

“Hawaii Has Been My America:” Generation, Gender, and Korean Immigrant Experience in Hawai‘i Before World War II

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Introduction

With 2003 marking the centennial of Korean immigration to the United States, it seems an opportune time to rethink some of the key paradigms that have defined contemporary understandings of pre-World War II Korean experiences in the United States. Prevailing historical accounts have routinely emphasized a diasporic immigrant community consumed by the politics of Korean independence that emerged from the colonization of Korea by Japan in 1910. Rife with political intrigue and larger-than-life personalities, these accounts have guaranteed that the Korean independence movement would serve as the dominant narrative of pre-1945 Korean immigrant experience in the United States.¹ While the importance of the independence movement cannot be discounted, the emphasis on this narrative has invariably produced a historiography that has simultaneously privileged nationalist histories at the expense of other experiences while also conflating such critical issues as generational differences, gender politics, and place.

While various historical accounts have traced Korean nationalist politics in particular areas (primarily Hawai‘i, Los Angeles, and San Francisco), these regional and urban studies have ignored how particular locales have shaped

Korean immigrant experiences. Instead, these works have focused on Korean nationalism as a political movement curiously unmoored not only from the larger forces of American history but also from local histories. When “place” is invoked, it is in the context of a specific geographical location or a generic “America” that serves merely as a backdrop to a myriad of ostensibly more important events. Yet, when we consider the “power of place,” the prevailing narrative of pre-World War II Korean immigrant experience is profoundly disrupted.² In an effort to rethink the issue of place and its relationship to Korean immigrant experience, this article examines how the “local” that is Hawai‘i shaped the life of one Korean immigrant woman’s life, Esther (Po Pae) Park, in the decades before World War II.³

In examining Park’s experiences in the 1920s and 1930s I contend that the distinctive context of Hawai‘i, which included sizeable Korean immigrant communities, a population where Asian immigrants outnumbered whites, and an understanding of Hawai‘i as a place of exile rather than settlement for Koreans, created a unique local cultural milieu where Korean immigrants experienced generational identity, gender, and homeland politics differently than on the mainland.⁴ Additionally, serious consideration of the relationship between the ideas of exilic identity and migrant life provides an important window into exploring why migrants *returned* to their country of origin, a dynamic largely ignored in the recent historiography of U.S. immigration and in studies on Asian immigrants.⁵ Finally, despite its status as a U.S. territory in this period, it is critical to understand that, given its racial demographics, natural resources, climate, and physical terrain, Hawai‘i existed beyond the pale of American cultural and political life before World War II. Consequently, the “America” that Koreans encountered in Hawai‘i was significantly different than in the continental United States.

While the United States experienced a mass immigration from throughout the world at the time of the twentieth century, Hawai‘i stands out for its system of contract labor to recruit migrants, its relative proximity to Asia, its geographical isolation from the contiguous United States, and its large Asian migrant population which formed the largest immigrant group in the Islands.⁶ Initially recruited to work on the sugar plantations, roughly 7,000 Koreans migrated to Hawai‘i between 1902-1907.⁷ While the number of Korean immigrants in Hawai‘i paled in comparison to other immigrant groups to the islands before World War II, Korean communities there were distinctive for their strong ties to Christianity, the large number of migrants from urban backgrounds, and their tendency to migrate in family units. Like immigrants from around the globe, the emigration of Koreans in this period was influenced by traditional “push and pull” factors, such as famine, political unrest, hopes of economic opportunity and religious freedom in the United States as well as the transnational American missionary connections between the United States and Korea. While numerous studies have demonstrated the ways in which immigrant ethnic identity has been

fashioned through the crucible of migration, for Korean immigrants, this process was heightened by the experience of increasing Japanese imperial encroachment in Korea at the turn of the twentieth century. Consequently, Korean migrants arrived in Hawai‘i with a distinct sense of “being Korean” that was firmly grounded in a nationalist anti-Japanese discourse. This anti-colonial identity was consolidated further by the subsequent Japanese colonization of Korea in 1910 and the attendant nationalist and labor conflicts in Hawai‘i between Korean and Japanese immigrant communities.⁸

For Koreans in Hawai‘i, the colonization of their homeland prompted a fervor of nationalist activity. This burst of political activity was also coupled with a shift in the way in which Korean migrants conceived their nationalist identity. Left without a nation or a state to call their own, many Koreans in the United States increasingly understood their experiences as one of exile rather than sojourning or permanent settlement.⁹ Those in exile maintained their Korean national identity primarily through political activity and cultural preservation. In the 1920s, demographics mattered enormously in the emergence and maintenance of this Korean identity. The mainland U.S. Korean population of roughly 1,100 paled in contrast to the nearly 5,000 Koreans in the Territory of Hawai‘i.¹⁰ As a result, Hawai‘i fostered Korean organizations in larger numbers than on the mainland. The size of Korean communities in the Islands guaranteed that Hawai‘i would play a critical role in the building and maintenance of a Korean exilic identity.

It must be remembered that, despite its status as an American territory, Hawai‘i existed on the margins of American life, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. Scholars have aptly demonstrated the reasons for its marginalization: distance from the mainland, the colonial relationship between the United States and Hawai‘i, a population in which non-whites significantly outnumbered whites, and a plantation economy that made Hawai‘i more similar to other tropical plantation economies of the era than to the continental United States.¹¹ Importantly, this cultural and geographic distance from the mainland provided the space for Korean immigrant communities to cultivate and maintain an exilic identity in the decades preceding World War II.

“Parkie”

Affectionately called “Parkie” by her friends and family, Esther Park was born in 1902 in what is present day North Korea and immigrated with her parents and two older brothers to Hawai‘i in 1903. Her parents worked as contract laborers on sugarcane plantations, first on the island of Hawai‘i and then in rural Oahu. Part of the “middle generation,” the roughly 500 Koreans who came to Hawai‘i as young children, Park was unusual in that she completed not only high school in Honolulu but also a B.A. in education at the University of Hawai‘i at a time when such educational attainment was rare for Korean immigrants, especially women. Even more striking, at a time when the majority of first generation women

followed the traditional path of marriage and family, the unmarried Park not only pursued a professional career in the Islands working for the Hawaiian Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), but she also returned to Korea in 1947 under the auspices of the Korean YWCA.

