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Michelle KH Nguyen

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MARRYING STRANGERS: ARRANGED MARRIAGES  
AND PICTURE BRIDES IN THE US,  
1875-1943 AND 1990-PRESENT

by

MICHELLE KIM HONG NGUYEN

Presented to the Faculty of the Honors College of  
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

HONORS BACHELOR OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN LIBERAL ARTS

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April 22, 2022

ABSTRACT

MARRYING STRANGERS: ARRANGED MARRIAGES  
AND PICTURE BRIDES IN THE US,  
1875-1943 AND 1990-PRESENT

Michelle Kim Hong Nguyen, B.A. Interdisciplinary Studies

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2022

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Stephanie Cole and Dr. Dustin Harp

This paper examines the historical phenomenon of picture or mail-order marriages during two periods; the first period is the era of Asian exclusion at the turn of the twentieth century and the second period is the rise of online dating at the turn of the twenty-first century. This research project examines oral testimonies, government reports, and products of popular culture to suggest that women have used their own agency to make these marriages beneficial as often as the marriages have been exploitative. In the era of Chinese exclusion, marriages help to sustain Asian communities especially in light of serious racial prejudice. While most imagine the marriage of an Asian female – white male in the second period as problematic for the women, this research in both the first and second periods

suggests that women have pursued these marriages for the economic and social advantages that the marriages bring.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“One day when I was eighteen years old, something happen. We had surprise guest. This couple had son, Matsukichi. He work on sugar plantation in Hawai’i and they come talk about marriage between their son and me, exchanging pictures with each other. That was when I first saw my husband’s picture. I thought he look very *hansamu*, so I said, ‘Okay.’ Just like that!”<sup>1</sup> Ushii Nakasone was a young Japanese woman who dreamed of going to Hawai’i. When migrants returned to Okinawa, she would hear many stories of an island paradise where people go to make big money. After hearing so many great things about Hawai’i, she agreed to marry the handsome Matsukichi and go to paradise in Hawai’i. Unfortunately, while Nakasone was packing her things in preparation for her journey overseas, Matsukichi’s stepmother caught the Spanish flu and passed away. Due to her death, he came back home to Okinawa and met Nakasone for the first time in person.

Her first thoughts when finally meeting her groom were of handsome his face truly was, just like his picture, but his feet were very small. Due to his small feet, Nakasone started having doubts of going through with the marriage but ultimately decided to continue with the marriage ceremony due to her promise to his parents.<sup>2</sup> Although she was able to see what her groom looked like and had his family vouch for being a suitable marriage partner, Nakasone was still ultimately marrying a stranger.

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<sup>1</sup> Kawakami, Barbara F. *Picture bride stories*. (Hawaii: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016), 108.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

“I am a warm-hearted, easy-going, tender, sincere, caring, educated, Chinese woman... [Looking for] a soulmate” was listed on a pen pal agency’s webpage, the description was for a Chinese woman named Moira.<sup>3</sup> Moira is a woman in her mid-forties who had difficulty meeting suitable local men. Single men in her area were interested in much younger women or had little interest in remarrying. She stated how “the women who are in the most who are the most difficult situation in China are those who are educated, professional women in their mid-thirties and forties or older who are divorced.”<sup>4</sup> Due to this adversity, she felt that Americans would offer her a new chance at life. Moira felt this experience would “change my life, find a good man, leave this place, and forget.”<sup>5</sup>

In late 2000, Moira decided to give up pen pals since she began to get closer to a particular fifty-five year-old gentleman from South Carolina, Pat. He described himself as a ‘Southern gentleman’ who held women in very high regard, put them on a pedestal, and considered them equals. When Pat found out about how difficult it would be for Moira to gain permission from the People’s Republic of China, he went to visit her instead.

Ushii Nakasone and Moira were a few of the many picture brides throughout Asia whose marriages were initiated through a photo exchange. This exchange of photos to initiate marriages was one of the most popular methods for Asian women to immigrate into Hawai’i or the western coastline of the United States’ mainland after 1882, when Congress first banned the immigration of Asian people. This practice of a photo being the medium of introducing the cross-national couple to each other persists today even after the repeal

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<sup>3</sup> Constable, Nicole. *Romance on a Global Stage Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and “Mail-Order” Marriages / Romance on a Global Stage Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and “Mail-Order” Marriages /* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 19.

of legislation preventing Asian immigration. Today, however, the grooms are more likely older White American men, rather than immigrant men of their own nationality, as it had been in the earlier historical context. While on one hand, participating in such marriages may seem like a good idea for women in impoverished countries, on the other, it can be full of problems. Some women were (and are) interested in leaving oppressive communities to marry men residing in America.

From the earliest encounters of Asian brides and American-based grooms from their own countries, shifting racialized thought has shaped both the encounter and the media depictions by which White Americans formed their own understanding of these picture – or “mail order” brides, one that was counter to the perspective of the participants themselves. Over a century later, despite many changes in ideas of race, gender, and immigrants' rights, many of the racist caricatures, especially connected to assumptions about Asian women developed long ago, still exist. In the twenty-first century, White Americans still produce and consume many stereotypes about "mail-order brides," or assumptions about these women that were first created in the early twentieth century.

While there is a popularly negative connotation associated with the term ‘picture bride,’ the personal experiences from Nakasone and Moira were positive. Picture brides, also known as mail-order brides, are often seen as victims of their own marriages. Some examples of negative connotations about picture brides include young women tricked by an American man who wishes for a stereotypical docile Asian wife, women who are marrying American men for either the green card or man’s wealth, or a foreign prostitute. More current stereotypes would be ‘docile Asian wife’ or the infantilization of their individual identities. Hearing these terms would subconsciously place these women as a

victim of their own marriage story rather than the comparatively positive experiences of the women themselves.

