



Korean Pioneer Women: *Picture Brides and the Formation of Upwardly Mobile Korean Families in California, 1910s-1930s*

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Abstract

This study examines the efforts of Korean picture brides to promote the upward mobility of their families in California from the 1910s to the 1930s. It analyzes special collections, oral histories, interviews, US government documents, contemporary studies, and newspapers to identify the specific characteristics of Korean picture brides in California and to shed light on their struggles to survive and expand their familial roles. The migration of Korean picture brides to California facilitated the development of unique nuclear families in California's Korean community. Objectively analyzing the impact of the US historical context on Korean picture brides' efforts to improve the socioeconomic status of their families, this study focuses on how these Korean women migrants diversified their roles in the face of California's changing discriminatory environment. It finds that Korean families' successful adjustment to life in California resulted from the varied and complex economic, educational, and emotional roles Korean picture brides adopted to facilitate their families' upward mobility. In adjusting to life as active members of a marginalized community in early twentieth-century California, Korean picture brides exemplified the spirit of pioneer women, leveraging opportunity from adversity by embracing roles that had no precedent in traditional Korean families.

Keywords: Korean picture brides, family, education, World War I rice boom, adjustment, upward mobility, small family business, anti-Japanese laws, Korean identity

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Introduction

In the early years of the 20th century, Korean women began embracing the frontier spirit, migrating abroad independently rather than in previously established family units. The first of these pioneer women were Korean picture brides who migrated to California not as immigrants or labor migrants but to fulfill picture marriages; ultimately, these women came to play indispensable roles in establishing the early Korean community in California. In spite of their unique position in Korean studies, Korean modern history, and Korean immigration history, however, objective historical evaluations of Korean picture brides' lives, adaptation efforts, and contributions to the Korean community remain scarce.

The purpose of this study is to explore the adaptation patterns of Korean picture brides who contributed to their families by performing various roles that differed from the roles played by wives in traditional large families in Korea during the Japanese colonial period. This study also attempts to objectively analyze the impact of the US historical context on Korean picture brides' efforts to help their families improve their socio-economic status, focusing specifically on how they diversified their roles in the face of California's changing discriminatory environment.

While Korean immigrants to the United States in the early 20th century resided overwhelmingly in Hawai'i, California was the socioeconomic center of the early Korean community in the continental United States. Prior to 1910, the majority of Koreans in California were unmarried single men, but the migration of large numbers of picture brides between 1910 and 1924 dramatically altered the Korean community in California and soon led to the formation of the Californian Korean family. Indeed, family became the most important factor in the Californian Korean community from the 1910s to the 1930s.

This period is historically significant because it was the only phase in which Korean picture brides in California successfully formed unique nuclear families and thereby achieved socioeconomic mobility. The Korean picture brides' adjustment processes and contributions to Korean families distinguished the Korean experience during this period from the periods

that preceded and followed it.

When Korea became a Japanese colony in 1910, Koreans in the United States had to live as “people without a country.” Meanwhile, the anti-Japanese movement in California exposed Koreans to further racial discrimination. Moreover, the political situations in both the United States and Korea influenced the legal status and lives of Korean immigrants in California. In particular, anti-Japanese laws resulting from Caucasian Californians’ anti-Japanese sentiments had a significant impact on Korean immigrants through the end of World War II. Indeed, Korean immigrants in the continental United States held the legal status of “aliens ineligible for citizenship”¹ until the 1952 enactment of the McCarran-Walter Act, which finally allowed Korean immigrants to acquire American citizenship.²

Most studies of Korean picture brides have focused on their activities in the Korean Independence Movement and oral histories of Korean picture brides in Hawai‘i.³ In particular, in his valuable two books *The Ilse and The Korean Frontier in America*, Wayne Patterson conducted in-depth academic analyses of Korean immigration to Hawai‘i, focusing on the adjustments Korean immigrants undertook between 1903 and the 1970s, and the lives of picture brides (Patterson 1988; 2000). However, existing oral histories only briefly mention the picture brides’ roles and contributions to Korean families in California. Moreover, research on Korean immigrant family adaptations has mainly focused on their economic activities and contributions to small self-owned businesses after 1965.

This study begins by investigating the voluntary migration of Korean picture brides to California starting in 1910 and describing the unique characteristics of the women who migrated as picture brides. The second section explains how the economic roles Korean picture brides embraced in their Californian families differed from the traditional roles of wives in Korean families and examines their contributions to their families’

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1. The California State Constitutional Convention of 1849 had labeled nonwhite people “aliens ineligible for citizenship.” For this matter, see Almaguer (1994, 7–11).
 2. Refer to Barth (1964, 37) and de Motte (1921, 18).
 3. For published works on Korean picture brides in Hawai‘i, refer to Rhodes (1998), E. Kim (1982), and Kim and Yu (1996).

socioeconomic mobility during the World War I rice boom. The third section investigates from a socioeconomic perspective the ways Korean families overcame early downward mobility and established themselves as upwardly mobile, analyzing how Korean picture brides fulfilled their various roles in small family-owned businesses. The final section considers the supportive roles and strategies adopted by Korean picture brides, focusing on their efforts to promote the upward mobility of their children.

This study applies a new methodology that combines an in-depth investigation of 25 oral interviews, statistical analysis, and a case study. The researcher discovered and collected 25 oral interviews with California picture brides. These 25 interviews constitute a sample of 22 percent of all Californian picture brides (115 total). The researcher analyzed these 25 oral interviews using specific criteria—name, arrival date, hometown, educational background, motivation, and economic activity—and presents the results in Appendix. This study also extracts statistical data from an in-depth investigation of US government documents and Korean newspapers to supplement and verify the information derived from the interviews. This statistical data is presented in seven tables.⁴ Ultimately, this study serves as a first step toward a fuller understanding of the ways Korean picture brides actively adapted to life in twentieth-century California and contributed substantially to the survival and development of their families.

4. To collect data regarding Korean picture brides in California, this study utilized four oral history sources: the Korean-American Oral History Project Collection (1903–1945) at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), Sonia Shin Sunoo's collection of oral histories (1982; 2002), Yim Sun Bin Oral Interview Collection (National Institute of Korean History), and Dora Yum's oral history (Chin 1999).