The understanding of Hawai'i as a place of exile is clearly evident in Park's experiences. Her father, a Methodist minister, was an ardent nationalist who fervently desired to return to a liberated Korea and to pass Korean culture on to his children.¹² Park recalled her father's efforts by pointing out that she had learned to "read and write those hard Chinese characters" by reading Korean philosophies and literature.¹³ While Park's father never returned to his homeland, both Esther and her older brother did.

Another important way that Hawai'i figured into the maintenance of Korean national identity in the 1920s and 1930s was the perception that it served as the gateway to Korea. The notion of Hawai'i as a gateway to the "Orient" is nothing new given the context of American imperial ambitions at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁴ However, for Korean immigrants in the United States, Hawai'i not only represented the closest geographical point to Korea but also, before the advent of commercial air travel, served as a way station for both the limited number of Korean immigrants who migrated to the United States and for the few Korean immigrants who returned to Korea during the colonial era.¹⁵ The sense of Hawai'i as the gateway to Korea played a critical role in shaping Park's nationalist and professional sensibilities.

Park's aspirations found a critical resonance in the 1920s and 1930s, especially because Hawai'i was home to some of the most important Korean nationalist leaders of the time including Young Man Park and Syngman Rhee, and served as the clearing house for a steady stream of Korean immigrants, including picture brides and Korean students, who in many ways provided a link to a Korea that Park had never known.¹⁶ For Park, this relative "nearness" of Korea and contact with both arriving and departing Korean migrants would have an enormous impact on her sense of Korean identity.

The small but steady influx of Korean students in the 1920s and 1930s contributed significantly to the maintenance of Korean culture and identity through various educational projects for Korean children and adults. For Korean immigrant communities before World War II, education for children that emphasized Korean language, history, and arts in addition to the American curriculum emerged as a way to sustain both Korean culture and to cultivate a Korean nationalist identity in the younger generation with the hope that they would contribute to the liberation of Korea. The explicit connection between the inculcation of Korean culture and national liberation had important repercussions on how Korean immigrants would educate their children in Hawai'i. Departing from the traditional Korean practice of reserving formal education for boys, Koreans in Hawai'i formally educated both boys and girls and established Korean educational institutions to carry out this mission.

Koreans were deeply committed to providing a Korean-centered education for their children. At a time when Korean immigrant communities could have certainly availed themselves of the local public school system, the majority of Korean grammar school-age children on the island of Oahu attended Korean schools. Duk Hee Murabayashi demonstrates the enormous sacrifices that Korean immigrants made to educate their children in Korean schools. In her work on education in Hawai‘i, Murabayashi reveals that Korean immigrants financially supported private schools and Korean-language schools for children at a time when the average income for a dual-wage earning family was less than \$30 a month.¹⁷ Additionally, given that secondary education was largely unavailable in rural areas beyond Honolulu, Koreans also expended resources to send students (male and female) to private boarding schools or paid to board their children in Honolulu so they could attend public high school.¹⁸

Despite the financial hardships that her family endured in the 1920s, Esther Park attended the Korean Girls Seminary for elementary school, the Mid-Pacific Institute for junior high and high school (both in Oahu) and continued on to the University of Hawaii, where she completed a B.A. in Education in 1926. Park’s student years at the Korean Girls Seminary would prove to be enormously influential. Founded by Syngman Rhee, the most recognizable Korean nationalist leader of the time and a future president of South Korea, the seminary emerged as an important site to inculcate Korean identity. In observing Korean educational institutions, the Hawaiian Methodist Mission noted that the founding of such schools reflected “a desire on the part of some Koreans to demonstrate their ability to do things without the help of the Mission and also to keep their children from being Americanized.”¹⁹ While Korean educational institutions could not prevent the Americanization of Korean youth in the islands, Korean schools did instill a sense of “Korean-ness” in their students that was unparalleled on the mainland.²⁰ Significantly, that Korean immigrants in Hawai‘i felt so committed to instilling a sense of “Korean-ness” amid the “Americanization fever” in the 1920s and 1930s underscores that they felt their stay in Hawai‘i was temporary. As Eileen Tamura has aptly demonstrated, Americanization campaigns in Hawai‘i, while primarily targeted at Japanese immigrants, were deeply concerned with eradicating the vestiges of Asian immigrant culture.²¹ Given their commitment to providing their children with a Korean education when such a move would find little resonance with the political climate of the time suggests that many Korean immigrants—particularly first generation immigrants—thought of themselves in exile.

In the 1920s, Park faced enormous obstacles in reaching this level of educational attainment. Growing up in rural Hawai‘i on the Big Island of Hawai‘i and Oahu, Park experienced poverty that was compounded by her mother’s poor health in the wake of the birth of her twin brothers. Consequently, from the age of twelve, Park found herself the primary caregiver for her younger siblings as well as responsible for the majority of household domestic duties. While her

parents did not oppose educational pursuits, these responsibilities at such an early age worked continually to interrupt Park's education.

One important influence on Park during these years was the YWCA. Like other Americanizing institutions in this period in Hawai'i, the YWCA recognized that women like Esther Park in the middle and second generations were important conduits of Americanization in their respective communities.²² At the same time, for Park, the YWCA was a welcome respite from the family responsibilities that she shouldered. In the 1920s, for girls like Park in rural areas, the YWCA offered a chance to socialize with other girls their own age through activities such as camping, arts and crafts, and various social events.

Aside from social and educational activities, the YWCA also provided female leadership role models and career opportunities. Significantly, in Hawai'i, unlike the mainland, the YWCA did not segregate organizational activity along racial lines.²³ However, this does not suggest that the YWCA in Hawai'i was somehow more "progressive" on matters of race. Instead, it was evident that race was framed differently in Hawai'i. While race on the mainland was primarily understood in a black/white binary, this model did not work in Hawai'i, where Asian immigrants comprised the largest racial category. The framing of race, however, in a white/"Oriental" model proved to be equally problematic.

