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THE REALITY AND SELF-IDENTITY OF KOREAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN AMERICA IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL RECORDS AND LITERARY WORKS

ABSTRACT

*The research examines the experiences and representations of early-twentieth-century Korean immigrant women by integrating historical documents, oral narratives and literary representation. It addresses the persistent marginalisation of women in studies of Korean migration to the United States, particularly Hawai'i. Juxtaposing newspaper articles, picture bride testimonies and Eugenia Kim's *The Calligrapher's Daughter*, the study reveals that these women actively exercised agency through migration, education and family decision-making under conditions of colonial rule and gendered constraint. Rather than passive dependents, these women strategically pursued education and mobility for themselves and their children. The article concludes that education functioned as a central means through which Korean immigrant women constructed selfhood and asserted historical subjectivity within a transnational and colonial modernity.*

KEYWORDS: *Korean immigrant women, picture bride, *The Calligrapher's Daughter*, women's agency, education and mobility*

Realnost in samoidentiteta korejskih priseljenk v Ameriki v začetku 20. stoletja: primerjalna analiza zgodovinskih virov in literarnih del

IZVLEČEK

Raziskava preučuje izkušnje in reprezentacije korejskih priseljenk z začetka 20. stoletja z integracijo zgodovinskih dokumentov, ustnih pripovedi in literarne reprezentacije. Obravnava vztrajno marginalizacijo žensk v raziskavah korejskih migracij v Združene države Amerike, zlasti na Havaje. S primerjalno analizo časopisnih člankov, pričevanj »picture brides« in romana *The Calligrapher's Daughter* avtorice Eugenie Kim raziskava pokaže, da so te ženske aktivno udeležene svojo agencialnost skozi migracijo, izobraževanje ter odločanje o družinskih vprašanjih v razmerah kolonialne oblasti in spolno zaznamovanih omejitvah. Namesto pasivnih spremljevalk so te ženske strateško uresničevale izobraževanje in mobilnost zase ter za svoje otroke. Članek ugotavlja, da je izobraževanje delovalo kot osrednje sredstvo, prek katerega so korejske priseljenke oblikovale svojo subjektivnost ter uveljavljale svojo zgodovinsko vlogo znotraj transnacionalne in kolonialne modernosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: korejske priseljenke, »picture bride«, *The Calligrapher's Daughter*, ženska agencialnost, izobraževanje in mobilnost

1 Introduction

In the early twentieth century, Koreans initially migrated to Hawai'i in response to demand in the United States for inexpensive plantation labour before later proceeding under the expanding conditions of Japan's imperial aggression on the Korean peninsula. Even though Korean immigrant women were present from the earliest stages of migration and later arrived in significant numbers through picture marriages, their movements and contributions were often rendered less visible in contemporary public narratives and subsequent historiography. The article therefore examines the experiences and representations of early-twentieth-century Korean immigrant women by integrating historical documents, oral narratives of picture brides, and literary representation. The aim is to address the persistent marginalisation of women in Korean migration studies by revealing how they actively exercised agency under colonial rule and gendered constraint.

The following research questions are addressed in this article. First, how

do historical records of early Korean migration to Hawai'i represent women's migration-related decision-making, and what do these representations reveal about women's agency and educational aspirations? Second, how do the oral narratives of picture brides explain women's motivation to migrate amid colonial and gendered constraints, and how is education articulated as aspirations and obligations within these accounts? Third, how does *The Calligrapher's Daughter* render women's desire, flexibility, and identity construction, and how does this literary articulation converge with or complicate the patterns observed in historical and oral sources?

Methodologically, the article employs a comparative analysis of three categories of sources: historical documents (including newspaper articles from the Korean Empire period); oral narratives of picture brides; and a literary narrative (*The Calligrapher's Daughter* by Eugenia Kim). By comparing these sources, the study examines how women negotiated social constraints, migration, and national belonging, and how women's agency becomes visible across the different genres of evidence.

The structure of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a literature review of early Korean migration and scholarship on Korean immigrant women, identifying key research gaps. Section 3 analyses historical documents to discuss women's agency and public self-positioning. Section 4 examines picture bride narratives that foreground women's decision-making in the circumstances of colonial and familial constraint and the centrality of education as an aspiration and obligation. Section 5 explores the literary representation of these themes in *The Calligrapher's Daughter*, showing how Najin Han's pursuit of an education and self-making offers a literary articulation of historically grounded processes of identity construction. Finally, section 6 synthesises the findings to argue that early Korean immigrant women's agency constituted a patterned response to constraint, with education functioning as a key practice via which women claimed historical subjectivity.