Migration: The Characteristics of the Korean Picture Brides in California

In 1905, the anti-Japanese movement in California created a number of disadvantages for Koreans, but the humanitarian provisions of the 1908 Gentleman's Agreement proved favorable in some respects. The 1908 Gentleman's Agreement between Japan and the United States effectively ended the immigration of Japanese laborers to the United States. However, the agreement made certain allowances for immigrant merchants and the relatives of immigrants already residing in the United States. The provision permitting the immigration of relatives of Japanese and Korean settlers was of great historical importance because it allowed them to send for their wives and children.⁵ The agreement also allowed for proxy marriages—an allowance that ultimately resulted in an influx of Japanese and Korean women to United States via the picture bride program.

Thus, between 1910 and 1924, a substantial number of Korean women in their late teens and early 20s left Korea for the United States as picture brides, mostly ending up in Hawai'i and California. According to Wayne Patterson, between 600 and 1,000 picture brides immigrated to Hawai'i during this period (Patterson 2000, 80).⁶ The majority of the Korean picture brides came from Gyeongsang province in southeastern Korea and, apart from a few exceptions, they were uneducated (Patterson 2000, 81–84). Korean picture brides' motivations for migrating to Hawai'i included economic improvement, a desire to escape Japanese domination, optimism

5. California and the Oriental: Japanese, Chinese, and Hindus State Board of Control of California, 1920, Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 163. . There are no exact statistics regarding the number of Korean picture brides who migrated to the United States. According to Sonia Shinn Sunoo (2002, 16), 951 Korean women immigrated to Hawai'i through picture marriage. Won-yong Kim (1959, 224) claims that 836 Korean picture brides arrived in Hawai'i and 115 Korean picture brides entered the US mainland.

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regarding life in the United States, and additional education.⁷

The characteristics of the Korean picture brides who migrated to California diverged from those of the Hawaiian picture brides. From November 1910 to October 1924, 115 Korean picture brides arrived in California and started new families in the Korean community there. According to the results of this study, the California picture brides came mainly from the northern regions of Korea, Seoul, and the Gyeongsang areas (Sunoo 2002, 16; Min 1986, 219). Although these picture brides also had diverse motivations for immigrating, many arrived with clear goals in mind. Importantly, few Korean picture brides immigrated for marriage alone. In their oral interviews, only two picture brides identified marriage as their primary motivation. In fact, the most prominent motivation was the desire for education. Of the 25 California picture brides who were examined, 15 indicated that they were motivated by a desire to further their education and hope for new opportunities in California. Other motivations included the desire to escape Japanese colonial rule, the pursuit of economic opportunity, and marriage.

Table 1. Immigration Motivations of Korean Picture Brides in California

Motivation	Education	Marriage	Escape Japanese Colonial Rule	Economic Opportunity	Unknown
Number (%)	15 (60%)	2 (8%)	3 (12%)	2 (8%)	4 (16%)

Source: Data from 25 oral interviews.

An article in *New Korea* (*Sinhan minbo*) advised Korean male migrants to marry women who agreed to their conditions and met their qualifications. Many Korean male immigrants (the potential bridegrooms in a picture marriage) to the United States seeking brides were working in agriculture, and possessed only two or three photos of themselves, and those as middle

7. For several Hawaiian Korean picture brides, the immigration motivation was their association with Christianity (Patterson 2000, 82–84).

school graduates or elementary school teachers (*Sinhan minbo*, March 25, 1915). Meanwhile, many of the picture brides had progressed beyond elementary school and therefore were more educated than their husbands, many of whom had not received even elementary educations in Korea,⁸ and were more enthusiastic about education than their would-be partners. In addition, some teachers and nurses emigrated from Korea to California as picture brides (Yang 1984a, 8).

Table 2. Educational Backgrounds of California Korean Picture Brides

Education Level	Teachers' School	High School	Girls' School	Middle School	Elementary School
Number (%)	1 (4%)	4 (16%)	4 (16%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)

Source: Data from 25 oral interviews.

As Table 2 indicates, 11 Korean women who had education levels beyond elementary school in Korea immigrated to California as picture brides. This finding distinguishes Korean picture brides in California from those in Hawai'i. Specifically, California picture brides appear to have been more educated than their Hawaiian counterparts.⁹ The testimonies of several highly educated Californian picture brides indicate that they immigrated to California for educational purposes. Do-yeon Kim, who immigrated to California in 1916 as a picture bride, indicated that her primary motivation for doing so was to study nursing. She had previously worked as a nurse in a women's hospital in Dongdaemun in Seoul and hoped to study proper medical practices so that she could return as a medical missionary to help the poor and sick.¹⁰ Other highly educated picture brides in California

8. For the characteristics of Korean immigrants to Hawai'i, see Patterson (1988, 103–108).

9. One survey of 49 Korean picture brides in Hawai'i found that four had received 7–9 years of education in Korea while only one had received 10–12 years of education in Korea (Patterson 2000, 82, 236).

10. Interview with Yong-ho Yoon and Do-yeon Kim couple, Korean-American Oral History Project, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Library, Los Angeles, CA.

included: In-myong Paik, who had worked as a teacher in a Public Normal School after graduating from Jinmyong High School and a teachers school in Korea,¹¹ Suk-ja Woo, who immigrated to California in 1914 after graduating from high school,¹² and Sun-hee Shin who also graduated from Soong-ee High School in Pyongyang and sought greater educational opportunities in California.¹³

Indeed, education served as a motivation for many Korean picture brides in California. For example, Suk-eun Kim, who immigrated to California in 1913, grew up in a sufficiently affluent environment to attend a private boarding school in Seoul from the age of 12 and was a student at the time of her departure from Korea. Her reason for entering into a picture marriage was not to become a picture bride, but to pursue additional education. The only way she could leave Korea was as a picture bride.¹⁴ Similarly, Sung-hak Kang, who arrived in 1917, and Cha-bong Kim, who arrived in 1915, immigrated to California primarily for educational purposes.¹⁵

According to an article in the *Sinhan minbo*, Korean women were so eager to go to America that many did not consider the qualifications of the men they agreed to marry (*Sinhan minbo*, May 25, 1915; *Sinhan minbo*, February 4, 1915). In other words, the picture brides did not immigrate simply for the purpose of marriage. To be picture brides required courage. Picture bride Mary Lee pointed out: “In the feudal days of Korea, becoming a picture bride was considered dishonorable, questionable and wicked...I wanted to go to America for an education, rather than become a picture bride.”¹⁶ The records thus indicate that picture brides in California needed to be assertive and take initiative to pursue new life opportunities, rather than

11. Interview with In-myong Paik, Yim Sun Bin Oral Interview Collection, National Institute of Korean History (NIKH), Seoul, Korea.