Pictures brides and mail-order brides are fraught with gender stereotypes. Women have dealt with structural issues (cultural, political, or societal) but they have not been free of agency in these marriage exchanges. Where these structural issues may have limited their agency, there were not without agency altogether; the playful language offered by Nakasone and Moira was not a “false consciousness.” Listening and understanding their stories contradicts their perceived classification as “victims,” therefore if we see them as victims, we have missed their own agency. This thesis takes a historic perspective for some of these picture brides and mail-order brides, structural practices, and considers what has changed in current contemporary marriage arrangements. Through an investigation of previously published works and contemporary media coverage, it can be seen that the push of these stereotypes within the media has built the ignorance of these women’s agency for outsiders.

CHAPTER 2  
AGE OF ASIAN EXCLUSION



Figure 2.1: Immigrants leaving for Hawaii from the port of Yokohama on the *Tatsuta Maru*, having a memorable send-off, ca. 1920s. Photo retrieved from Kawakami's *Picture Bride Stories*.

Exchanging photos with the intention of marriage was very common in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century among East Asian cultures. Families would arrange marriages for the next generation to ensure the family bloodline will continue. Families would compare the man's ability to provide for his family and a woman's temperament to decide whether the couple would be well-matched. This practice of initiating a marriage continued to be used across national borders.

A “picture bride” is understood to be a woman whose marriage was initiated from a portrait photo of herself. This practice is related to a long history of matchmakers exchanging photos of eligible women among each other to find a suitable groom. This exchange of photos to initiate marriages was one of the most popular methods for Asian women to immigrate into Hawai’i or the western coastline of the United States’ mainland after 1882, one of the first actions by Congress to ban the immigration of Asian people. These arranged marriages are often decided by the family elders, so it was uncommon for the bride and groom to meet before their wedding. In some instances when the distance of the exchange is shifted from the local community to across national borders, these women married without a groom present and were then shipped off days later to join their husbands.<sup>6</sup>

One of the major focuses of the American government during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was how to decrease and mitigate the rising population of Asian Immigrants. For the first time in history, there was a federal law that forbade entry of an ethnic working group under the premise that the working group endangered the order of certain regions.<sup>7</sup> They had many rigorous stipulations that made attaining legal entry from China into the United States very difficult. Some examples of these stipulations include obtaining certification from the Chinese government that they were able to immigrate, refusing US state and federal courts the right to grant citizenship to Chinese immigrant residents, and making Chinese residents obtain certification if they left US land and wished to return.<sup>8</sup> The Chinese Exclusion Act

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<sup>6</sup> Composite view based upon the following interviews: Kawakami, *Picture Bride Stories*, 20-26, 47-48, 57-60, and 77.

<sup>7</sup> Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island.; Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2012), 6.

<sup>8</sup> “Chinese Exclusion Act (1882),” National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act>.

was approved and signed on May 6, 1882, by President Chester A. Arthur, thus providing a 10 year ban on Chinese laborers immigrating into the United States. After the renewal in 1902, it was made permanent and finally repealed in 1943 when China was a member of the Allied Nations during World War II.<sup>9</sup> Another instance of a legal barrier of an ethnic group entering the United States was the Gentlemen's Agreement between America and Japan. Due to the decrease of Chinese agricultural workers, there was an increase of Japanese immigration to the dismay of people living in California. To appease the disgruntled Californians, President Theodore Roosevelt had an agreement where Japan would assume responsibility for harshly restricting Japanese immigration so that Japanese American children will be able to attend integrated schools on the west coast.<sup>10</sup> Although they were able to successfully bar Asian immigration legally with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1907, there were loopholes that Chinese and Japanese migrants could exploit to bring picture brides into America.

One such loophole was the exception regarding family. Although these laws barred new prospective immigrants from entering the country, there was the stipulation that those residing in the United States' land were allowed to bring their immediate family into the United States. Their immediate family included parents, wives, and children. Many Asian men who immigrated to the United States before the bans were unmarried. Although there were also other women and American born Asian women, these men would prefer the women from their home countries. There was also no shortage of women who were willing

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<sup>9</sup> "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)," National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act>.

<sup>10</sup> *Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Victor Howard Metcalf*. (1906) Theodore Roosevelt Collection. Harvard College Library.



to leave their homeland to be with these men. These men symbolized a new way of life that would be appealing to poor girls who dreamed of a more affluent lifestyle.<sup>11</sup>

One key document that will be examined is the Japanese Picture Bride Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) study.<sup>12</sup> This document was a collection of letters, numerical data, and ultimately the final decision of how to deal with the incoming Japanese picture brides. These federal documents illustrate that white government officials did not know how to deal with the family exploitation of the loophole. These government officials questioned whether the marriages taking place in Japan were legal. Immigration officers interrogated Chinese picture brides to determine if they had ever met their husband.

While examining the gendered language of the document, the bias that these officials had against foreigners becomes clear. They structured their argument against the perceived morality of the Japanese marriage ceremony. The customary Japanese marriage in question was called the *san san ku do*; a nuptial ceremony consisting of the formal drinking of sake alternately by the marrying couple from the same cups three-three-three-nine times. These ceremonies were established and sanctioned by the Japanese custom of having nothing to do with religious rites or priests. Although the marriage is seen as complete in the eyes of the Japanese government, the American government had difficulty with accepting this form of marriage.

Although these women were not painted as carriers of vice, the officials attempted to detain Japanese picture brides due to immigration officer's suspicions of the *san san ku*

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<sup>11</sup> Composite view based upon the following interviews: Kawakami, *Picture Bride Stories*, 19-20, 176, and 196.

<sup>12</sup> Immigration: Records of the INS, 1880-1930; Casefile 52424/13C. 1919-1921. 101pp; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Series A: Subject Correspondence Files, Part 1: Asian Immigration and Exclusion, 1906-1913; [Japanese Picture Brides]; Immigration and Naturalization Service; National Archives, Washington, DC.