The study generally follows the McCune-Reischauer system for Korean terms and names, maintaining the traditional surname-first order. Nonetheless, exceptions are made for historical figures and authors who have an established presence in English-language scholarship under a different spelling. For instance, Chun Yun-hee is used instead of the McCune-Reischauer form (Ch'ŏn Yŏn-hŭi) to maintain consistency with the literature. In addition, the given name-first order is applied to individuals with Westernised names (e.g., Mary Paik Lee) and fictional characters (e.g., Najin Han) to reflect their specific cultural or literary contexts.

2 Literature Review and Research Gaps

Research on early Korean migration to the United States has often focused on the structural conditions of labour recruitment and plantation life, along with the political activities of male leaders and the forming of immigrant institutions in Hawai'i (Baik and Murabayashi 2011; Patterson 1988). Within this historiography, women have frequently appeared only in supporting roles – as wives, family members or “picture brides” – rather than as historical subjects whose perspectives and decisions shaped migration and settlement.

2.1 The Marginalisation of Women in Migration Historiography

More recent studies in both English and Korean have noted this imbalance and stressed that Korean immigrant women's voices and experiences remain underrepresented in historical records (Park 2024). As a result, key dimensions of women's lives – such as daily struggles, cultural agency, and identity formation – have often been under-examined or approached indirectly through male-centred archives or institutional histories (Fan 1996; Bae 2024).

2.2 The Dearth of First-Person Narratives

A recurrently mentioned limitation is the dearth of first-person accounts by early Korean immigrant women. With only a handful of memoirs or autobiographies available, historians have had few direct women's voices to draw upon. Mary Paik Lee's memoir *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* (1990) and Marie Park Fujii's *Growing Up American in Papa's World: Stories of a Korean Immigrant Family* (2012) are frequently mentioned as rare and invaluable first-hand narratives of an immigrant Korean woman. Such narratives offer “rare insight into a group often neglected in history” (Park 2024: 2). At the same time, the prominence of these works shows how unusual it remains to centre women's voices via written sources alone. The paucity of women's writings has forced researchers to rely on male-centred archives or second-hand reports, leaving women's personal experiences under-documented.

2.3 Methodological Limitations: Institutional and Macro-Historical Emphases

Traditional historical and sociological research on early migration has often prioritised demographic trends, institutional events and political mobilisation. Despite the acknowledged importance of early Korean immigrant women – often referred to as “picture brides” – in contributing to the forming of Korean communities and the anti-Japanese independence movement (Chai 1988; Kim

2020), academic discourse has historically tended to centre on male-dominated narratives of sugarcane farm workers and political leaders' achievements, thereby causing women to be invisible (Bae 2024; Fan 1996; Gravdahl 2025). Further, existing macro-historical and sociological approaches have many times obscured the meaning of Korean immigrant women's lives due to an overriding interest in dominant national, class and gender groups (Oh 2017: 1634). Accordingly, these macro-level emphases leave less room for analysing the everyday meanings of women's lives, including decision-making, moral reasoning and educational aspirations.

2.4 The Need for Interdisciplinary Juxtaposition

On top of these documentary constraints, interdisciplinary perspectives – especially from literature, culture and gender studies – have only recently started to inform historical research on early Korean immigrant women. Much of the previous research was written in a traditional historical or sociological mode, emphasising dates, demographics and institutional events, yet neglecting the cultural expressions and personal stories of immigrant women. This is a notable gap because, as Oh (2017) argues, fictional and narrative works can reveal truths about immigrant women's daily lives and inner worlds that official records omit. For example, Younho Oh's study *Korean Picture Brides in Hawaii: Historical and Literary Narratives* (2017) analyses recent novels, poems and plays – from Korea and the Korean diaspora – that imaginatively reconstruct the experiences of picture brides. She found that these literary works provide important details of women's daily living, emotional struggles, and the "transboundary culture" (Oh 2017: 1634) they created, details largely missing from conventional histories. The literary perspective exposes facets of immigrant women's reality (such as intimate family dynamics, personal resilience, and cultural adaptation) that a purely fact-based approach might overlook. Oh suggests that such stories, whether drawn from oral narratives or creative fiction, raise awareness of the complex reality of Korean women's migration a century ago.