12. Interview with Sook-ja Woo, Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

13. Interview with Sun-hee Shinn (Sunoo 2002, 57).

14. Interview with Suk-eun Kim (Sunoo 2002, 77–79).

15. Interview with Sung-hak Kang and Cha-bong Kim (Sunoo 2002, 297, 304).

16. Interview with Mary Lee (Sunoo 2002, 196). See also, *Kukminbo* (*Gungminbo*), March 1, 1914; *Kukminbo* March 6, 1914.

passively accepting their circumstances. Indeed, these attributes became an important dimension of their identities.

Such characteristics notwithstanding, Korean picture brides who immigrated to California still faced the reality of marriage to men with whom they had only exchanged pictures and letters. When they first met these men on the pier in San Francisco, the experience was often shocking. Many Korean men in California sent photographs taken when they were considerably younger, and picture brides were often disappointed to see that their grooms were older than the photographs had indicated. However, even if Korean bridegrooms deceived their brides regarding their ages and living conditions, picture brides could not return to Korea (Min 1986, 220). They had no money to pay the ship passage and because picture brides often immigrated despite the objections of their parents, who viewed their decisions to become picture brides as disgraceful, returning to Korea was extremely difficult (Sunoo 2002, 194–200). Korean picture brides arriving on Angel Island in San Francisco left the immigration office for joint weddings in the same location. Most of these weddings were prepared with the help of local Korean churches and the Korean National Association (*Sinhan minbo*, April 6, 1916).

Challenge: Korean Picture Brides' Active Economic Roles and Contributions to Upward Mobility during the Rice Boom

Being a picture bride required great strength and courage, and the picture brides quickly recognized that they were unlikely to fulfill their dreams in California. In fact, upon arrival, most picture brides were disappointed because they had high hopes for their new lives in California. Nevertheless, their migration facilitated the formation of Korean families and thereby became a turning point in the development of the Korean community in California.

Table 3. Korean Migration from Hawai'i to the US Mainland (1905–1907)

Year	Men	Women	Children	Total
1905	373	16	10	399
1906	428	17	13	458
1907	130	12	6	148
Total	931	45	29	1,005

Source: US Congress, House. Immigration Commission, Abstracts of Reports of the Immigration Commission, vol. I, Sen. Doc. No. 747. 61st Cong., 3d Sess., 710–711.

The early Korean community in California consisted primarily of small-scale ginseng merchants. In 1903, fewer than 100 Koreans resided in California, most of them men.¹⁷ From 1903 to 1905, 6,747 Koreans emigrated from Korea to Hawai'i. As Table 3 shows, between 1905 and 1907, some of the Koreans who had worked on Hawaiian plantations moved on to California in pursuit of better lives. According to the US Census Bureau, some 1,005 Koreans resettled in the continental United States between 1905 and 1907. Among these, 931 were men and only 45 women. In 1905, immigration from Korea to the United States was halted. In March 1907, migration from Hawai'i to the mainland also came to a halt when President Theodore Roosevelt issued Executive Order 589 prohibiting Korean and Japanese laborers from Hawai'i, Mexico, or Canada from re-migrating to the continental United States. Now, Korean picture brides who were the only women immigrants to California became pioneers of Korean women and the emergence of this Korean family became a new factor that changed the characteristics of the Korean community there.

Further, the situation that Korean picture brides faced in California differed from that of other Asian immigrants. After Korea was subjected to Japanese colonial rule, Korean migrants became a “people without a country” and had to live as settlers rather than as sojourners. Most Korean immigrants to California, including the picture brides, came to the United States without families and thus had no obligations to their parents or members of their

17. For more on this matter, refer to Cha (2010, 2–3, 10–11), Yim (1984, 542), and Choy (1979, 105).

extended families. The traditional Korean family system maintained a strict division of labor and was structurally rigid, making it difficult for Korean families to change or adapt to new rules or conditions. However, the legal status of Koreans in the United States and the political situation in Korea forced the families of picture brides to undergo structural alterations. Indeed, the traditional Korean familial hierarchy changed fundamentally in Korean families in the United States. Most significantly, Koreans in California created nuclear families that consisted only of parents and children—a stark contrast from the traditional extended Korean family system.

In these unique Korean nuclear families, women assumed different roles than in traditional Korean families. Korean picture brides started to actively pursue economic opportunities to support their families. Importantly, Korean families relied on the joint bread-winning of both husbands and wives. After their weddings, Korean picture brides faced the reality of life on the California farms where their husbands served as laborers (Charr 1996, 149).¹⁸ They also experienced racial discrimination and downward mobility. During the 1910s, about 80 percent of Koreans in California lived in rural communities and small towns (Yim 1984, 525). As a result of racial discrimination and the legal status of Koreans in California, Korean picture brides, regardless of their educational backgrounds, were also forced to become farm laborers like their husbands.

Within a few days of their wedding ceremonies almost all Korean picture brides ended up in rural rice farming areas in Dinuba, Willows, Redlands, and Riverside, where they began working to earn money (*Sinhan minbo*, April 6, 1916). In these challenging circumstances, life for Korean picture brides in California was difficult. As wives and eventually as mothers, they were responsible for all household chores, primarily the cooking and cleaning, and they also worked in the farming fields. As the statistical data presented in Table 4 indicates, 18 of the 25 Californian picture brides earned wages from farm labor—far and away the most common form of labor taken up by these picture brides.

18. There were small Korean communities in the towns of Claremont, Redlands, and Upland, and every orange season Riverside became the largest Korean settlement in California.

Table 4. Economic Activities of Korean Picture Brides in California

Occupation	Farm Labor	Sewing	Washing	Ironing	Cooking
Number (%)	18 (72%)	2 (8%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)	1 (4%)

Source: Data from 25 oral interviews.