Particularly, with the intersecting discourses of American Orientalism, the civilizing mission of Protestant Christianity, and anti-Asian sentiment, it is important to point out that the YWCA in Hawai'i conflated Asian immigrant communities in Hawai'i with its overseas work in Asia. This was certainly part of the larger Protestant mission of the YWCA in this period which did not distinguish between its work at home and abroad.²⁴ The conflation of Asia and Asian immigrant would profoundly influence the course of Park's career with the YWCA. Despite her occupational mobility within the local YWCA, she found that her opportunities for advancement within the YWCA were largely confined to Hawai'i.

The issue of generation also was significant in shaping Park's experiences in the 1920s and 1930s. In general, studies of Asian immigrant groups in the United States have failed to grasp the complexities of generational identity aside from the conventional differentiation between the first generation, the individuals who make the migrant journey, and the second generation, their American-born children.²⁵ While this approach has allowed scholars to speak broadly about general attributes such as educational attainment and occupational status of specific generational cohorts, it has also conflated the intricacies of generational identity. The adherence to a simple first generation/second generation model in framing Korean immigrant experience in the United States before World War II disregards the complicated dynamics of Korean migration and of transnational immigrant formations.²⁶ In particular, in this paradigm, the experiences of what historian Wayne Patterson has called the "middle generation"—first generation immigrants who came as children have been largely overlooked.²⁷ This distinction

is crucial in the assessment of Park’s experiences in the 1920s and 1930s, especially because first generation Asian immigrants were precluded from naturalization by the 1790 Naturalization Act that limited naturalized citizenship to “free whites.”²⁸ For the middle generation cohort, who were largely socialized and acculturated to what passed for American life in Hawai‘i, the inability to naturalize had a significant impact on their experiences and opportunities. For example, Park, who had aspired to teach in the Hawaiian school system, found that she could not obtain a position because American citizenship was a prerequisite for the job. Additionally, in the 1930s, as Americans became concerned over Japanese territorial expansion, the designation of Koreans as Japanese nationals, given the colonial status of Korea, became increasingly problematic as questions of national loyalty became an issue.²⁹

As part of the middle generation and thanks to the commitment of first-generation immigrants to exposing their children to all things Korean, Park was particularly attuned to Korean politics and culture. Entering adulthood in the 1920s, Park and others in the middle generation found themselves in a curious position. As immigrants they were ineligible for naturalization, but at the same time they were fully socialized into American life in the Territory of Hawai‘i.³⁰ This was particularly true for Park who arrived in Hawai‘i at the age of one.

Another equally important influence in Park’s life was the strong presence of Korean immigrant women’s groups as well as the visibility of Korean women in Hawai‘i. Unlike the mainland, where women composed less than 25 percent of the Korean population, in Hawai‘i the approximately 2,000 Korean women formed more than one-third of the population. Like the larger narrative of Asian American history, the experiences of Korean immigrant women have been given short shrift. Invariably, the historical scholarship on Korean immigrant women has focused primarily on the picture-bride phenomenon or examined the ways in which Korean immigrant women participated in the Korean independence movement, with very little attention to experiences beyond these scholarly frameworks.

The efforts of Korean women in the independence movement must be recognized. Indeed, as in many other political and social movements in the United States, women served as the “rank and file” of nationalist organizations, especially in fundraising and the daily maintenance of such organizations. Thus, for young women like Park, older Korean immigrant women served as models for emulation and as agents of encouragement. In the 1920s, organizations such as the *Taehan Puinhoe* (Korean Women’s Association), *Sinmyong Puinhoe* (Sinmyong Women’s Association), *Taehan Puin Kujehoe* (Korean Ladies Relief Society), *Youngnam Puinhoe* (Youngnam Women’s Association), and the Korean Young Women’s Christian Association involved nearly all adult women in the islands.³¹

At the same time, while women performed much of the day-to-day work of the independence movement, the leadership of Korean nationalist organizations

in Hawai'i and throughout the diaspora remained in the hands of men. In Hawai'i and in the continental United States, this gendered structure paid off for middle- and first-generation Korean men who migrated to the United States as students as they moved into leadership positions within the movement. Indeed, in the 1930s and 1940s, first generation Korean men who could not naturalize found professional opportunities limited because of the blatant racial discrimination against those of Asian descent, even in Hawai'i. Importantly, immigrant men, particularly middle-generation men educated at American colleges and universities found an outlet in the independence movement for their ambitions and educational training.³² As part of the leadership coterie, many of these men achieved social prominence at least within Korean immigrant communities and some were able to parlay their experiences in the United States into significant political roles in South Korea in the postwar period.

Middle generation women, on the other hand, did not easily find occupational mobility within the ethnic enclave. This was particularly true of Park, who did not subscribe to prevailing gender expectations of marriage and family within Korean immigrant communities and in the broader context of American society. Despite these obstacles, aside from their secondary status in the independence movement, Korean women did assert their influence and control over two important arenas of Korean life in Hawai'i: the needs of women and children and the maintenance of Korean culture.

Significantly, first-generation Korean women created female networks to acclimate Korean picture brides, provide social services for the indigent and elderly, and assist women in childbearing and child rearing. Consequently, Korean women maintained a high level of visibility in Hawai'i. Equally important was the role immigrant women played in the maintenance of Korean culture. The YWCA recognized this dynamic and hired Ha Soo Whang to serve as the Korean secretary for the Islands in 1922.