Taken together, existing scholarship points to several persistent gaps, and this article fills a critical gap by undertaking a unique comparative analysis of diverse source categories. While some studies have investigated literary representations of picture brides alongside a historical background, not many have directly juxtaposed official historical records, first-hand personal accounts and literary works. By integrating these perspectives, the presented study moves beyond previous emphases on political activism alone and sheds light on how these women, with their determined pursuit of education and economic independence, asserted significant agency that has often been overlooked. Rather

than the familiar stereotype of passivity, historical sources reveal these women led active and multifaceted lives, participating in political causes, educating themselves, and working to secure opportunities for their families. Their individual experiences thus demonstrate resilience and agency in the face of colonial rule, migration, and cultural upheaval.

This study comparatively analyses historical documents, oral narratives of picture brides, and literary representation, thereby examining how early Korean immigrant women constructed a sense of self and national belonging while negotiating colonial rule, gendered constraint, and migration.

3 Historical Documents and Oral Records: Women's Agency and Public Self-Positioning

The USA's annexation of Hawai'i in 1898 accelerated the plantation economy's growth, generating structural demand for inexpensive Asian contract labour. As Chinese migration became restricted by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Japanese labourers organised themselves for higher wages, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA) sought alternative labour sources and turned to Korea. On 13 January 1903, the first organised group of Korean labour migrants (102 individuals including workers and accompanying family members) arrived at Honolulu Harbour to work primarily on Hawaiian sugar plantations (Baik and Murabayashi 2011: 77–79; Patterson 1988). Between early 1903 and the suspension of Korean labour immigration to Hawaii in August 1905, approximately 7,400 Korean labourers were recruited to the islands, a figure commonly rounded down to about 7,000 in later scholarship on the first wave of Korean migration (Baik and Murabayashi 2011: 80–81; Gravdahl 2025: 4–6). Passenger manifest-based reconstructions further indicate that more than 600 women were included in this early cohort, representing roughly one woman for every ten men. Most of these women were listed as wives or other family members of male labour migrants rather than independent contract workers (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Center for Korean Studies 2024; Young 2022). During the Japanese colonial period, the colonial authorities permitted Korean women to migrate to Hawai'i specifically as brides of Korean men who had already settled there, with the outcome that a further 1,000 picture brides arrived between 1910 and 1924. These women played a crucial role in stabilising community life, organising family structures, and sustaining immigrant institutions such as churches, schools, and nationalist associations (Bae 2024; Fan 1996; Oh 2017).

Although these women, through their combined wage and reproductive labour and their participation in religious and political networks, were foundational to the

formation and continuity of the early Korean diaspora in Hawai'i, their presence did not necessarily translate into visibility in contemporary public discourse. In late 1902, *Hwangsŏng Sinmun* (皇城新聞, a daily newspaper published in 1898 and forcefully discontinued in 1910 due to Japan's imperialisation) reported that an American resident in Incheon had planned the emigration of Koreans to Hawai'i, and that 54 Koreans who initially responded to the recruitment left on 22 December, travelling via Japan to Hawai'i (Hwangsŏng Sinmun 1902). Even though there were 102 Koreans in total, including 21 wives (Baik and Murabayashi 2011: 77), the newspaper only reported about male labourers and omitted the 21 women who also embarked. Although nearly half of those on board were adult women and minors, they did not appear in this coverage of Korea's first official immigration convoy. This silence is not accidental; it reflects the broader gendered hierarchies of the late Joseon and Korean Empire period, which continued to operate under a Confucian, patrilineal order that had structured society for over five centuries. In the described context, men appeared at the forefront of public narratives as formal workers and household heads, whereas women's movements and contributions were relegated to the background or rendered invisible. When considering women of the Joseon-Korean Empire era within this framework, it becomes understandable that they were imagined as passive and submissive figures standing behind the men who occupied the front of society, even as their actual decisions and migrations were integral to the making of Korea's early diaspora.

3.1 Women's Public Voice in *Cheuk Sinmun* (1907)

Cheuk Sinmun from 1907 provides direct evidence that Korean immigrant women engaged with political news, followed social developments in Korea, and articulated their place within a national community even while residing abroad. A letter published on 26 June 1907 shows the writer's ongoing attentiveness to social transformations in the homeland and her valuation of information concerning educational and industrial change. Another 1907 article documents immigrant women's contributions to the National Debt Repayment Movement, expressing that "even though we are humble women, we are still among the 20 million Koreans", in turn asserting a shared sense of responsibility for national survival. Read together, these materials complicate the assumption that early immigrant women existed outside political discourse. They show women speaking publicly as national subjects – politically informed, socially engaged, and conscious of collective obligation.