*do* as an illegal method of smuggling Japanese women into the United States, one of the officers stated in his letter to the secretary of state “a woman cannot be admitted as a wife of a Japanese-American citizen unless the latter proceeds to a place where both he and his intended wife will be under the jurisdiction of the country in accordance with the laws of which the marriage is contracted.”<sup>13</sup>

Through examining the gendered language of Americans on the topic of picture brides, it is evident how choice of language impacted the labels and connotations of picture brides. Although these women’s voices are often unheard in the general public, the laws that impacted the ability to immigrate and cultural expectations are the structures that impacted their marriage or personal lives provide answers why racist stereotypes still persist today.

Structures are the factors that make things possible. Structures not only impact these women’s marriages physically but also their surrounding environment. In the case of the “picture brides,” their structures mainly center around the government, their home country’s traditions/cultures, and racism.

Examinations of the political landscape of the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century will aid in understanding the structures the country built to mitigate the growing Asian population. By looking at the gendered language and how government agencies chose to interact with the new phenomenon of picture brides immigrating into the US after legislation like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Gentleman’s Agreement of 1907, it could be discerned how these structures impacted their immigration process.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 29-30.

Other structures that significantly impacted their immigration were the traditions and cultures inherent in their home countries. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were many different stipulations of how women were expected to behave and obey their elders and future husbands. Japanese men during this time period also preferred a traditional Meiji woman even if they were working extensively in a pineapple farm in Hawai'i. This preference was one of the structures that positively impacted the demand of Japan born wives.<sup>14</sup> According to Chinese tradition, filial piety was the primary duty of all those who were raised in Chinese society. Being a filial son would mean complete obedience to his parents as long as they will live, providing the best-possible care, and upon their deaths, the son was required to perform ancestral rituals. For Chinese women that married into their husband's family, filial conduct meant faithfully serving her in-laws and giving birth to a son.<sup>15</sup> Other cultural structures that facilitated these marriages was the practice of the elders arranging the marriages.

Another key factor of picture brides for immigrating into the United States was the economic strife many country women experienced during their childhood. Hearing about how filial a neighbor's son was to send back money he was able to earn in America, these women would be very willing to participate in proxy marriages. Many women in the Japanese countryside would grow up tending silkworms or help their families in the farm fields.<sup>16</sup> The shift from the preindustrial household economy of China to the industrialized urban society of San Francisco had little effect on the socioeconomic status of most

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<sup>14</sup> Kawakami, Barbara F. *Picture bride stories*. (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 57.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Brians, ed., "Washington State University," Common Errors in English Usage and More Examples of Filial Piety 14th Century CE Comments (Washington State University, November 14, 2016), <https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/11/14/examples-of-filial-piety-14th-century-ce/>.

<sup>16</sup> Composite view based upon interviews by: Kawakami, *Picture Bride Stories*, 18-19, 46, 88, 178, 209, 221, and 228.

Chinese women. Chinese women, regardless of status, were considered as property of men and treated as such.<sup>17</sup>

In Japan, it was expected for boys and girls to be in separate spheres. It was not uncommon for a young ladies' first experience with a man happen during their marriage meetings.<sup>18</sup> Women were able to receive compulsory education until 4<sup>th</sup> grade, but often they would wish to pursue a further education. They were not barred from education from the government but from their families who needed extra help around the house or work. The skills learned in their youth were what was expected of a traditional meiji woman; such as *ikebana* (flower arrangement), kimono sewing, *reigi saho* (etiquette), and tea ceremony classes were taught by individual instructors in the village.<sup>19</sup>

One of the last key structures that impacted these women's daily lives while living in America was Sinophobia. Sinophobia is the fear or dislike of China or Chinese people, their language and culture. After the Page Act of 1875 prohibiting the entry of Chinese women and subsequently enacting the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banning immigration of Chinese men.

Due to the growing population of Chinese immigrants on the West Coast of America, many Americans feared the rising population and attempted to legally ban the immigration of additional Chinese men and women into the United States. Although the Page Act was an attempt to ban women who immigrated for immoral purposes, this act

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<sup>17</sup> Judy Yung. *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.uta.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=21409&site=ehost-live.com.ezproxy.uta.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=21409&site=ehost-live>, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Composite view based on interviews by: Kawakami, *Picture Bride Stories*, 58, 89, 146, and 240.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

was primarily enforced against Chinese women.<sup>20</sup> China during this time had the practice of polygamy; oftentimes, the women who immigrated to America were 2<sup>nd</sup> wives or concubines of the men already living on the West Coast. Even if they were legally married in China, polygamy was not seen in a positive light for Christian Americans. In 1919, *The Seattle Star* published an article titled “Japanese Picture Brides are Swarming Here.” The column’s author stated that the “crux of the evil lies in the inability of the Japanese to miscengenate with our white population” while also agreeing that their white population also had no desire to assimilate its Japanese population.<sup>21</sup> Jane Kwong Lee’s grandparents also maintained the belief that girls were not equal to boys; their justification for this reasoning was how girls, after their marriage, belonged to other families and could not inherit the family name therefore girls could not help their families financially even if they were good at housework.<sup>22</sup>

According to an argument presented by Nicole Constable, as men and women were able to express initiative, make choices, and exert control, they are not only active agents within their correspondence but an individual beyond the stereotypes such as the “dragon lady” or “lotus blossoms”.<sup>23</sup> Agency is the idea that people in deeply oppressed situations can make choices to carve out their own humanity or dignity.<sup>24</sup> The choice for many of

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<sup>20</sup> The Page Act of 1875 (Immigration Act) FORTY-THIRD CONGRESS. SESS. II. CH. 141. 1875. Accessed via “Page Law (1875),” Immigration History (University of Texas at Austin: Department of History, July 18, 2019), <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/page-act/>.

<sup>21</sup> *The Seattle Star*. [volume] (Seattle, Wash.), 30 July 1919. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Lib. of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87093407/1919-07-30/ed-1/seq-1/>

<sup>22</sup> Judy Yung. *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.uta.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=21409&site=ehost-live>, 60.