Other jobs included seamstress, laundress, ironer, and boardinghouse worker. For example, Do-yeon Kim, who immigrated to California in 1916 with ambitions of becoming a nurse, worked with her husband on rice farms in Colusa, Maxwell, and Dixson.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Kyung-shin Sunoo, who immigrated in 1917, was her family's sole breadwinner because, instead of contributing financially to the family, her husband drank and gambled. Thus, she had to support them both by her labor on a rice farm in Fresno, where she and her husband lived in a tent. The work was so intense that she miscarried several times and only managed to carry one son to term.²⁰ Korean picture brides with small children who were unable to work in the fields often prepared meals for the bachelors or managed boardinghouses. Some of these women knew they could earn more money by cleaning and sewing for bachelors than they could working in the fields (Choy 1979, 96–97).

Records regarding Korean male and female wages as farm workers at the time are as follows: Leo Song worked in a soybean field in 1917 and earned 35 cents an hour, a relatively high wage.²¹ Lee-wook Chang (a male) earned 25 cents an hour at an orange farm and recalled that, at that time, a light lunch of bacon, eggs, bread, and coffee in San Francisco was 25 cents.²² Also Sallome Lee recollected that “a bowl of noodles was 15 cents

19. Interview with Do-yeon Kim couple, Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

20. Interview with Kyung-shin Sunoo, Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

21. Interview with Leo Song, Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

22. Interview with Lee-wook Chang, Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

in California rural areas around 1916.”²³ Women earned lower wages than men. Kyung-shin Sunoo (a female) earned just 20 cents an hour at a Fresno vineyard²⁴ and In-myong Paik (a female) earned just under \$2 a day at a vineyard. Still, over the years, she saved enough money to buy a small house for her family at the cost of \$600.²⁵

Women’s economic activities contributed significantly to family economies and helped improve their socioeconomic status. In some cases, their work enabled their husbands to progress from farm laborers to tenant farmers or independent rice farmers. Rice cultivation in California began in 1912 and once the industry was fully established rice became an important and profitable product in the state (Bleyhl 1955, 94–96). The industry’s development provided Korean immigrants the opportunity to forgo migratory farm labor and establish themselves as rice farmers. This transition depended on the availability of sufficient capital for cash rentals, and many Korean men who did not have sufficient capital on their own were able to take advantage of economic support from their wives. Indeed, the money Korean women saved by earning wages frequently served as seed-money for establishing tenancies or independent rice farms. Picture bride He-kyung Chung recalled: “My husband didn’t have money when I came. I have been able to save some money because of my involvement.”²⁶ Thus, the income earned by picture brides proved indispensable in improving the socioeconomic status of their families.

Korean immigrants endeavored to raise the agricultural capital necessary to establish rice farms and leave behind their lives as farm laborers. Male Korean agricultural workers earned around \$3 per day (Warren Y. Kim 1959, 224). The average monthly cost of living for individuals in rural areas was about \$25 and about \$38 for married couples. Thus, Korean families earning double incomes could save wages and collect additional funds and women often saved their wages to serve as the seed-money their husbands needed

23. Interview with Sallome Lee, Yim Sun Bin Oral Interview Collection, NIKH, Seoul, Korea.

24. Interview with Kyung-shin Sunoo, Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

25. Interview with In-myong Paik, Yim Sun Bin Oral Interview Collection, NIKH, Seoul, Korea.

26. Interview with He-kyung Chung (Sunoo 2002, 214).

to participate in tenancy during California's rice boom (Choy 1979, 124). Picture bride Sung-hak Kang's case exemplifies picture brides' contributions to their families' upward mobility; she recalled: "I sewed while my husband, at the time, worked a 30-day month. Others who weren't able to work were humiliated."²⁷ During the World War I rice boom, her family leased land through her American-born son, eventually purchasing their own farmland and establishing themselves as independent farmers.²⁸ Ke-yul Park, who worked as a farm laborer, also circumvented the Alien Land Act of 1913, buying land using the name of her American-born son and establishing an independent farm.²⁹

Table 5. Korean Rice Farmers in the Sacramento Valley, California in 1920

Farmers	Participants	Cultivated Area (acres)	Harvest Estimate (seok)	Price Value Estimate (US\$)
Independent farmer	32 persons 1 company	7,990	279,650	1,398,250
Tenant farmer	43 persons	9,760	34,160	170,800
Total	75 persons 1 company	17,750	313,810	1,569,050

Source: *Sinhan minbo*, August 26, 1920.

From the mid-1910s to the early 1920s, Koreans worked mainly in Colusa and Glenn counties in the northern Sacramento Valley, developing from laborers into tenant and independent rice farmers.³⁰ Though the exact number of Korean farmers in California during the 1910s is unknown, some county documents did register Koreans as farmers.³¹ As Table 5

27. Interview with Sung-hak Kang (Sunoo, 2002, 301).

28. Interview with Sung-hak Kang (Sunoo, 2002, 299).

29. Interview with Ke-yul Park (Sunoo 2002, 281–282).

30. For more on this matter, refer to Jiwon Kim (2014, 60–78).

31. See the cases of J. Soo Lee, J.K. Lim, C.H. Lim, Y.S. Park, D.Y. Song, Y.H. Yoon, and A. Lee in "Personal Property Mortgages," 193, 244, 334, 376, 427, Book 7, 126, 210, Colusa County Recorder's Office, Colusa, CA. See also the cases of Leo K. Chang, C.H. Mang, C.L. Kim, D.K.

shows, in the year 1920, 75 Koreans and one Korean company participated in rice farming as independent farmers, earning a total of \$1,398,250 from 7,990 acres. Meanwhile, tenant farmers earned \$170,800 from 9,760 acres. The estimated total harvest value from land owned or leased by Koreans was about \$1,569,050. During the rice boom, some Korean families thus achieved a degree of socioeconomic mobility they could not have hoped for as farm laborers.

Crisis: Post-Rice Boom Downward Mobility of Korean Families and the Diverse Roles of Korean Picture Brides in Developing Small Family Businesses

After the end of World War I, the anti-Japanese movement intensified in California. The enactment of the Alien Land Act in 1920 and 1923 dramatically impacted the lives of Korean families engaged in rice farming in the state. The postwar depression reactivated anti-Japanese agitation, increasing pressure on state officials to pass stronger laws against Japanese farmers. Whereas the 1913 law had prevented “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from purchasing or leasing land for more than three years, the 1920 revision prohibited them entirely from leasing agricultural land.