3.2 Oral Records of Migration Decision-Making Beyond Accompaniment

This political and social awareness was closely connected to a distinct feature of women's migration to Hawai'i at the time: in several cases, women did not migrate merely as accompanying family members but made the decision to emigrate independently. One example appears in testimony concerning Rosie Kim Chang's maternal grandmother, who had migrated to Hawai'i in 1904 through the Methodist Church together with her 5-year-old daughter, without a husband (Lee and Chang 2014: 328–330). The case indicates that the grandmother did not rely on the judgment of others but instead exercised her own agency in determining both her own and her daughter's future.

Other cases further reveal that women chose migration while assuming full responsibility for young children, and did so without the presence of husbands. One such case is Mun T'ōra, born in Pyongyang, who served as a Sunday school teacher at the Namsan-hyōn Methodist Church before she migrated. In 1903, she left her non-Christian in-laws and migrated to Hawai'i together with her 8-year-old daughter under the title of Bible woman (Lee Tōk-hŭi 2003: 194). Her case demonstrates how religious conviction provided both the motivation and the institutional framework which enabled women to undertake independent migration.

While some women migrated based on religious commitment, others did so out of profound dissatisfaction with their marital circumstances. One example is Kim Elaine's maternal grandmother. After witnessing her husband attempt to silence their crying infant by covering the baby with a blanket, she feared for the child's life and alone fled to Hawai'i with the baby. Her husband was a habitual gambler, and several of their children had already died during the marriage (Lee et al. 2016: 290–291). This case highlights how women's migration decisions were sometimes driven by immediate concerns for physical safety and survival.

Women who chose to leave unsatisfactory marriages did not always migrate alone with young children. In some cases, women assumed leadership over the entire family's relocation, deliberately excluding their husbands from the migration. A good example is Mrs Hwang, the mother of Kim Hei-won. Mrs Hwang migrated to Hawai'i with her eldest son and his wife, her daughter, and her youngest son. At first glance, it might appear that she migrated as part of her adult son's household. Yet, according to Kim Hei-won's testimony, Mrs Hwang herself decided to abandon her husband and take the family to Hawai'i. Although her husband was a high-ranking official in the P'yōngan region and Mrs Hwang came from a yangban family, she left after her husband took a *kisaeng* concubine. Declaring that she would take the children to America so that they could receive

an education, and that she herself would become a morally exemplary person, she carried out the migration. After arriving in Hawai'i, Mrs Hwang worked on a sugarcane plantation with her son and daughter-in-law, despite having lived a life far removed from manual labour in a wealthy household (Sunoo 2002: 155, 172; Lee Tök-hŭi 2003: 195). Her decision to migrate was grounded in her refusal to endure the continuing disappointment in her husband as a life partner and in her determination to lead her children in search of a new path.

These cases collectively demonstrate that at the dawn of the twentieth century – when overseas migration to the West was virtually unprecedented in Korean history – some women made deliberate and decisive choices to enter an unfamiliar and uncertain future. Contrary to the prevailing stereotypes of women in a Confucian society as passive, these women actively sought alternatives when they judged that their dignity, values, or the safety of their children, were threatened. For such women, migration to Hawai'i represented a viable means of escaping their constraining social and familial circumstances.

3.3 Education as an Aspiration, Obligation and Strategy

Across these oral records, education emerges as a recurring value through which women framed both migration and settlement, often as a moral obligation and a strategy for mobility. Mary Paik Lee (1990) and Lee et al. (2016) show that Mary Paik Lee's mother, Song Gwang-do, received an education in Korea from her mother-in-law, who herself had been taught to read and write by her husband. After converting to Christianity, the grandmother actively evangelised local women and taught Hangul using the Bible, arguing that educational customs privileging men alone were unjust. She later founded a school for girls in Pyongyang and recruited female students door to door. These efforts coincided with broader developments, including the Joseon government's 1895 Elementary School Ordinance granting girls access to schooling and the 1898 Women's Rights Petition issued by women in Seoul's Bukchon area. Together, these developments formed a cultural foundation that encouraged women's education.

This educational orientation continued among women who migrated to Hawai'i. As already noted, Rosie Kim Chang's grandmother, who had migrated with her young daughter in 1904, worked while placing her daughter in the Susanna Wesley Home and enabled her to graduate from McKinley High School (Lee and Chang 2014: 328–330). Similarly, Mary Paik Lee herself attended high school despite extreme poverty, relying on her father's farm labour and her mother's laundry work amid intensifying anti-Asian discrimination (Sunoo 2002: 234). Kim Elaine's grandmother ensured that her daughter attended school, and Kim Elaine recalls that her mother took great pleasure in studying English and reading

newspapers in full. Even under harsh conditions, these women actively cultivated their children's intellectual capacities (Lee et al. 2016: 291).