<sup>23</sup> Constable, Nicole. *Romance on a Global Stage Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and “Mail-Order” Marriages* /. *Romance on a Global Stage Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and “Mail-Order” Marriages* /. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

these women going to America is in pursuit of their personal goals. Goals such as marrying a rich handsome man or pursuing higher education are key motivations in influencing the agency of picture brides.

Research within the scope of picture brides are often completed in a traditionalist Western perspective. Picture brides are frequently viewed in a western patriarchal and racist point of view, which erases the key agencies that motivated these women to immigrate into the United States. Examining, rather than assuming, how picture brides choose to view their own experiences will allow for us to better understand these women within their historical context without bias. Assumptions about lifestyles and Asian cultural traditions are often stereotyped due to racial and gender bias. Providing a cultural and personal narrative of picture brides – giving voice to these women – will expand the topic beyond notion of picture brides being either a “foreign prostitute” or a “bought sex slave” These connotations situate the current narrative of picture brides within the scope of sex work, denying these women agency and voice and simplify the complexities of their lives.

Rather than selling themselves to American men, these women saw benefits to getting married. These women are pursuing a new environment to facilitate their desires of attaining further education and/or to escape a life of perpetual poverty and limited choices.

Asian women in their countries often have their marriages negotiated by their family elders. The elders would attempt to best match the man and woman to strengthen familial bonds. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, arranged marriages were arranged to build stronger families. Men would be expected to take care of their families but are not expected to help the bride’s family. Women were expected to learn the necessary skills to fulfil their wifely duties, which directly correlates to the social standing of the family. In the case of

picture brides during this time period, these women followed the plans of their elders and married the men residing in America. In the case of the Japanese, proxy marriages known as *san san ku do* were able to legally bind the bride and groom together without needing the groom to physically be there for the marriage to be legal. This practice led to the women often not meeting their husbands until they were picked up from the Angel Island immigration center located in San Francisco Bay, California.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Japanese women who became picture brides were got married in to escape the drudgery of farm life and Korean picture brides often ran away from their home countries in hopes of pursuing high education or experience a new world. Korean women would often marry American men against their family's wishes to fulfill these goals.<sup>25</sup> It is important to understand these women's motivations and perspectives – their voices and agency – when examining the cultural phenomenon of picture brides. How these women viewed their own experiences will be lost if an exclusively Western perspective is used to structure the narrative of their lives. Although they were brought into the United States through their marriage with their husbands, these women chose to follow through with their marriage in exchange for economic, educational, or personal gain. These women do not view their experiences the same way a Western outsider may view these experiences.

For Chinese immigrants, “the long detentions and rigorous examinations of the immigration station were routine consequences of the discriminatory Chinese exclusion laws.”<sup>26</sup> Some of the major legislation passed during this period enforced other legal

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<sup>25</sup> Composite view based on interviews by: Sunoo, *Korean Picture Brides*, Kim Suk-eun, Lee Ke-man, and Park Soon-ha.

<sup>26</sup> Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island.; Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2012), 31.

structures that impacted Chinese immigrants included miscegenation laws and other immigration restrictions. Even though they were brought into the United States as cheap labor to building railroads, the threat of an increasing Chinese population within American borders caused many white Americans to urge legislators for something to stunt the Chinese population growth.

Before any Chinese immigrants were allowed to leave their steamships or be officially admitted into the United States, the Chinese were subjected to longer examinations, interrogations, and detentions than other immigrants of different ethnic origins.<sup>27</sup> To combat the oppressive Chinese exclusion laws, Chinese immigrants, returning residents, and Chinese American citizens employed various methods to enter or return to the United States.

As a response to the range of legal, political, and immigration strategies used, the immigration officials enforced stricter measures that included the scope of exclusion and revealed any false claims to admission. They were asked more questions, called more witnesses, and required more evidence for Chinese cases compared to any other group on Angel Island. Although initially welcomed into the United States as a valuable source of laborers or investors during the Gold Rush in the mid-nineteenth century, before long, white Americans targeted them with discriminatory laws and racial violence.

One of the first discriminatory laws that targeted the Chinese immigrant women was the Page Law in 1875 when the anti-Chinese movement had gained national momentum. The Page Law excluded Asian contract labor and prostitutes. Seventy-one percent of Chinese women in San Francisco were listed as prostitutes; these women were

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 70.



in a lucrative business that catered to both Chinese and non-Chinese patrons. Dubbed as “moral and racial pollution,” these women’s prostitution businesses were used as justification for Chinese Exclusion from the United States.<sup>28</sup> In 1906, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish moral reformers decided to mitigate the prostitution and commercialized vice in San Francisco.<sup>29</sup> Because prostitution was so unbridled within Chinese communities, the early stereotypes of foreign brides being prostitutes may have stemmed from this time.

In Confucian ideology, women remain subordinate to men and confined to the domestic sphere. It was expected for the women to obey her father at home, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son when widowed. Chinese women were further disadvantaged by being unable to divorce or remarry if their former spouse initiated a divorce or died. Despite these cultural structures, these women were still able to claim their own agency to a better life in the United States. An example of a Chinese immigrant who arrive in San Francisco and immediately placed into prostitution work is Wong Ah So. Ah So arrived in the United States as the wife of Huey Yow but later learned her husband had been paid \$500 by Sing Yow to procure her as a slave. At the demand of Sing Yow (her madam), Ah So went to many towns and served several men to the point her private parts pained so much she could no longer have intercourse with men. In spite of working tirelessly to pay for her freedom, Sing Yow sold Ah So to another madam in Fresno. Luckily, Ah So was rescued from her situation through the Presbyterian Mission Home by a family friend. Wong Ah So continued to live and work in the United States but in later

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>29</sup> Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.uta.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=21409&site=ehost-live.com.ezproxy.uta.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=21409&site=ehost-live>, 76.

letters showed a shift in core beliefs in letters complaining about her husband to Donaldina Cameron, her caretaker after the rescue. Her complaints show she was able to make individual choices against her prior duties of filial piety.<sup>30</sup>