In addition, California rice farming, which boomed in the 1910s, began to collapse around 1920. These disasters hit Koreans in California hard, precipitating a socioeconomic crisis in the Korean community. California’s rice boom began to collapse in early November 1920, as unexpectedly heavy rainfall prevented growers from harvesting the year’s crop. In California, the rice harvest typically began in November and was completed before the onset of winter. However, by mid-November 1920, 5.48 inches of rain had fallen (compared to 0.58 inches during the same period in 1919) and rice growers were unable to harvest. As the heavy rain continued into December,

Kim, W.H. Kim, and M.S. Soo in “Personal Property Mortgages,” Book 23, 148, 214, 268, Book 38, 21, “Crop Mortgages,” Book 34, 58, 139, 190, 202, Glenn County Recorder’s Office, Glenn, CA.

Koreans had to further postpone the harvest, and in fact were only able to resume farming activities in mid-April 1921, with the rice that had remained unharvested in 1920 left in the fields.³² In the end, facing serious losses, many Korean farmers were unable to pay their rent and struggled to make payments on the loans they had taken out during the growing season.

Furthermore, the Alien Land Act of 1920 and 1923 forced many Korean farmers to return to their previous roles as laborers. Because the legal status of cropping contracts had been unclear, the 1920 law was amended in 1923 to expand the scope of the restrictions on leasing land “to include the usage, cultivation, and occupancy of agricultural land for beneficial purposes” (Ichioka 1988, 163). The Alien Land Act of 1923 thus made it almost impossible for Korean farmers to set up any type of employment agreements that approximated lease-share agreements.

Confronted with these new obstacles, Korean farmers in California began to abandon the Glenn and Colusa County rice fields after 1920. By 1925, almost no Koreans were farming rice in Glenn County (Givens 1935, 22). During the 1910s, the proportion of the Korean population living in big California cities was low, but it had significantly increased by 1930. For example, while just 14 Koreans lived in Los Angeles in 1910, that number grew to 84 by 1920 and to 345 by 1930, making Los Angeles the city with the largest Korean population in the continental United States.³³

Korean immigrants who had progressed from migratory laborers to rice farmers were thus relegated to laborer status once again; moreover, even after moving to the cities, few were able to pursue alternate professions. Racial discrimination seriously limited Korean workers’ options in the labor market and their relatively low levels of education and lack of training in English made finding jobs difficult. On the other hand, in the 1920s, Korean immigrant families who had moved to the cities began establishing small family-owned businesses to make a living. Korean wives play essential roles in operating these small independent businesses, working alongside their husbands to keep their families afloat.

32. Interview with Leo Song, Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

33. US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1932, 81).

According to the statistical data, 16 out of 25 Korean picture brides helped run small family businesses. Most Koreans living in the continental United States settled in either San Francisco or Los Angeles where Korean family businesses included restaurants,³⁴ fruit stands (Lee 1990, 70–78), barbershops, small grocery stores,³⁵ tailor shops, laundries (Choy 1979, 302),³⁶ retail shops,³⁷ coffee shops, and shoe repair shops.³⁸

Family life intermingled with the management of these small family-owned businesses and wives played a variety of indispensable roles. Husbands and wives in Korean nuclear families mainly managed the family businesses. Korean men were usually responsible for everyday management of stores and were expected to work during open hours and attend to more physically demanding tasks. As wives and mothers, Korean women were primarily responsible for the care of the home and children. However, in addition to domestic chores and childcare responsibilities, they were also expected to work in the stores or shops. This usually meant that they had to supervise their children while they worked in the kitchens of the restaurants, washed and ironed clothes in the laundries, stocked shelves in stores, and prepared fruits and vegetables for sale in markets.³⁹

After her marriage in 1914, picture bride Suk-ja Woo worked on a rice farm for eight years and gave birth to two children before starting a cleaning shop, which she operated for the next 50 years.⁴⁰ Do-yeon Kim, who migrated to California in 1916, started working on a Sacramento rice farm soon after her marriage and subsequently moved to Mantica, California to open a restaurant with her husband. She had to get up at 4:30 AM to make

34. Interview with Leo Song, Korean-American Oral History Project Collection, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA; Choy (1979, 299).

35. Sin Han managed a barber shop in San Francisco. Philip Ahn, eldest son of Chang-ho Ahn who left California in 1926, managed a fruit stand in 1927 (Sunoo 1982, 47, 63).

36. Rev. Sa-Eun Whang managed a tailor shop and laundry (Choy 1979, 302).

37. Helen Kim and her husband opened a retail shop in 1927 (Choy 1979, 310).

38. The Shinn family ran a coffee shop and Deuk-gu Chunn a shoe repair shop in San Francisco (Lee and Chang 2013, 145).

39. Interview with Do-yeon Kim, Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA.

40. Interview with Suk-ja Woo and Sang-ok Han couple. Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

coffee and prepare to open the restaurant, where she then worked until it closed at 11:00 PM. She lived a very hard life, nurturing several children and managing this restaurant. Fortunately, she had learned English in Korea, so she was able to print the restaurant menu in English.⁴¹

In general, it was unusual for bachelors to start their own businesses, as Korean businesses traditionally relied on the availability of unpaid family labor to survive and profit. Thus, Korean picture brides served as the foundation for these small family operations. Moreover, the fact that, in addition to their economic roles, they provided the advice and emotional support necessary to promote their small family businesses and pursue their families' upward mobility warrants emphasis. In many cases, Korean wives not only encouraged their husbands to start small businesses, but often worked and saved for the initial capital investment needed to establish them (Choy 1979, 101). Records suggest that picture bride Kyung-soo Kang worked alongside her husband as a farm laborer after arriving in California and then encouraged him to learn the techniques necessary to become a barber. Ultimately, her husband opened a barber shop in Oakland and managed it successfully until his retirement.⁴²

In their active contributions to the establishment and management of family-owned businesses, Korean wives in California clearly diverged from the gender-related expectations in traditional Korean families during the Japanese colonial period. Korean picture brides wanted to improve the quality of life for their families and made great sacrifices to earn the money necessary to do so.⁴³ In addition, they encouraged their husbands to open small businesses. The following example provides strong evidence of the diverse roles picture brides played in their California families:

Kang-ae Shinn who migrated to California in 1914 convinced her husband to let her work outside the home. She worked at various menial jobs, but found them to be too strenuous. Her husband actually did not

41. Interview with Suk-ja Woo and Sang-ok Han couple. Korean-American Oral History Project, UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA.