Mrs Hwang, the mother of Kim Hei-won mentioned earlier, likewise regarded children's education as a moral obligation. She sent both sons to school and supported her eldest son through a Korean boarding school and eventually to doctoral studies in Chicago. When her daughter Kim Hei-won expressed a desire to pursue education, Mrs Hwang agreed and undertook laundry work to finance her schooling. Although Kim Hei-won later withdrew from the seminary due to financial and academic difficulties, her commitment to education remained, and she later married on the proviso that her husband would support her continued schooling (Sunoo 2002: 158–160). The fact that daughters as well as sons were viewed as rightful recipients of education under such constrained circumstances is particularly significant.

Institutional evidence further supports this pattern. At the Kawaiaha'o Girls' Seminary in Hawai'i, 18 Korean female students were enrolled between 1908 and 1919, accounting for approximately 4% of the total student body of 484 (Lee Tök-hŭi 2003: 54–55) – a notably high proportion given the severe poverty experienced by Hawaiian immigrants. Mollie Hong Min, who had migrated to Hawai'i in 1903 with her parents following her older brother's missionary journey, attended this seminary at her brother's initiative. After graduating, she went on to study at the Methodist Deacon Theological College, where she was the sole Korean and the only Asian student at the time (Lee and Chang 2014: 78–79).

Such cases suggest that, even under severe economic hardship, education could function as a core aspiration shaping women's family strategies and self-understanding.

In sum, this section has shown that women's agency is visible not only in later community stabilisation but also in early public speech and decision-making. *Chekuk Sinmun* documents women's political self-positioning as national subjects, while oral records reveal women's migration choices and educational commitments as deliberate responses to constraint. The next section turns to picture bride narratives more directly in order to examine how women framed migration under colonial and familial pressure and how education operated as both an aspiration and an obligation within these accounts.

4 Picture Brides under Colonial Constraint: The Pursuit of Freedom via Education

After 1905 marked the end of the initial wave of labour migration, women once again migrated to Hawai'i in the 1910s under the designation of "picture brides".

According to immigration statistics, from 1910 until 1924 – when immigration by Japanese nationals, including Koreans, was prohibited by the Immigration Act of 1924 – the number of Koreans who arrived in Hawai‘i totalled 859, among whom 800 were women (Lee Tök-hŭi 2003: 121). The predominance of women in this period resulted from colonial policy: following Japan’s annexation of the Korean Empire in 1910, the Japanese authorities permitted overseas migration from Korea chiefly in the form of marriage migration, allowing Korean women to emigrate as wives of men who had migrated earlier between 1903 and 1905.

Compared to the initial wave of labour migration, these women entered migration with an even greater degree of individual initiative. They chose to leave their familiar social environments and to marry men whose identities they knew only through photographs and correspondence. While such decisions entailed considerable uncertainty, the motivations underlying them can be approached through the autobiographical writings of Chun Yun-hee, a picture bride whose life narrative offers rare insight into women’s subjective experiences of migration under colonial rule.

4.1 Choosing a “Free Country”: Chun Yun-hee’s Decision-Making and the Logic of Migration

Born in Jinju in 1896, Chun Yun-hee survived the loss of most of her siblings and received an education at a Christian private school. She later described picture marriage as the only viable path through which she could emigrate, motivated by a desire to reach what she called a “free country”. Romantic attachment was secondary; for Chun Yun-hee, migration itself represented the primary objective, reflecting a conscious effort to shape her own future.

Her interest in picture marriage first emerged in 1914 while attending Gwangnim Girls’ School in Jinju, Gyeongsangnam-do. At the time, picture marriage – as reported in newspapers – was a frequent topic of discussion among students. That summer, Chun Yun-hee travelled alone on horseback from Jinju to Masan to visit the family of Park Geum-u, who was already living in Hawai‘i as a picture bride, and actively requested that Park Geum-u’s father arrange a picture marriage for her. Her determination surprised those around her. Park Geum-u’s father questioned why the daughter of a well-off family would seek such a path, and Chun Yun-hee’s teachers attempted to dissuade her, warning that the men in Hawai‘i were merely ignorant farmers. Despite these objections, Chun Yun-hee later recalled her then reasoning as follows: “At that time, my hope of going abroad drowned out everything else – love and all other considerations could not be heard at all. All I could think about was going to a free country. The desire to marry and live in love with a husband came second; going abroad

became the first priority, and I hurried to arrange it" (Mun et al. 2017: 165–167).