Wong Ah So's experience in the United States was not uncommon as she and other Chinese women's roles and family life changed. A more balanced gendered ratio, literacy, and the decline of prostitution helped Chinese women living in the United States carve out their own agency and continue living their lives. When asked if she felt imprisoned, Law Shee Low was able to find life in the United States better than in China. Although the United States did not welcome Chinese people, at least it had food on the table and allowed for a better life for themselves and their children through hard work.<sup>31</sup>

Another group who targeted Chinese women living in California (pre-exclusion) were the Presbyterian San Jose Woman's Board of Missions (SJ-WBM). By examining the accounts from a secondary source SJ-WBM initially wanted to establish a local rescue home for enslaved, prostituted, and abused Chinese American women and girls, they shifted their original purpose into their concern towards general evangelism and education while maintaining their original concern about the "possibility of freeing Chinese women from their condition of slavery."<sup>32</sup> As little research was done on this particular group of immigrants during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the SJ-WBM was able to provide some insight into the daily lives and cultural customs associated with the Chinese people living in the United States at the time, even if the accounts are biased due to being filtered

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 69-71.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Voss, Barbara L. "'Every Element of Womanhood with Which to Make Life a Curse or Blessing': Missionary Women's Accounts of Chinese American Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century Pre-exclusion California." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 105-134. doi:10.1353/jaas.2018.0004., 120.

through white missionary women. Although it is not the personal experiences of the Chinese brides themselves, the SJ-WBM's records offered a personal view into what occurred within the family home of a Chinese American family.



Figure 2.2: Kaku Kono's exchange photograph, 1920.  
Retrieved from Kawakami's *Picture Bride Stories*

Beginning in 1894, the Japanese government licensed private companies to oversee the immigration process. During this private contract period, which allowed 57,000 Japanese immigrants to move to Hawai'i, this group of Japanese laborers were frequently exploited through complicated financial arrangements that made it necessary for a laborer to spend his initial contract period working to pay off debts to the contracting company for

the start-up materials required for employment on the plantations.<sup>33</sup> The importation of Japanese laborers would later be halted due to prohibition by US law in 1900 to 1908. Contrary to the specified ban that singled out Chinese immigrants, the Japanese immigrants were able to attain a less rigorous immigration process for male laborers wanting to go to Hawai'i.

In 1907, the Japanese government implemented the Gentleman's Agreement which placed severe restrictions on immigration into the United States. This Gentlemen's Agreement not only affected Japanese male laborers but opened a new opportunity for picture brides to immigrate into Hawai'i. Since the men who immigrated into the United States as laborers were unable to earn enough money to return to Japan as quickly as believed, over 20,000 women were married in absentia in Japan and ferried across the ocean to be with their husbands they never physically met. This period was popularly known as *shashin hana-yome jidai* or "picture bride period among the *issei* population."<sup>34</sup>

Many of the women who later became picture brides were daughters of farmers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three.<sup>35</sup> Prior to the ban on Japanese immigration, 28,691 Japanese laborers and members of their family came to Hawai'i on a three-year government contract.<sup>36</sup> There were rumors that anyone could make a fortune working in the sugarcane and pineapple fields of Hawai'i, and the island was painted as a paradise that was alluring for young Japanese countrywomen who wished for a new life. The influence of these rumors and the wish for a new life brought thousands of women onto sugarcane

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<sup>33</sup> Kawakami, Barbara F. *Picture bride stories*. (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island.; Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2012), 119.

<sup>36</sup> Kawakami, Barbara F. *Picture bride stories*. (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 1.

or pineapple plantations. After reaching the shore and going through the immigration interview, the picture brides would depart from the ship and come face to face with their new husbands. Since most of these women had proxy marriages, young brides would anxiously look around to match a man to the photograph in their hands. Because some men would often send touched-up or younger photos of themselves, disillusioned brides would ask to return back to Japan.<sup>37</sup>

For her book *Picture Bride Stories*, Barbara Kawakami interviewed many Japanese picture brides and recorded their personal history. One of the brides she interviewed for this book was Soto Kimura. When Kawakami saw a photo of a plantation in Kauai with many ethnic groups that caught her attention, she wanted to include Kimura in her book about Japanese picture brides. On November 1, 1911, nineteen-year-old Soto Shigehiro, later changed her name to Soto Kimura, departed on her journey to become the picture bride of Kuniyoshi Kimura. Their families had made the decision for the couple to be united through marriage and for Soto to go to Hawai'i to accompany Kuniyoshi. Before Kimura arrived at Angel Island, she had only heard about the exciting rumors from villagers who had returned from Hawai'i.

While describing her experience with the Honolulu harbor to Kawakami, Kimura said she had to go through a physical examination and interrogation before being allowed to meet up with her husband. Brides who could not understand or speak English would often be detained for longer periods of time. The majority of brides who passed the examination process were picked up by their husbands and whisked away to their new homes; Soto, unfortunately, had to wait for two weeks before she could be picked up by

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<sup>37</sup> Composite view based on interviews by: Kawakami, *Picture Bride Stories*, 95 and 223.

her husband.<sup>38</sup> Her resilience in the face of anxiety while waiting for her husband to pick her up from the immigration center displayed how strong her agency of starting her new life in Hawai'i.

After the couples were united, there would be a Christian ceremony provided and encouraged for the new couples to have a traditional marriage that is recognized by American law. Prior to departing, picture brides would perform a ceremony called *san san kudo*, which is the exchange of nuptial cups by the bride and a groom proxy to seal their marriage vows. Although their marriage ceremonies were scrutinized by the American immigration officers at Angel Island, the decision to ultimately respect the laws and customs of other countries was finally decided upon in 1917 by Aimaro Sato. He wrote in a letter to Secretary of State Robert Lansing saying "I desire to make it unmistakably clear that 'picture bride' is not, in the eye of the law, 'an unmarried woman who comes to a United States port and claims upon arrival that she has been sent for by a man in the United States who is desirous of marrying her at the port of her admission.'"<sup>39</sup> A marriage completed and recognized by a woman in Japan and a man in the United States is no less legal than a marriage contracted between parties residing within the same jurisdiction. For Japan, the couple would only need to notify the Family Registrar of the district where the would-be bridegroom resided; and once notified, the legal procedure of the marriage contract has been completed, and the marriage becomes effective from the date of notification.