42. Interview with Kyung-su Kang (Sunoo 2002, 84–85).

43. Interview with Kyung-su Kang (Sunoo 2002, 19).

want to approve of her efforts outside of the home because she was weak. But she was even more determined to pursue a job when she observed her husband's failing health. Again, she convinced her husband that she could work as a seamstress with the National Dollar Stores sewing factory, located just around the corner from their barber shop. She would not be required to meet any deadlines. The sewing factory was a stifling place to work. She tried to take full advantage of the "no set hours" and was determined to build a nest egg should any emergencies arise. She was anxious to earn enough money so her husband did not need to find extra jobs. Her sacrifice took its toll. She sat at the machines and sewed for long hours and barely took time to care for her personal needs. After 6 years of working, she finally became a professional seamstress.⁴⁴

Traditionally, Korean families were strictly patriarchal; the lives of men and women were separate and their roles within families distinct (Sorenson 1984, 308–310). However, this traditional, male-dominated family structure changed significantly in the Korean nuclear families that formed in California. To promote the upward mobility of their families, Korean wives actively performed diverse roles as partners in small family business, laborers, or part-time workers on farms or in industrial factories (see Appendix). The vital roles they played in family businesses gave them more power in their families, as they contributed directly and substantially to their families' economic stability and income-earning capacities.⁴⁵

Struggle: Enactment of the Immigration Act of 1924 and Korean Picture Brides' Support for the Upward Mobility of Their Children

California's anti-Japanese movement, which had its initial heyday in 1905, recurred following World War I and gained a great deal of traction at the federal level, culminating in the enactment of the Immigration Act of 1924. During this period, the number of Korean children increased and,

44. Interview with Kang-ae Shinn (Sunoo 2002, 28).

45. Interview with Do-yeon Kim couple, Korean-American Oral History Project.

as they grew, Korean picture brides' roles as mothers became increasingly important.

After World War I, a majority of Caucasian Californians believed that the Japanese in California were both an economic and racial threat (Ichihashi 1932, 158). Issues such as the picture brides, Japanese land ownership, agricultural achievement, and legal status became central points of contention in California (Ichihashi 1932, 202). Between 1913 and 1924, an average of approximately 5,800 Japanese immigrants arrived in the United States annually⁴⁶ and California residents began to recognize that the Gentlemen's Agreement, which aimed to curtail Japanese immigration, had failed. Exclusionists derived a new vitality by invoking anti-Japanese sentiment as they sought to exclude the Japanese from the United States.⁴⁷

The most contentious issue in California from 1919 to 1920 was Japanese land ownership and agricultural output. The Japanese had produced crops valued at US\$67 million in 1919 and the value of the products they grew increased 976.8 percent between 1909 and 1919 (State Board of Control of California 1920, 53). In addition, Japanese owned only one percent of agricultural areas in California, totaling 458,156 acres, yet they accounted for 10 percent of the agricultural production in the state (Daniels 1988, 143–144; State Board of Control of California 1920, 117). One of the hottest issues in California concerning the legal status of the Japanese was citizenship. In 1922, the United States Supreme Court's ruling in *Ozawa v. United States* denied citizenship to Japanese aliens.⁴⁸ With the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, which excluded "aliens ineligible for citizenship," the exclusionists succeeded in halting Japanese immigration. The act passed on May 15, 1924, by a margin of 69 to 9 in the Senate and 308 to 58 in the House (*New York Times*, May 16, 1924, 1).⁴⁹

46. See "Picture Brides and Their Successors," in Katherine Philips Edson Papers, Special Collections, UCLA.

47. See "Assimilation of Japanese," in Katherine Philips Edson Papers, Special Collections, UCLA.

48. *Ozawa v. United States*, 260 US 189; see also Takaki (1989, 208–209); Daniels (1988, 151); Daniels and Kitano (1970, 53–54).

49. Congressional Record, US Congress, Congressional Record, 68th Congress 1st Session, Vol. 65, 8589.

Table 6. Population of Koreans in California: 1910, 1920, and 1930

Year	Immigrants (First-generation)	Native-born (Second-generation)	Total Koreans
1910	209	14 (4.6%)	303
1920	537	237 (30.6%)	772
1930	585	512 (46.6%)	1,097

Source: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1932, 58–59, 80–81).

The enactment of the Immigration Act of 1924 also brought the migration of Korean picture brides to a halt,⁵⁰ significantly influencing generational relationships and the gender ratio of the Korean population in California. Importantly, beginning in the 1920s the population of native-born Koreans started to increase, substantially altering the ratio of immigrants to native-born Koreans. According to the US Census, the percentage of native-born Korean children in California increased from 4.6 percent in 1910 to 30.6 percent by 1920. As Table 6 shows, almost 46.6 percent of Koreans in California in 1930 were native born.⁵¹

At this point, children, education, and generational relationships became increasingly important to Korean picture brides. Within the Korean community, second-generation Koreans, the majority of whom were born between 1910 and 1930, placed a growing emphasis on the transition from the immigrant generation to the American-born generation. The hopes and dreams of the family rested on this generation, because, unlike their parents, they were American citizens by birth. However, this legal status proved to be of little significance until World War II. Second-generation Korean Dora Yum, who was born in San Francisco, recalled: “I grew up with discrimination. Discrimination affected every aspect of my life” (Chin 1999, 17).

Living as minorities and facing racial prejudice and discrimination, Korean picture brides used several distinct strategies to support their children. First, Korean mothers emphasized traditional Korean values

50. US Statutes at Large, Vol. 43, Part 1, Chapter 190, 154–162.

51. US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1932, 59, 98, 670).

and sought to impart Korean pride as a means of overcoming racism. They recognized that it would be difficult for their children, who had not visited and directly experienced the traditions of their homeland, to hold on to their Korean identities. American-born children of Korean families understood that their parents' main focus was on their Korean identities and the perpetuation of Korean heritage (Lee and Chang 2013, 144). Indeed, as these children grew up, Korean mothers continually emphasized their Korean roots (Chin 1999, 17).