When she received the photograph of her prospective husband, Gil Chan-rok, she felt little emotional response; who he was mattered far less than the opportunity to leave Korea. After her travel permit was issued in January 1915, family members, friends and teachers alike attempted to stop her. Nevertheless, she later recalled that she could not hear their objections and focused solely on departing Korea. Her memoir recounts the medical inspections in Japan, the arduous trans-Pacific journey, and her shock upon meeting a husband far older than she had expected.

4.2 Colonial Unfreedom, Memory, and the Value of Freedom

Chun Yun-hee's desire to leave her family and homeland stemmed from the profound sense of suffocation she experienced within the realities of colonial rule. Recalling memories from around the age of 12 or 13, she described sharing in the collective grief surrounding the loss of national sovereignty. She remembered the day when villagers wept openly as Japanese flags replaced Korean ones, and the following day when Japanese *kisaeng* paraded through Jinju celebrating the annexation, humiliating the Korean leaders, and mocking the defeated nation. Schools were closed for what the colonial authorities declared a holiday, while for Koreans it marked the loss of freedom and dignity. Although young, Chun Yun-hee recalled that she understood the gravity of the situation and felt compelled to witness these events first-hand (Mun et al. 2017: 162–163).

She further recounted experiences of Japanese police entering her school to enforce Japanese-language education and the replacement of Korean history with Japanese history (Mun et al. 2017: 163), as well as the fate of her cousin Ch'ŏn Myeong-ok, who had attended a boys' school and was imprisoned, tortured and killed for refusing to submit to the colonial authority (Mun et al. 2017: 626–627). These encounters with violence and repression shaped Chun Yun-hee's understanding of colonial domination and directly informed her decision to pursue migration. Her reflection on her desire to go to a "free country" encapsulates both the harsh realities of colonial Korea and her resolve to escape them.

The emotional impact of liberation from colonial oppression remained vivid even decades later. When Chun Yun-hee began recording her life story in 1971, she recalled that although she had arrived in Hawai'i as a young girl who knew little and endured many hardships, she regarded it as a genuinely good place because it was a democratic country of freedom. While she also noted the island's mild climate, she emphasised that even in her seventies being a "citizen

of a free country” remained a central and enduring value, outweighing all other considerations and underscoring how deeply the experience of colonial unfreedom had influenced her worldview.

Her subsequent life in Hawai‘i included multiple marriages and divorces – choices that were highly unusual for Korean women of her generation. Her first divorce resulted from economic instability that prevented her husband from supporting their children’s education. Her second divorce followed her husband’s refusal to allow her daughter to attend university. In each case, Chun Yun-hee prioritised her children’s educational opportunities over social convention. Among her six children, several completed secondary and higher education, reflecting her sustained commitment to education as a means of securing social mobility.

4.3 Education as an Aspiration and an Obligation: From Women’s Hopes to Intergenerational Strategy

Chun Yun-hee’s experience was not exceptional. A strong aspiration for education can be observed across the life histories of many picture brides, and this desire often preceded concerns for children’s schooling. For many women, picture marriage offered the possibility of pursuing education unavailable to them in Korea. Park Young Chin, who arrived in Hawai‘i as a picture bride in 1913, decided to marry after her prospective husband promised that she would be able to continue her education after exchanging letters with him, who was 13 years older than her (Lee and Chang 2014: 199). Mary Lee, who arrived in 1915 at the age of 17, likewise chose migration in the hope of receiving a free education in America. She left her widowed mother, older brother and younger sister in Korea. Having made her decision independently, she did not relent despite the fierce opposition of her mother and brother (Sunoo 2002: 194–198). Choi Ho-kyong, who arrived in 1924, cited education as her primary motivation. She was the youngest daughter of a wealthy family in Pyongyang and had attended elementary school. While her family opposed Christianity and objected to her becoming a picture bride, she was able to migrate to Hawai‘i because her mother accompanied her to America. Still, from the day of her arrival, she was required to work on a plantation, and this harsh plantation labour prevented her from realising this ambition (Sunoo 2002: 115–118). Kang Sung-hak, who migrated to Hawai‘i as a picture bride in 1917, was the daughter of a relatively affluent family from Gyeongsang Province. Even though she planned to study in the United States, extremely harsh living conditions and the birth of five children prevented her from realising her dream; instead, she redirected her unrealised educational ambitions toward securing educational opportunities for her children (Sunoo 2002: 297–298).

For many picture brides, the promise of education quickly gave way to the reality of unrelenting labour. Yet their frustrated personal ambitions did not disappear and instead were transferred to the next generation. Women perceived their children's education as a responsibility that they themselves were obliged to fulfil, often compensating for their husbands' limited economic capacity. For instance, Song Jeong-yun, who arrived in 1914, worked as a domestic labourer to fund her son's university education when her husband's income proved insufficient (Lee et al. 2016: 38–39). This demonstrates that she actively took on the responsibility of her child's education as her own duty, irrespective of her husband's capacity.