Upon earning her college degree at an American college, Whang was hired to direct the Korean department of the International Institute of the YWCA.³³ Through her work with the YWCA, Whang was able to stay above the fray of the frequently turbulent world of Korean nationalist politics by focusing on the needs of women and children and the elderly and by passing on Korean cultural practices to the younger generation. As one of the earliest Korean women to graduate from an American college, Whang served as an important role model for Park. Indeed, for Park, the arrival of Whang in the 1920s was a turning point in her life.³⁴ By focusing on work with Korean women and girls and the preservation of Korean culture, Whang offered Park an option beyond local nationalist politics and was a highly visible example of the professional opportunities that the YWCA could offer. Simultaneously, Whang believed that Korean immigrant women could Americanize without sacrificing their Korean identity.³⁵ With this belief, Whang organized English language and health education courses and a mother's club. While Whang's work with the YWCA was certainly part of the larger Americanization movement of the 1920s, she was

also deeply committed to maintaining Korean culture among younger Koreans, particularly teenage girls. To promote this agenda, in her spare time, she established the *Hyung Jay* (Sisters) Club, which in addition to promoting friendship and Christian ideals, focused on learning traditional Korean dance and music.³⁶

In addition to the influence of the YWCA and female role models within the Korean community, Park's experiences at the University of Hawaii emerged as a critical arena in which she found enormous support for her academic endeavors. Reflecting Hawaii's broader racial demographics, students of Asian descent significantly outnumbered whites. As a result, the anti-Asian sentiment prevalent on West Coast college campuses, especially in California, was muted in Hawai'i.

As an education major, Park took numerous courses in sociology to fulfill her degree requirements, and these courses proved to be critical to the way she viewed Koreans in Hawai'i and her relationship to Korea. Indeed, more so than any other academic department at the University of Hawaii, the sociology department embraced non-white students. The department, heavily influenced by the Chicago School of Sociology led by Robert E. Park, explicitly identified Hawai'i as a “racial laboratory,” and, under the direction of Romanzo Adams and later Andrew Lind, actively encouraged both undergraduates and graduate students to write about what they knew best—their own experiences as non-whites and about their larger ethnic communities.³⁷ Routinely, professors assigned student projects that provided detailed accounts about ethnic communities throughout the islands. These student papers were used extensively by professors as a source of valuable data to assess processes of assimilation, race relations, rates of intermarriage, and class mobility. In many ways this arrangement was particularly exploitative as professors capitalized on their student's community ties and language abilities. However, for Esther Park and other nonwhite students, that their life experiences and communities were worthy of academic study significantly contributed to a positive identification with their ethnic/racial identity. In a paper written in her senior year for an upper division sociology course, Park declared,

I was ashamed of my parents and home no more. I tried my best to improve conditions with what we had. I felt humble when I met the people who had no opportunity to go to school. I tried to get into their crowd when I was with them and share their simple way of thinking. I was willing to help them when they needed me. Ah—that was knowledge-humble service. I was fully determined to work for my people when I get out of college and I hope I shall be able to do so.³⁸

Upon graduation from the University of Hawaii in 1926, Park received her first teaching post at the Kohala Girls School on the Big Island of Hawai'i, but

this appointment was short lived. In the midst of the Americanization campaigns of the 1920s, the Board of Education in Hawai‘i ruled that U.S. citizenship was required to teach in the Islands. Although she had arrived in Hawai‘i at the age of one and had spent nearly a quarter of a century in the Islands, the Korean-born Park was ineligible for citizenship and thus lost her teaching position. This was a tremendous blow for Park, especially because by the mid-1920s she had become the principle financial support for her parents and siblings. At the suggestion of Ha Soo Whang, the YWCA recruited Park to work initially with the Girl Reserve and throughout the 1930s as the Rural Secretary for all the Hawaiian Islands.³⁹ This began a nearly fifty year career with the YWCA.

While most accounts of Park’s early years with the YWCA have underscored the ways in which the YWCA groomed her to lead the YWCA in Korea, it is clear that Park’s interest in working in Korea predated her stint with the YWCA. Moreover, it is clear that the national YWCA before World War II did not consider Korea important to their larger mission in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁰ While she was committed to her work in Hawai‘i, she was explicit in declaring that, “It has been my one desire and ambition [that] I shall go back to Korea someday and do my little bit in uplifting the downtrodden nation[,] if it is only to be teaching one person to live a better life.”⁴¹ Ironically, in the 1930s, it was the issue of racial/ethnic background that served as her greatest obstacle to securing a position with the YWCA in Korea. The Foreign Division Secretary of the national YWCA made this clear as she pointed out that despite the many conversations about securing a post for Park in Korea, “there would be absolutely no opportunity for her [Park] to have a position in Korea at the present because of the Japanese influence.”⁴² At the same time, the national YWCA was reluctant to commit any resources to Korea in the 1930s. Despite the close ties between Korean women leaders such as Helen Kim and the Foreign Division and the formal affiliation of the Korean YWCA with the World YWCA in 1924, requests for funds for buildings and for an American secretary were routinely turned down.⁴³

In light of the steady discouragement that Park faced about working for the YWCA in Korea, it is not surprising that she turned her ambitions domestically. In 1939, she requested a formal leave from the Honolulu YWCA and asked for part-time placement at a YWCA on the mainland, where she could continue her work for the YWCA and pursue a graduate degree. Park’s desire to pursue further professional training signaled her growing interest in working for the YWCA at the national level.⁴⁴ However, as Vera Berger, the General Secretary of the YWCA in Hawai‘i worked to secure Park a position on the mainland, Berger was quickly informed by the national office, “If the study of the experience which she [Park] has during her long leave is intended to lead to a position on the mainland, again we have to be discouraging.”⁴⁵ Aside from being discouraged about the prospects of working for the YWCA at the national level, Park and her supporters in Hawai‘i found it enormously difficult to find a YWCA on the mainland willing to sponsor Park during her course of study. While many of the

YWCA leaders at the national level were sympathetic to Park’s plight, they also recognized the reality of race relations and racial discrimination and understood that placing “oriental students” in mainland YWCAs was difficult, especially because both graduate school fieldwork and YWCA projects required extensive community work.⁴⁶