Before World War II, second-generation Koreans faced limited socioeconomic opportunities and were unable to assimilate into mainstream American society the way second-generation Europeans did. Sonia Sunoo was born in 1915 in San Francisco and took several courses at San Francisco College. She was interested in teaching high school. The day before graduation, the Dean of Women Students called her and said, "You will never be able to teach in California in the position of a secondary teacher. So you might as well think of something else." In the end, she accepted a scholarship to cosmetology school to become a beautician (Lee and Chang 2013, 145–146). Other Korean students who graduated from college during the 1920s and 1930s also struggled to find jobs in their major areas (Sunoo 2002, 36). Consequently, they turned their focus to their Korean communities and their families. The influence of their mothers was vital in their lives and parent-child relationships were cohesive during this period. Thus, despite social mobility and the adaptation of each successive generation, Korean picture brides ensured that family solidarity and certain Korean values continued to exist.

Second, seeking to ensure their families' continued upward mobility, Korean picture brides strongly supported the education of their children, even though they could not accomplish their own educational goals. Korean picture brides emphasized their children's education because their children faced racial discrimination in their efforts to pursue socioeconomic mobility. They encouraged their children to excel in their studies and pursue a higher education to improve their future prospects. Margaret Pai recalled how her mother told her everyday: "Study hard! Study hard!" (Pai 1989, 314). Korean picture brides also strongly encouraged their children to study practical

majors like engineering or to obtain licenses. Meanwhile, the families' rising socioeconomic status and their educational and occupational mobility enabled Korean mothers to serve as stepping-stones for their children. They preserved some traditional values while others were changed.

Korean picture brides also strived to support the educations of their sons and daughters equally. During the Japanese colonial period, Koreans mainly focused on educating their sons, meaning that men and women in Korea had little chance of being educated equally. In this regard, Korean picture brides' efforts to educate their sons and daughters equally can be regarded as a truly remarkable contribution. For example, picture bride Suk-ja Woo, who managed a laundry in San Francisco, was very poor during the Great Depression in the 1930s. Business was very slow and there were times when her family was actually down to its last penny. The family did not even have enough money to buy fresh bread and would buy stale bread because it cost less. Nevertheless, she supported her daughter So-jung's studies at the Julliard School (Sunoo 1982, 178). Thus, the passion for education of a mother who attended high school in Korea had an enormous impact on the education of her daughter. Similarly, Korean picture brides In-myong Paik and Do-yeon Kim, who immigrated with strong educational motivations, supported all their children through college graduation despite facing economically difficult situations.⁵²

Table 7. School Attendance of the Population 5 to 20 Years Old, By Color, Ethnicity in 1930 (California)

Race	Average of All Races in California	White	Chinese	Korean
Ratio	69.9%	71.5%	75.6%	82.9%

Source: US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1932, 1094).

52. Interview with In-myong Paik and Do-yeon Kim, Sun Bin Yim Oral Interview Collection, NIKH, Seoul.

School attendance statistics testify to Korean picture brides' prioritization of their children's education. As Table 7 shows, in 1930, average school attendance in California was 69.9 percent, with Caucasian attendance at 71.5 percent, Chinese attendance at 75.6 percent, and Korean attendance at 82.9 percent.⁵³ This demonstrates the impact of Korean mothers' active efforts to promote their children's socioeconomic status in discriminatory circumstances. Crucially, the school attendance rates of Korean boys and girls were nearly equal: 84.7 percent of Korean boys and 81.2 percent of Korean girls age 5 to 20 attended school.⁵⁴

Third, although Korean fathers and mothers experienced similar processes of adjustment and changes in values, they came to hold diverging attitudes. While Korean fathers were more patriarchal, mothers tended to be more supportive of equality between the sexes. Korean fathers who had experienced traditional Korean values growing up still followed the Confucian value system regarding sexual equality. In a 2001 interview with Anna Kim, second-generation Korean Sonia stated that although her father taught Korean language and supported her education until college, he emphasized that she should be a chaste and modest lady (*yojo sungnyeo*).⁵⁵

Dora Yum's parents in San Francisco also held diverging attitudes regarding their children. While her father, Man-suk Yum, was a man raised in a culture in which responsibility to daughters ended after they were married, her mother, Hang-shin Kim, continued to support her pursuit of a job after her marriage. Due to her mother's support for her career, Dora was able to explore professional options for herself in various fields and she ultimately passed the real estate licensing exam and completed the coursework for a degree in nursing (Chin 1999, 176–177). Dora's mother thus challenged Confucian patriarchal norms and the social preference traditionally allotted to sons.

53. US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1932, 1094).

54. US Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census (1932, 1094).

55. Interview with Sonia Sunoo, "Evelyn Kim Charr Papers," University of Southern California Library, Los Angeles, CA.

Conclusion

This article explored how Korean picture brides helped their families in California pursue new socioeconomic opportunities between the 1910s and the 1930s. They actively adjusted to life in their new families by working to sustain and advance the socioeconomic standing of their families in the face of antagonistic historic and social forces.

Prior to 1910, Korean immigrants to California were almost exclusively single men who had few opportunities to form families in California. The migration of Korean picture brides to California began in 1910 and continued until 1924, following the stipulations of the 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement. The picture brides who moved to California did so for several reasons, though the most common motivation was the desire to actively further their education. The immigration of Korean picture brides enabled Korean immigrants to form family-based communities. More importantly, Korean picture brides became an exceptional group of pioneer women in California and were able to create a second generation of native-born American citizens.

The structure of the Korean nuclear family in California differed from that of the traditional Korean extended family and the roles of women diverged significantly from traditional Korean gender norms. Korean picture brides played active economic roles to support their families. Crucially, Korean families in California initially functioned based on a joint bread-winning system that required both husbands and wives to earn income. During the World War I rice boom, Korean picture brides actively contributed both to the economic stability of their families and to their husbands' advancement from farm laborers to tenant farmers or independent rice farmers.