Chun Yun-hee herself articulated this sense of responsibility clearly. She went through two divorces, both because her husbands had obstructed her children's education. In her first marriage, she had two daughters and one son, but her husband, who drank heavily and frequently missed work, lacked the ability to support the children's education. Faced with financial hardship that made it impossible to raise the children properly, Chun Yun-hee chose her first divorce in order to allow her children to study freely. In her second marriage, she had two more daughters and another son, but divorced once again when her remarried husband opposed the college education of a daughter from her previous marriage. Chun Yun-hee stated that her own mother had sent her, a daughter, to school even in Korea, and that she herself could not become someone who failed to fulfil her parental duty by being unable to educate her children after coming to such a good country (Mun et al. 2017: 227). For her, educating her children was no one's responsibility but her own. "Earning money with my own hands and educating my children" was Chun Yun-hee's goal (Mun et al. 2017: 423). Her resolve was realised in the outcome that, among her six children, three graduated from high school, two from college, and one left college without completing a degree.

As examined above, Hawaiian immigrant women demonstrated agency by establishing a personal foundation through education. Education extended not only to themselves but, when circumstances did not permit their own educational advancement, to their children. These women saw education as a means of standing upright as human beings and continuously acted to realise that belief despite the structural and cultural constraints imposed by colonial rule, migration, and gendered expectations.

5 Literary Representation: *The Calligrapher's Daughter*

Eugenia Kim's *The Calligrapher's Daughter*, inspired by the author's mother, portrays similar themes through the fictional character Najin Han. Najin grows

up in Japanese-occupied Korea where educational opportunities for girls are limited by patriarchal expectations. However, her deep yearning for education and the construction of her identity via this pursuit serve as central themes that reflect the broader struggles faced by women in early-20th-century Korea.

5.1 Intergenerational Desire for Education

Despite her father's rigid adherence to Confucian traditions (which dictate that women should prioritise domestic roles), Najin's mother, Haejung, quietly supports her ambition to receive an education since she regrets her own lack of schooling. A passage describing Haejung's childhood envy of her brothers' lessons captures the gendered constraints of the period: "The first tutor had come to the house in Najin twenty years ago when Haejung was seven, and at this moment she felt as if she were seven still, sitting outside her brother's classroom window, fuming with envy" (Kim 2010: 18). In this sense, she plays a critical role in transmitting both cultural values and a desire for learning. Though her own opportunities were limited, Haejung dreams of a future where her daughter might receive formal schooling (as hinted at by the mention of the newly reopened Ewha College). The described personal hope for education is intertwined with the family's broader experience of colonial modernity and the transformation of traditional roles. This underlines not only Najin's personal determination but also the generational desire for learning among women, even in a society that largely restricted their access to formal schooling.

Najin's pursuit of education is challenged by her father, however, who equates modern schooling with the erosion of Korean traditions under Japanese rule. He sees imperial education as a tool for colonisation rather than empowerment, making Najin's access to schooling a battle not only against gender norms but also colonial control.

As the previous chapter showed, early Korean immigrant women pursued education both formally and informally notwithstanding systemic barriers, treating learning as a means of independence and family survival in a new social environment. Much like Najin, who must balance familial duty with her educational aspirations, these women saw education as a tool for survival and empowerment, even if it was not formally encouraged by the men in their lives.

5.2 Flexibility and the Pursuit of New Opportunities

Najin's journey in the novel illustrates her adaptability in navigating societal constraints. When her dream of formal education is stifled, she finds alternative routes to expand her knowledge and experiences, such as working at the royal

court and later adjusting to married life with Calvin Cho. She also takes on work assisting in household tasks and tutoring the children of the Gordon family, an American missionary household, despite her father's belief that it is undignified for a noblewoman to work. Her ability to adapt and seek out opportunities, even when initial plans fail, reflects the lived experiences of immigrant women who undertook various forms of labour to ensure their family's survival.

The novel further depicts Najin's identity formation across different cultural spaces, from colonial Korea to the United States, mirroring the transnational negotiation experienced by many immigrant women. Flexibility, therefore, becomes a crucial survival strategy for women facing displacement and political upheaval. Just as early Korean immigrant women adjusted to shifting social and economic conditions, Najin's flexibility enables her to navigate the Japanese occupation and eventual migration. Whether through education, work or marriage, Najin and historical immigrant women alike show perseverance in shaping their futures.