While Park understood the international issues that prevented her from securing a YWCA position in Korea, she was surprised to find her professional aspirations within the YWCA circumscribed by race given her positive interracial experiences within the YWCA in Hawai‘i. Ultimately, Park was placed at a YWCA in Cleveland and began a one-year program at Case Western Reserve University in applied social sciences. It is important, however, to note that Park received this offer only after the national YWCA was assured that her Cleveland training would be used to further her career in Hawai‘i and after YWCA leaders in Hawai‘i had called in various personal favors at the Cleveland YWCA.⁴⁷

Completing the year in Cleveland, Park returned to Hawai‘i in September 1941, where she became the program director of the Business and Industrial Department of the Honolulu YWCA, which catered to the needs of working women. However, in the aftermath of the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the United States’ entry into World War II, Park, as well as the rest of the YWCA, found themselves quickly incorporated into the war effort.⁴⁸ The end of the war brought liberation to Korea and new hope for Park and her lifelong dream to return to Korea. After much negotiation, in 1947, at the age of forty-five, Park went to Korea as the YWCA Korean Secretary. Upon hearing news of her appointment, Park declared,

It is the one thing I have always wanted to do, and perhaps my prayers are being answered. I pray that I may be equal to the work and meet the expectations of the people there. I have many limitations, but I do have a strong will to work among my people.⁴⁹

Conclusion

In emphasizing the ways in which the “place” of Hawai‘i shaped Park’s experiences, I do not mean to suggest that Hawai‘i should be understood as a racial paradise or as an exceptionalist narrative. While the racial composition of the Islands, in contrast to the mainland, did offer greater occupational mobility for Asian immigrant communities, it is crucial to remember that while whites were the minority, a haole elite routinely controlled local politics, the local economy, and dictated cultural standards. And the dominance of this white elite in Hawai‘i in the first half of the twentieth century existed within a larger context of colonial subjugation and racial hierarchies established through the plantation economy.

As an Asian immigrant, Park was denied naturalization and, hence public employment; she could not fulfill her ambition to teach in Hawai‘i. Even though

Park found enormous satisfaction in her career as the Rural Secretary for the YWCA, she also experienced firsthand how race circumscribed her ambitions within the YWCA at home and abroad.⁵⁰

For Park, returning to Korea represented more than occupational mobility, especially given the hardships of daily life in postwar Korea and the political instability on the peninsula. Indeed, Park left Hawai‘i just as U.S. citizenship laws were being liberalized to allow Asian immigrants to naturalize and Korean immigrant communities were reaping the economic and social benefits of postwar America.⁵¹ Understanding Park’s return to Korea in the postwar period only as one of professional ambition ignores the complicated ways in which generational identity and an exilic sensibility, combined with the particular local context of Hawai‘i, influenced her motivations.

Not surprisingly, in her over thirty years of service to the Korean YWCA, Park devoted her efforts to improving the lives of women and children from all walks of society. Under the direction of Park, the Korean YWCA instituted vocational education, daycare for working mothers, and social services for widows and prostitutes. In the aftermath of the Korean War, the Korean YWCA continued to expand its sphere of influence, as the YWCA was designated to disperse United Nations reconstruction funds.⁵² Importantly, at a time when numerous forces in Korean society—including Protestant Christianity, a divided peninsula, and Cold War politics—were determining the future of Korea, both North and South, Park, in spite of the bitter ideological divisions among Koreans, remained above the fray of these heated and oftentimes violent debates. Instead, Park maintained the political identity of the YWCA in Korea as a distinct women’s organization “that claimed identities for women as women.”⁵³

Heralded as a national heroine, Park could have retired in Korea to a life of ease and wealth.⁵⁴ Instead, at the age of 77, she returned to Hawai‘i, where she spent the remaining years of her life surrounded by family and “old time” friends.⁵⁵ Esther Park died at the age of 98, February 2001, after more than fifty years of service to the YWCA, nearly thirty of which were spent in Korea. Throughout her career, her commitment to improving the lives of women and girls remained steadfast. In many respects, she was unusual for her time within Korean communities in Hawai‘i and the continental United States. She earned a college degree, remained single, worked as a professional, and most notably, returned to Korea at a time when few Korean emigrants, especially women, made the return journey.⁵⁶ Of the small number of Koreans who did return to Korea in a professional capacity after liberation in 1945, it is not surprising that many of these returnees spent their formative years in Hawai‘i, which underscores for us the importance of the power of place.⁵⁷ Park herself exemplifies this power when she declared, “America has been a great country to me—I say America[,] for Hawaii has been my America.”⁵⁸

Notes

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1. Representative works include: Yo-jun Yun, "Early History of Korean Emigration to America," *Korea Journal* 14 (1974), 21-26; Eui-Young Yu, "Koreans in America: An Emerging Ethnic Minority," *Amerasia Journal* 4:1 (1977), 117-32; Kingsley Lyu, "Korean Nationalist Activities in Hawaii and the Continental United States, 1900-1945," pt. 1 (1900-1919), *Amerasia Journal* 4:1 (1977), 23-90; and pt. 2 (1919-1945), *Amerasia Journal* 4:2 (1977), 53-100; B.Y. Choi, *Koreans in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979); Linda Pomerantz, "The Background of Korean Emigration," in *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States before World War II*, Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonadich eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 277-315; Wayne Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896-1910* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988). Also, a number of important unpublished works include: Bernice Kim, *The Koreans in Hawaii* (M.A. thesis, University of Hawaii, 1937); Helen Lewis Givens, *The Korean Community in Los Angeles* (M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1939); Hyung June Moon, *The Korean Immigrants in America: The Quest of Identity in the Formative Years, 1903-1918* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nevada, Reno, 1977).

2. Here, I borrow architectural historian Delores Hayden's conceptualization of the "power of place." Hayden argues for the serious consideration of the "power of ordinary urban landscapes," specifically the urban landscape of Los Angeles, as a way to understand how the built environment shapes history and culture in the "contested terrain of race, gender, and class." See, Delores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 5-13. I build on Hayden's argument by examining how both a mythic understanding of Hawai'i as well as the material realities of the Islands shaped Korean immigrant experiences.