Many women saw their arranged marriages as a filial duty or economic necessity. Fundamentally, all Japanese marriages during this time were arranged marriages; however

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<sup>38</sup> Kawakami, Barbara F. *Picture bride stories*. (Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 57-60.

<sup>39</sup> Immigration: Records of the INS, 1880-1930, 78-79.

because picture brides were crossing international borders to meet a man they have never physically met, they were labeled as picture brides and scrutinized by Westerners unfamiliar their marriage practices. Even if their first meetings were awkward or full of disappointments, it was too late to make a fuss, so the couples just went on their way. Many women would often also work on the sugarcane or pineapple fields to help alleviate the cost of raising a new family in a new environment. In the case of Soto, she most likely saw her marriage as a filial duty. Even after the death of her husband in 1937, her resilience to take care of the family she created in Hawai'i inspired Kawakami so much that Kawakami described Soto as someone who's life was an example of the spirit of *gaman* (perseverance and endurance).

Contrary to Japanese picture brides, Korean picture brides did not have their family elders decide their marriages but rather these women chose to run away from harsh Japanese rule. Korean picture brides are often women associated with Korean students who wished to pursue a higher education that was not attainable for those residing in rural villages. Although similar, picture brides came to the United States because they were unable to afford the cost of travel. Another difference was the legality of their immigration status for Japan, as Korean picture brides had to trespass into neighboring countries and sail across the ocean. Although there is not specified legal barrier preventing the entry for those of Korean ethnicity, Korean picture brides and their families were unable to pay for the expenses required to immigrate into the United States. As there was a ban on Korean emigration by the Japanese, they had to sneak across the northern Korean border into Manchuria, travel to Shanghai to avoid detection from the Japanese police, and book a

passage on an American steamer going to San Francisco.<sup>40</sup> In pursuit of the American Dream, these women chose to marry a man they had never met in order to achieve their academic aspirations or escape from Japanese rule.

Although there was a leniency towards Korean students and picture bride immigrants, this was based on the perception that their statuses as students or wives did not pose a threat to American labor. There was also leniency due to the American government willing to deal with the Korean National Association (KNA) instead of Japan for matters concerning Koreans residing in the United States. Japan would often voice their complaints that Koreans without a Japanese passport should not be allowed into the county; however, immigration officers were directed by their superiors in Washington D.C. to admit Korean applicants as long as they met the general provisions of the immigration law.<sup>41</sup>

An example of a picture bride that came to the United States against the wishes of her parents was Kim Suk-eun. She was the daughter of a wealthy family in Korea, but she wished to be able to continue her education. She wasn't interested in being a picture bride but wished to go to pursue further education because the Japanese controlled Korean education. In Kim's mind, the Japanese were the enemy and escaping into the United States was the only viable method available to her. Wanting to get away from their suppressive and unfair treatment, her trip across the ocean as a picture bride was done without the

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<sup>40</sup> Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island.; Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2012), 178.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 178.



blessings of her parents. Her parents stated that “You go marry over there, and something go wrong, don’t tell family. You go drown in the ocean.”<sup>42</sup>

As an 83-year-old woman at the time of her interview with Gail Whang, she expressed regret for her actions as a nineteen-year-old in 1913. She was mostly determined to further her education and leave the oppressive Japanese rule. She had thought that by marrying her husband, her husband would provide the fare for her to travel into the United States and her family would provide money for her tuition. However, soon after her marriage to Mr. Kim, she realized her motivation of attaining higher education could not be achieved. Despite all the shortcomings of Mr. Kim looking significantly older than his photo, unable to pursue higher education, and feeling overall deceived of her circumstances, she married Mr. Kim and chose to make the best of her situation. She later joined the KNA to send money back to Korea in support of the Korean Independence movement, personally chose not to follow Korean customs in America, and had children with her husband. Although she was only able to attain citizenship in 1955, she was very proud of the fact that all her children were citizens.<sup>43</sup> Gail Whang’s sentiment was the culmination of social structural influences such as the white missionaries promoting the United States as a paradise free of persecution compared to their old home under Japanese rule and her own Korean national pride.

Another Korean woman who became a picture bride was Lee Ke-man who was inspired to become a picture bride after listening in on conversations of the servant girl who became a picture bride. After her introduction to her future husband’s picture, she saw

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<sup>42</sup> Sonia Shinn Sunoo, *Korean Picture Brides, 1903-1920: A Collection of Oral Histories* (Xlibris Corporation, 2002), 79.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 81-82.

that he was very handsome and immediately chose him to be her future husband. They corresponded for a couple months through the help of a matchmaker. There was great anticipation towards marrying a handsome man but there was even greater anticipation for the opportunity “to have an education in the wonderful land of liberty and freedom.”<sup>44</sup> Because of these two reasons, she was able to preserve her strength to endure any hardships she met on the way to Angel Island.

Lee Ke-man’s family was heavily against her marriage as a picture bride. One uncle had a violent opposition saying, “We’re not going to have any woman in our family sold into prostitution!”<sup>45</sup> Within the context of this paper’s argument, although Lee’s uncle and Westerners viewed her marriage as one akin to prostitution, the main difference is how Lee initiated this marriage herself without the consent of patriarchal family while the Western perspective viewed the entire process of her marriage as an immoral transaction. Her family would later lock her up and forced her to reconsider being a picture bride if she wished to be released. Due to these hardships, Lee felt justified to continue her secret correspondence with her future husband, Lee Yoon-kyong. She would later have 10 children with Lee Yoon-kyong and help manage his farm in Montana. Not only did Lee overcome structural barriers, but she also participated in the creation of a *Chinmokhoe* (Friendship Club) that strives to retain their Korean cultural customs and traditions away from the homeland.<sup>46</sup> Her actions not only exemplified her agency of living her life without restrictions from the Japanese government but also paved the early history for Asian Americans in Montana.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 184.