5.3 Constructing the Self under Constraint

In the novel, Najin's identity is shaped by her persistent desire for an education and her ability to adapt to life's challenges. Throughout the novel, she transitions from a daughter bound by familial expectations to a woman who carves her own path, navigating both personal and political upheavals. While her journey remains deeply rooted in her cultural heritage, she learns to reconcile her identity in the different environments – first in Japanese-occupied Korea and later as an immigrant in America. A particularly striking moment occurs when she realises that not being given a name by her father in her early age granted her a form of freedom, unlike her brother, who was confined by the weight of lineage and expectation. Her namelessness becomes a metaphor for self-determination, allowing her to construct her identity on her own terms. This theme closely parallels the experiences of Korean immigrant women in the USA who had to negotiate their sense of self while adapting to a new cultural landscape. Many immigrant women straddled the expectations of their home culture and the opportunities available in America, shaping identities that were neither fully traditional nor entirely assimilated.

Altogether, Najin's narrative does not merely parallel the experiences of early Korean immigrant women but renders legible the same processes of self-construction observed in historical records. Much like the immigrant women discussed above – who pursued an education, redefined family roles, and exercised agency amid conditions of constraint – Najin's namelessness functions as a literary articulation of a historically grounded strategy of survival and self-definition. In both historical reality and fiction, identity is not inherited uncritically but actively negotiated through education, mobility, and moral choice. The convergence of

these literary and historical trajectories suggests that the agency of early Korean immigrant women was neither exceptional nor accidental; rather, it constituted a broader pattern of women's self-positioning in a transitional modern world whereby education became not simply a means of advancement but a foundational condition for becoming a subject in history.

6 Conclusion

This article has examined the experiences and representations of early-twentieth-century Korean immigrant women by bringing together three distinct albeit complementary bodies of sources: historical documents, oral narratives of picture brides, and literary representation. With this comparative approach, the study has sought to illuminate how Korean women, often rendered marginal in migration historiography, actively constructed a sense of self while negotiating the intersecting constraints of colonial rule, gendered social order, and migration.

The historical records analysed in the study demonstrate that Korean immigrant women were neither passive dependents nor incidental participants in the formation of the early Korean diaspora in Hawai'i. From the earliest phase of labour migration, women appeared not only as accompanying family members but also as politically informed subjects who followed developments in Korea, participated in nationalist movements, and assumed responsibility for their family's survival and the community's continuity. The silence surrounding women in contemporary press coverage, rather than reflecting their absence, reveals the gendered limits of public recognition under late Joseon and colonial social hierarchies.

The oral narratives of picture brides further complicate the prevailing stereotypes by foregrounding women's deliberate and often risky choices to migrate under conditions of profound uncertainty. These narratives show that migration decisions were frequently shaped by women's own assessments of dignity, safety and possibility, instead of romantic aspiration alone. For many, picture marriage functioned as a strategic route out of colonial suffocation and into a space imagined – however imperfectly – as one of freedom. Across these life histories, education emerges as a central and enduring value: first as a personal aspiration, and later, when circumstances closed off women's own educational opportunities, as a moral obligation directed to their children. Women's willingness to prioritise education even at the cost of social stigma, marital dissolution, or intensified labour underscores their active engagement in shaping intergenerational mobility.

The literary analysis of *The Calligrapher's Daughter* reinforces and refracts these historical findings. Through the character of Najin Han, Eugenia Kim's novel

makes visible the same processes of desire, adaptation, and identity construction evident in historical sources. Najin's pursuit of education, her flexibility in responding to disrupted plans, and her eventual self-definition beyond inherited roles offer a literary articulation of strategies that many immigrant women employed in lived experience. The motif of namelessness, in particular, functions as a powerful metaphor for self-determination under constraint, highlighting how identity was not simply inherited but actively negotiated.

Taken together, these historical and literary trajectories suggest that the agency of early Korean immigrant women was neither exceptional nor accidental. Rather, it constituted a patterned response to a transitional modern world influenced by empire, migration, and gendered limitation. Education, mobility, and moral choice operated not merely as instruments of advancement but as foundational practices via which women asserted themselves as historical subjects.

By juxtaposing official records, oral narratives and literary representation, the presented research contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to move beyond male-centred and institution-focused accounts of Korean migration. It shows that women's lives, decisions and aspirations are indispensable to understanding the formation of the Korean diaspora and the meanings of migration itself. In so doing, the study invites further research that continues to integrate women's voices – across genres and archives – into the historical narratives of transnational Korean modernity.

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This article is based solely on the authors' analysis of historical documents and literary sources referenced within the submitted materials.

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