3. The term "local" has been deeply contested. Emerging in the 1930s as a way to distinguish between the native-born people of Hawai'i and mainlanders, "local" increasingly came to invoke a Hawaiian panethnic identity that underscored a shared ethnic experience that was rooted in the history of Hawai'i's plantation economy in which indigenous Hawaiians and Asian immigrants groups were held subordinate to a *haole* (white) elite. However, with the growth of the indigenous Hawaiian sovereignty movement, many individuals have come to critique this panethnic use of "local." Increasingly, scholars and activists have pointed out that the claiming of local identity by Asian immigrants has worked to simultaneously deny Native Hawaiian history and to obfuscate Asian settler colonialism and its attendant benefits. For a discussion of the emergence of local identity in the 1930s, see John Rosa, "Local Story: The Massie Case and the Politics of Local Identity in Hawai'i," (Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Irvine 1999), Jonathan Okamura, "Aloha Kanaka Me Ke Aloha 'Aina: Local Culture and Society in Hawai'i," *Amerasia Journal* 7 (1980), 119-137, and Eric Yamamoto, "The Significance of the Local," *Social Process in Hawai'i* 27 (1979), 101-115. For a particularly insightful assessment of the "settler colonialism" debate see, Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai'i," *Amerasia Journal* 26:2 (2000), 1-24. My use of "local" is certainly embedded in these debates, particularly the ways in which Korean immigrants have been incorporated into American immigration history. However, for the scope of this article, I focus less on "settler colonialism" and instead examine how Hawai'i in a multiplicity of ways in a Korean immigrant imaginary shaped Korean immigrant experiences in the Hawaiian Islands.

4. The bulk of Korean immigrants came to the United States as contract laborers or as picture brides to Hawai'i. Korean immigrant communities on the West Coast were established by Koreans from Hawai'i, who for a wide range of reasons chose to re-migrate to the mainland. While Korean-born college students were the exception to this pattern, Hawai'i was invariably a stopover on their trans-Pacific journey.

5. The work of Donna Gabaccia is the notable exception to this paradigm. See Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2000).

6. The 1920 census records that Caucasians numbered approximately 16,000, the indigenous Hawaiian population 24,000, mixed Caucasian/Hawai'ian 11,000, Portuguese 27,000, Puerto Ricans 5,000, Spanish 2,000, Japanese 110,000, Chinese 23,000, Filipinos 21,000, and mixed Asian/Hawaiian 11,000. In this period, Portuguese, Puerto Rican, and Spanish each were designated as distinct racial/ethnic categories.

7. For a comprehensive examination of the origins of Korean immigration to Hawai'i see Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America*. In contrast to other Asian migration to the United States that dated to the nineteenth century, the period of mass Korean immigration was relatively brief, roughly five years. This was a result of Korea's status as a Japanese protectorate that began when in 1905 as Japan successfully intervened in Korean foreign affairs by halting Korean immigration in 1905 as plans for colonizing Korea were consolidated. At the same time, the Japanese colonization of Korea in 1910 combined with anti-Japanese immigration legislation in the U.S. with few exceptions, namely picture brides, diplomats, and students, effectively halted Korean immigration to the U.S. since Korean immigrants were designated as Japanese nationals.

8. In the plantation system, various ethnic groups were often pitted against each other as strikebreakers. See Gary Okihiro, *Cane Fires: The Anti-Japanese Movement in Hawai'i, 1865-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

9. This exilic sensibility, particularly for first generation immigrants, was further consolidated by the steady codification of anti-Asian immigration laws that denied naturalization rights, worked to end the migration of Asian migrants to the United States, and prevented the remigration of Asian migrants to the mainland.

10. Ken Klein, "Korean Americans in the 1920 Census," Korean American Digital Archive, Korean Heritage Library, University of Southern California. Moreover, the small and scattered nature of Korean communities in the continental U.S. contrasted sharply to the nearly 2,000 Koreans on the island of Oahu alone.

11. For an insightful discussion about the place of Hawai'i in the American imaginary see Adria Imada, "Hawaiians on Tour: Hula Circuits through the American Empire," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 56 (March 2004), 111-149.

12. Mary Hong Park, interview with author (July 2003). Mary Hong Park was Esther Park's sister-in-law. Park's father was never formally ordained in the Methodist Church.

13. Park, Esther, "My Autobiography," (undated manuscript) Confidential Student Files, Romanzo Adams Social Research Laboratory Papers, Special Collections, University of Hawai'i.

14. Matthew Frye Jacobson provides a particularly cogent analysis of U.S. imperial projects at the turn of the century. See *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

15. In the wake of Japanese colonization in 1910, Korean migrants were classified as Japanese nationals, which made them subject to the 1907 Gentleman's Agreement that virtually halted Japanese immigration. However, until the 1924 Immigration Act, Korean picture brides, the majority of whom settled in Hawai'i, were allowed entry into the United States. Studies estimate that roughly 1600 Korean women came to Hawai'i as picture brides. For a detailed age and sex distribution of picture bride marriages, see Yong-ho Choe, "The Early Korean Immigrants to Hawai'i: A Background History," (undated manuscript, Special Collections, University of Hawai'i), 9-12. Aside from picture brides, the only other group of immigrants who were allowed to emigrate after 1924 were Korean-born students attending American colleges and universities.

16. Just as Hawai'i functioned as a gateway to the United States, it also served as the departure point for American missionaries and Korean migrants bound for Korea. It was in this context that Park became acquainted with Helen Kim, the founder of the YWCA in Korea. Kim would ultimately recruit Park for the position of Korean secretary. See Nancy Boyd, *Emissaries: The Overseas Work of the American YWCA, 1895-1970* (New York: The Woman's Press, 1986), 189-192.