Each ethnic group was met with different attitudes when they touched American soil. Chinese women were actively scrutinized throughout the immigration process to stunt the growth of a Chinese American population. The Japanese formed an agreement that was used as a source of labor due to the lack of cheap Chinese workers and to appease the Americans along the west coast. The Koreans wished to escape the harsh Japanese oppression or pursue an education but ultimately were unable to gain educational opportunities after their arrival on American soil.

Japanese picture brides have their own set of unique circumstances that contribute to the overall experience and perception of picture brides. Since picture brides were mostly Japanese, the cultural customs and structures impacted their voyage across the ocean into their new homes. Japanese picture brides were able to perform proxy marriages in order to navigate the hostile immigration process. These women also had cultural customs that impacted their agencies and decisions of how to pursue their lives after reaching American soil. Compared to Chinese women, Japanese women were less likely to be suspected or accused of being a prostitute. These women had the benefit of being able to provide adequate proof of their identities and marriages such as the certificate signed by the Japanese consul to satisfy the requirements of US residency and the economic status of the husband. They were also able to provide other forms of proof such as bank account books, land titles, and land leases as a response to the Japanese community's awareness of the class biases of the Gentleman's Agreement. When asked of the picture bride's occupation in the United States, the men and women knew to answer this question with 'housework' to avoid suspicion of the women becoming laborers but rather proper middle-class housewives. These actions were examples of appealing to the immigration officials to make

the Japanese seem more respectable so that this entry of a despised group was then acceptable.<sup>47</sup>

Although many were swayed by the rumors of a rich paradise, the majority of Japanese picture brides ultimately chose to stay in the United States and make the best of their situation after understanding the possibility of getting rich and returning to their homes in Japan was a lie perpetuated by the initial recruitment of Japanese laborers in the late nineteenth century.<sup>48</sup> These women saw America as their new home and the place where their families were formed. The Japanese picture brides also valued filial piety of following the will of the family elders. Since the marriages were conducted as an agreement to unite the two families, the act of marketing their children as the best groom or bride ensures they are deciding the marriages with their children's best interests. Although most of the men were several years older than the bride, the bride would ultimately choose to make a family with their husbands even if the women were slightly disillusioned from their prior expectation of what their husbands looked like in real life contrary to the photo in their hands.

After the annexation of Korea into Japan in 1910, life for the Korean people drastically worsened. Linking the Korean farming industry to the international market caused the fall of the Korean agricultural economy thus forced many Korean farmers off their lands. The rise of unemployment and starvation worsened with the cholera epidemic and natural disasters took their strikes in 1901-02. The lack of basic necessities and general dissatisfaction with the oppressive Japanese rule allowed for the increase of American

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<sup>47</sup> Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island.; Immigrant Gateway to America* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2012), 127.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

missionaries to persuade the new Korean converts to go to Hawai'i.<sup>49</sup> Hawai'i was painted as a paradise free of political and religious persecution and where they would be able to better their living conditions.

Despite the suppression on Korean emigration by the Japanese, 115 picture brides fled Korea by sneaking into Manchuria, Shanghai, or Europe. Many arrived without passports or proper documentation of their identities, but their immigration processes were waived. Since the beginning those immigrating from Korea to the United States skewed the gender ratio of 6 men to 1 woman in Hawai'i and 9 men to 1 woman on the American mainland. This skewed gender ratio provided some security of the Korean picture brides since most of the Korean men in America preferred to marry and stay in America rather than return to the instability of Japanese rule. Inspired by the Japanese and following the Korean custom of arranged marriages, these men were able to acquire a picture bride.<sup>50</sup> Although the immigration of Japanese and Korean picture brides was stifled by the Ladies Agreement of 1910-1920, an agreement to placate anti-Japanese exclusionists, over a thousand Korean picture brides and twenty thousand Japanese picture brides found their way into the United States to start a new life.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 199.

## CHAPTER 3

### AGE OF TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT

There are still women today who find their future husbands through a photo exchange. Although the methods are not the same as they were a hundred years prior, through the advancement of technology, we are able to see how a simple photo exchange has transformed into a much more complex exchange of images and information. The establishment of websites, electronic mail, widespread internet access, and instantaneous chat through long distances all contribute to widening the dating pool many men and women partake in. As each forte and preference have their own dedicated dating services that start the courtship with a profile picture; picture brides are an example of a niche within the dating pool. A photo being front and center of their profile to attract possible partners is very common in the twenty-first century. Some examples of popular dating applications that utilize a photo as the initial introduction of a match are Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr. Humans are visual creatures, but we all do not have the same standards of beauty. Although one standard of beauty is widely accepted within a culture, that same standard of beauty is different in another culture.

Despite the similarities for these online dating applications, picture brides (now referred to as *mail-order brides*) are often painted as victims of their own marriage. These women are seen as wives bought with money, foreign sex slaves, and the submissive docile Asian woman wet dream of white incels. Incels are often classified as young men who consider themselves unable to attract women sexually. One extreme example of a white

man who was racially and sexually motivated to act out on his violence by killing 8 women (6 of which being of Asian descent) in Atlanta spas in 2021. In initial interviews, the shooter claimed to have a ‘sex addiction’ and these spa businesses were seen as a sexual temptation.<sup>51</sup>

The same structures which effected these women in the 1900s, such as the exclusion laws or the miscegenation laws, are no longer in effect as of 1990. Although there are no longer any laws that would impede the immigration of a specific ethnic group, we do see a preference for Asian immigrants compared to the earlier age of Asian exclusion. According to the Pew Research Center in 2018, the top countries of origin for new immigrants coming into the United States was China with 149,000 people, India with 129,000, and the Philippines with 46,000. This totals to roughly 32 percent of the millions of immigrants arriving in the United States each year. By 2009, there was an increase of Asian immigrants surpassing the number of Hispanic immigrants.<sup>52</sup>