In subsequent years, the severe limitations of the Alien Land Acts of 1920 and 1923, and the collapse of the rice boom forced Koreans in California to experience downward mobility, returning them to the status of laborers. Korean families who abandoned farming started to relocate to urban areas and established small family-owned businesses. For families that started small businesses, the labor contributions of wives and their roles as partners

were critical. Indeed, the Korean picture brides served as the foundation of small family operations. In many cases, they not only encouraged their husbands to start small businesses, but often worked and saved to cover the initial capital investments needed to establish them. The picture brides' diverse roles and contributions to family-owned businesses thus significantly bolstered the socioeconomic status of their families.

Meanwhile, the anti-Japanese movement of the 1920s and the events it precipitated profoundly impacted the lives of Koreans. The enactment of the Immigration Act of 1924 produced specific nuclear family characteristics in Korean families. Children, education, and generational relationships became the most important issues for Korean picture brides and, as mothers, they came to play critical roles in the upward mobility of their children. Living as minorities and facing racial prejudice and discrimination, Korean picture brides in California supported their children in distinct and strategic ways.

While Korean picture brides significantly altered their traditional familial roles to adjust to life in California, they emphasized their Korean identities and taught their children basic Korean traditional values. Their dedication to their children's educations and socioeconomic mobility was reflected in their children's school attendance. Nevertheless, to survive, they needed to transform some traditional values. The picture brides' efforts to adjust to life in California resulted in more intensely cohesive and supportive relationships between parents and children—relationships that emphasized equal support for children and the improvement of women's positions, and ultimately weakened Confucian patriarchal norms and the social preference traditionally allotted to sons.

Between the 1910s and the 1930s, Korean picture brides strived to improve the socioeconomic status of their families, dedicating themselves to building and supporting their new families. Korean picture brides' adjustment processes did not occur in a linear pattern. Responding to historical changes in California, they pursued different and various roles to support their families. Korean picture brides' efforts to survive and their adoption of the nuclear family system to improve their upward mobility distinguished their families from traditional Korean families.

This study examined the unique ways Korean picture brides adjusted

to life in early twentieth-century California and helped improve the socioeconomic status of their families. In conclusion, Korean families' successful adjustment to life in California resulted from Korean picture brides' abilities to adopt varied and complex roles to facilitate the upward mobility of their families. In adjusting to life in California during this period, Korean picture brides leveraged opportunity from adversity, embodying the spirit of pioneer women by performing roles that were unprecedented in traditional Korean families.

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Appendix. Data from the In-depth Investigation of
25 Korean Picture Brides in California

Name	Arrival Year (age)	Hometown	Motivation	Educational Background	Economic Activity	Source
Kang-ae Shinn	1914 (19)	Masan	Education	Girl School	Seamstress, barbershop, hotel management	SKAOC 43-55
Sun-hee Shin	1915	Pyongyang	Education	Soong-ee High School	Farm labor, cook, restaurant	SKAOC 56-62
Myong-won Woo	1914 (18)	Seoul	Education	High School	Laundry, boarding house	SKAOC 63-76
Sook-ja Woo	1914	-	Education	High School	Farm labor, washing, laundry, cleaning shop	UCLASC No.39
Do-yeon Kim	1916	Pyongyang	Education	Moose School in Wonsan	Farm labor, cook, restaurant, vegetable stand, fruit stand	UCLASC No.14 YBIC #12
In-myong Paik	1920 (20)	Seoul	Education	Teacher School	Farm labor, laundry	YBIC #9
Suk-eun Kim	1913 (19)	Northern Korea	Education	Eight years study in school	Farm labor	SKAOC 77-82
Kyung-soo Kang	1923	Gyeongsang-do	Education	-	Farm labor, barbershop, bath business, hotel management	SKAOC 83-90
Ho-kyung Choy	1924 (20)	Pyongyang	Education	Elementary School	Farm labor	SKAOC 115-118
Sung-sil Hahn	1917	Pyongan-do	Education	Pyongyang Soong-ee School	Farm labor, restaurant, seamstress, laborer	SKAOC 167-171
Ke-man Lee	1914 (17)	-	Education	-	Farm labor	SKAOC 179-183

Mary Lee	1915 (17)	-	Education	-	Farm labor	SKAOC 194-200
Sung-hak Kang	1917 (17)	Gyeongsang- do	Education	-	Farm labor, seamstress	SKAOC 297-303
Cha-bong Kim	1915 (19)	Pyongyang	Education	-	Farm labor, farming	SKAOC 304-306
Ho-taik Chung	1917 (22)	-	Education and work	-	Sewing factory labor, vegetable stand	SKAOC 201-103
Sallomae Lee	1916 (19)	Hamheung	Marriage	Hamheung Middle School	Farming, restaurant	YBIC #11
Hang-shin Kim	1920 (22)	Pyongyang	Marriage	Can read and write Korean	Grocery store, Restaurant	DYK 29-32
Ke-yul Park	1919	Busan	Freedom from Korea	Uneducated	Farm labor, farming	SKAOC 267-284
Soon-ha Park	1918 (16)	-	Escape from colonialism	Ilshin School	Farm labor	SKAOC 126-131
Shin-sook Kim	1924 (21)	Southern Korea	-	-	Farm labor, vegetable stand	SKAOC 285-290
Kyung-shin Sunoo	1917 (18)	-	Economic opportunity	Uneducated	Farm labor, hotel	UCLASC No.27
Myong-sook Kim	1916 (18)	Southern Korea	-	-	Farm labor, farming, trucking	SKAOC 291-296
He-kyung Chung	1916	Pyongyang	-	-	Farm labor, grocery store, cleaning shop	SKAOC 213-218
Ki-lyul Park	1919 (18)	Daegu	Escape from colonialism	Uneducated	Washing, cooking	YBIC #8
Soon-man Shin's wife (Mrs. Shin)	1914	-	-	-	Ironing, barbershop, laundry	YBIC #10

Source: UCLASC=Korean-American Oral History Project Collection (1903-1945), UCLA Library, Los Angeles, CA; SKAOC=Sunoo (2002); YBIC=Yim Sun Bin Oral Interview Collection, NIKH, Seoul, Korea; DYK=Dora Yum Kim's oral history (Chin 1999).