17. The burden of financial support was not limited to immigrants with children. As Murabayashi points out, the majority of Koreans donated a significant portion of their income to nationalist causes, which included support for Korean private schools and language schools as well as for scholarships for needy students. Between 1903 and 1932, Koreans in Hawai'i established three schools: Korean Boarding School for Boys (1906-1918) (with the support of the Hawaiian Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church), Korean Girls' Seminary (1915-1918), and the Korean Christian Institute (1918-1928) each of which was located in Honolulu. Additionally, they founded twenty-five Korean language schools in this period. The number of these schools peaked in the 1910s and subsequently diminished as a result of the anti-foreign language movement rooted in the Americanization campaigns of the 1920s in Hawai'i. See, Duk Hee Murabayashi, "Education of Koreans in Hawai'i, 1903-1932," (unpublished paper, 2001), Hawai'ian Collection, Hamilton Library, University of Hawai'i. For an account of the Americanization campaign in Hawai'i, see Eileen H. Tamura, *Americanization, Acculturation, and Ethnic Identity: The Nisei Generation in Hawai'i* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 45-88.

18. Private high schools were religiously affiliated, including the Iolani School, which was supported by the Episcopal Church, and Mid-Pacific Institute, which was established by the Hawaiian Evangelical Association.

19. *Methodist Journal*, (1921), 29. Quoted in Duk Hee Murabayashi, “Education of Korean in Hawai‘i, 1903-1932. 16.

20. The notable exception was the all-male boarding school *Hanin Sonuynbyung Hakkyo* (Young Korean Military School) in Hastings, Nebraska and the *Hungsadan* (Young Korean Academy), a young adult educational society founded by the nationalist leader An Chang-ho, in California. However, according to census data, in the 1920s the total Korean population in Nebraska numbered 12. It is not clear how many individuals belonged to the *Hungsadan*; photos of various chapters in the continental United States suggest that the numbers of active participants remained small. See, Photo Database, Korean American Digital Archive, Korean Heritage Library, University of Southern California.

21. Tamura, *Americanization, Acculturation, and Ethnic Identity*. 58-61.

22. The literature on Americanization and second generation immigrant experience before 1945 is vast. Representative works include James R. Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930,” *The Journal of American History*, 79:3, (December 1992), 996-1020, Anne Soon Choi, “Are They Koreaned Enough?:” Generation, Gender and the Korean Independence Movement in Los Angeles, 1930-1945,” *Amerasia Journal* 29:3 (Spring 2004), 57-77, Gary Gerstle, “Liberty, Coercion, and the Making of Americans,” *The Journal of American History*, 84:2 (September 1997), 524-558, John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Eileen Tamura, “The English-only Effort: the Anti-Japanese Campaign, and Language Acquisition in the Education of Japanese Americans in Hawai‘i. 1915-1940,” *History of Education Quarterly*, 33: (Spring, 1993), 37-58, Richard Weiss, “Ethnicity and Reform: Minorities and the Ambience of the Depression Years,” *The Journal of American History*, 66:3, (December 1979), 566-585, David Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei: Race, Generation and Culture among Japanese Americans of California, 1924-49* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

23. On the mainland, the YWCA, despite its public discourse of racial inclusion, maintained racially segregated associations for African American and white women in the decades before World War II. Only in 1946 did the YWCA officially endorse desegregation. For a local study of the relationship between African American and white YWCA associations, see Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

24. Boyd, *Emissaries*. 27.

25. Within the historiography of Asian American experience prior to 1945, the most complicated analyses of generation have been produced by scholars who have examined the role of the *kibei*, American-born Japanese who were sent to Japan to be educated but later as young adults returned to the U.S. See Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 87, David Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei*, 1-11.

26. For Korean communities in the pre-World War II era, the issue of generation primarily involved differences between an American-born generation and two “sets” of first generation Korean immigrants—the predominantly male immigrant cohort that migrated between 1903 and 1907 and the picture brides who joined them between 1910 and 1924 and a later wave of first generation immigrants, primarily Korean-born students, who arrived throughout the 1920s and 1930s. By pointing out the shared experiences across immigrant generations, I am not suggesting that scholars should collapse the experience of Korean-born students with that of second generation Koreans. Instead, I contend that, in the context of generation, scholars should pay close attention to age as well as immigrant status. Simultaneously, in the larger body of immigration scholarship, the issue of generational difference has been primarily understood as the struggle between the first and second generations over processes of assimilation and cultural retention. However, these interpretations have disproportionately emphasized the experiences of European immigrants, who, unlike Asian immigrants, could opt to naturalize. This historical emphasis on European immigration has reified a teleological American immigrant narrative where through the processes of assimilation, Americanization, and acculturation, first generation immigrants, despite enormous difficulties, ostensibly became “American.” Scholars researching Asian American and Latino experiences in the United States have worked to challenge the hegemony of this narrative by insisting, as George Sanchez has suggested, that the “histories

of racial minorities in the United States...are qualitatively different from the experiences of European immigrants." Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*. 7.

27. With the resurgence of mass immigration from Asia and Latin America, in particular in the wake of the 1965 Immigration Act, scholars—especially sociologists— have become increasingly attuned to the complexities of generational experience. For example, scholars of post-1965 Korean immigration have begun serious inquiry on the 1.5 generation—immigrants born in Korea but primarily educated and socialized in the U.S. While this definition of the 1.5 generation in the literal sense can be applied to earlier Korean immigrant experiences, the use of the term before 1965 is problematic in many ways. Particularly, the use of 1.5 generation with its emphasis on and frequent celebration of bicultural and transnational identities cannot be used indiscriminately in the prewar period where Asian migrants were denied the right of naturalization, were subject to anti-Asian immigration policies and explicit anti-Asian discrimination was an everyday part of life. For a detailed study on contemporary 1.5 generation identity in Hawai'i, see Mary Yu Danico, *The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawai'i* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004). For a discussion of 1.5 generation identity in Los Angeles, see Edward J.W. Park, "The Impact of Mainstream Political Mobilization on Asian American Communities: The Case of Korean Americans in Los Angeles, 1992-1998," in *Asian Americans and Politics: Perspectives, Experiences Prospects* ed. Gordon Chang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 300-303, 305.

28. In the wake of emancipation the act was subsequently amended to include African Americans.

29. For a discussion over issues of loyalty and Korean communities in Hawai'i see Lili M. Kim, "The Limits of Americanism and Democracy: Korean Americans, Transnational Allegiance, and the Question of Loyalty on the Homefront During World War II" *Amerasia Journal* 29, no. 3 (2003-2004): 79-96.

30. Middle generation women in particular were often incorporated into an ostensibly "more" Korean life, especially because many, given the gender imbalance within Korean communities during this period, married older first generation men.

31. Murabayashi, "Korean Women's Activities in Hawaii, 1903-1950." Women oftentimes had overlapping memberships in the three largest organizations: the Korean Women's Association, the Korean Women's Relief Society and the Korean Young Women's Christian Association.

32. For an expanded discussion of Korean-born students and their participation in the Korean independence movement, see Anne Soon Choi, *Border Crossings: The Politics of Korean Nationalism, 1919-1945* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Southern California, 2004.)

33. Whang graduated from Athens Female College in Athens, Alabama, a Methodist-affiliated college that had missionary ties to Korea.

34. Mary Hong Park, interview with author, (July 2003).

35. For an extended discussion of Whang's role in Hawai'i, see Lili M. Kim, *The Pursuit of Imperfect Justice: The Predicament of Koreans and Korean Americans on the Homefront during World War II* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Rochester, 2001), 77-80.

36. Murabayashi, "Korean Women's Activities in Hawaii, 1903-1950."

37. For a discussion of the influence of the University of Hawaii's Sociology department, see Jonathon Okamura's, "Race Relations in Hawai'i during World War II: The Non-internment of Japanese Americans," *Amerasia Journal* 26:2 (2000), 117-141. For a broader analysis of the Chicago School of sociology and Asian immigrants, see Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

38. Park, Esther, "My Autobiography."

39. Many of Park's organizational skills were honed during her tenure as the YWCA Rural Secretary. By the mid-1930s Park had established 28 rural clubs with a membership of over 700 girls. See Minutes of the YWCA Rural Committee Meeting, 1937 February 9, Rural Committee Files, YWCA Archives, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

40. Park's long-held desire to return to Korea can be seen in her letters to various YWCA leaders, missionaries, and Korean women leaders in Korea. For example, see Park's personal correspondence in the Esther Park Collection, Box 2, Korean Studies Center, University of Hawai'i; Boyd, *Emissaries*, 189-192.

40. Minutes of the YWCA Rural Committee Meeting, 1937 February 9, Rural Committee Files, YWCA Archives, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

41. Letter from Helen N. Flack to Vera V. Barger, 4 May 1939, Esther Park Files, YWCA Archives, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

42. Boyd, *Emissaries*, 91. Throughout the 1930s the Foreign Division of the YWCA directed their efforts to projects in Mexico and the Philippines. Additionally, the political unrest in Asia rooted in Japan's imperial ambitions made working in Asia increasingly difficult in this period. Given that the YWCA in its overseas work cultivated projects that

would be self-sustaining, leaders at the national level, while sympathetic to the plight of Korea, doubted that a Korean YWCA would ever be self-supporting or viable under Japanese colonial rule. These fears were recognized in 1938 when the Korean YMCA was absorbed by the Japanese YWCA.

44. Mary Hong Park, interview.

45. Letter from Helen N. Flack to Vera V. Barger, 4 May 1939, Esther Park Files, YWCA Archives, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

46. Letter from Grace L. Coyle to Vera V. Barger, 12 December 1939, Esther Park Files, YWCA Archives, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

47. Letter from Vera V. Barger to Grace L. Coyle, 15 February 1940 and Letter from Vera V. Barger to Freda Seigworth, 16 January 1941, Esther Park Files, YWCA Archives, Honolulu, Hawai'i.

48. Mary Hong Park, Interview.

49. Letter from Esther Park to Alice Appenzeller, 26 April 1947, Box 2, Folder 26, Esther Park Collection, Korean Studies Center, University of Hawai'i.

50. Mary Hong Park, Interview. Park worked assiduously throughout the 1930s to convince the YWCA to send her to Korea. These efforts included further graduate study at Western Reserve University in Ohio as well as tapping into a transnational network of American-educated Korean students who had returned to Korea.

51. Park with the support of the YWCA would naturalize in 1952.

52. Boyd, Nancy, *Emissaries*, 198.

53. Vandenberg-Daves, Jodi, "The Manly Pursuit of a Partnership between the Sexes: The Debate over YMCA Programs for Women and Girls, 1914-1933, *The Journal of American History*, 78:4, (March 1992), 1334.

54. As an employee of the Foreign Division of the American YWCA, Park was paid in U.S. dollars and earned a salary commensurate with her counterparts in the United States. Additionally, the power of the dollar in Korea in the 1970s would have allowed Park to live very well.

55. Mary Hong Park, interview.

56. While it is not clear precisely how many Koreans from the United States returned to Korea, Park was the only middle-generation woman who returned in a professional capacity. While there were other first-generation women who returned to Korea in the postwar period, they were students who had come to the United States for their education.

57. Given the centrality of Korean nationalism in understanding pre-1945 Korean experience in the United States, the striking lacuna in the literature is the absence of any real discussion about diaspora communities in the wake of Korean independence in 1945 with the defeat of Japan at the end of World War II. Some scholars have contended that for Korean immigrant communities in the United States, the crucible of the war provided an opportunity for Koreans to assimilate fully into American life and consequently shifted Koreans into thinking about themselves as settlers rather than as exiles. Indeed, few Koreans opted to return to their homeland in the immediate postwar period, but this explanation is too facile. It fails to consider the complicated matrix of events and circumstances that Korean liberation brought. These include the political and social chaos of a recently decolonized nation, ideological differences within Korea, geopolitical interests of the United States and the Soviet Union that would ultimately lead to the division of the Korean peninsula, and, with the division of Korea, Syngman Rhee's calculated efforts to keep his political opponents in the United States out of Korea. (At the time of his return to Korea after World War II, Rhee had spent over forty years in the United States and had been involved in the bitter factionalism that characterized the Korean independence movement in the diaspora.)

58. Park, Esther, "My Autobiography."