Laws that impact the immigration of wives and fiancés have also been impacted such as the K-1 visa which requires a legal marriage to take place within ninety days after the foreign citizen fiancé lands in the United States.<sup>53</sup> Other visas, IR1 or CR1, are immigrant petitions for spouses of a US citizens. Although there is a process for each application process, there is currently no limit to how many such applications one US citizen may make. There have been instances where men would court multiple foreign

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<sup>51</sup> Annika Kim Constantino, “Atlanta Spa Shooter Who Targeted Asian Women Pleads Guilty to Four of Eight Murders,” CNBC (CNBC, July 27, 2021), <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/27/atlanta-spa-shooter-who-targeted-asian-women-pleads-guilty-to-four-counts-of-murder.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Abby Budiman, “Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants,” Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, September 22, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/>.

<sup>53</sup> “Nonimmigrant Visa for a Fiancé(e) (K-1) - Travel.state.gov,” travel.state.gov (US Department of State), accessed April 1, 2022, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/family-immigration/nonimmigrant-visa-for-a-fiance-k-1.html>.

women at once, apply for the K-1 visa for each of them, and whisk the first accepted application into America without any regard for the other women.<sup>54</sup>

Other than legal structures that factor into a mail-order bride's new life in the United States, there are also changed cultural structures that influence how Asian women view themselves. Marriage expectations within Asian cultures have become more lenient beginning in the 1990s and including present-day. Although arranged marriages are still in practice, they are not as popular as they once were in the early 1900s. The expectations after marriages are also not as stringent as to require casting aside their individual identities after marrying into the husband's family. Although there is still the expectation of upholding filial piety, women are able to choose their own partners, make personal decisions, and uphold personal beliefs in spite of their local society still valuing filial piety. Some of the beliefs these women would hold include where the couple would live after the marriage, ability to work outside the domestic sphere, or choosing to marry someone of a different race.<sup>55</sup>

Divorce is also a key cultural shift that allowed for more freedom with marriages for Asian women. Due to the increased societal acceptance of divorce, many Chinese women who would consider themselves as mail-order brides were often women older in age or a divorcee. Because prospects of remarriage in China were difficult, some women felt the appeal to marrying a foreign man. On the other hand, the intermingling of different countries allows for a conversational discourse. Before the spread of the internet where it

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<sup>54</sup> Human Trafficking: Mail Order Bride Abuses: Hearing before the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Eighth Congress, Second Session, July 13, 2004. Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Based on the racial and ethnic preference Asian women may have when choosing a marriage partner. Information provided by Thoa Nguyen.



was very difficult to exchange ideas and cultural customs, it was nearly impossible for those to meet a potential foreign spouse. Due to the increase of internet cafes and later on dedicated international dating sites, cross-national couples are able to meet much more easily.

Presently, although Asian mail-order brides faced the same stereotypes as picture brides, new stereotypes have emerged such a “docile Asian wife” or the infantilization of their individual identities. The harsh stereotype of a ‘docile Asian wife’ creates a vacuum of misunderstanding since these women’s personal experiences cannot be heard due to their position within a white patriarchal system. The biggest stereotype of mail-order brides is the ‘white male-Asian female’ pairing. When a white man specifically looks for an Asian wife, they are often seen as a ‘loser’ or a ‘misogynist.’ While this stereotype is mostly online men expressing how ‘superior Asian women are to Western women’ along with other misogynistic rhetoric of the image they want. These men often have fantasies of dominating their Asian wives as they are considered to be submissive and feminine.<sup>56</sup> In a tweet by Gabby Rainn, she stated how excited she was for a date or a hook up only to be disappointed after finding out the real reason why they wanted to hook up which was to “find out if Asian pussy really is extra tight.”<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, in a quick search on Twitter with “I want an Asian girlfriend because,” one finds several tweets by white men utilizing misogynistic, racist, and infantilizing rhetoric.

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<sup>56</sup> Knapp, Ashley. 2017. “If the non-Asian man actually is immersed in Asian culture, such as living and working abroad or friends with many Asian women and coworkers, no one would think he was a loser if he fell in love and got married to an Asian. ...” Quora answer, June 27, 2017. <https://www.quora.com/Why-do-people-assume-a-man-looking-for-an-Asian-wife-is-automatically-a-loser-or-a-misogynist>.

<sup>57</sup> Gabby Rain (@Gabrielle\_Rainn). 2020. “If I had a dollar for every time I was so excited to date or hook up with a crush only to find out after the fact they really just “wanted to find out if Asian pussy really is extra tight” I could buy myself a nice...” Twitter post, December 17, 2020. [https://twitter.com/Gabrielle\\_Rainn/status/1339664434051117058](https://twitter.com/Gabrielle_Rainn/status/1339664434051117058).

Another harsh stereotype that is attached to being an ‘Asian woman’ is the infantilization of their identity. Since Asian women often retain their youthful looks for a longer time due to cultural habits and expectations, they are often denied their own maturity in age or experience. Some of this connotation stems from the mitigation of Asian accomplishments compared to white accomplishments, while the other half is from their typically associated appearance of a younger woman – girlish figures or youthful facial features. This infantilization of Asian women contributes to ‘yellow fever,’ which is a preference for Asian women and men, contributes to Asian women being objects of sexual fascination. Rather than seeing the depraved gaze as sexual racism, Asian fetishism has a long history of being brushed aside and associated with being a compliment.<sup>58</sup> Rather than the Asian preference being seen as a ‘type,’ this preference contributes to the hyper-sexualization of Asian women and the emasculation of Asian men.

In 1994, Mila Glodava and Richard Onizuka published the book *Mail-Order Brides: Women for Sale* as one of the few books published on the topic of mail-order brides in the United States. They wrote that these relationships are based on an unequal economic relationship between “developing and industrialized nations.”<sup>59</sup> They argued the inequality led to the marital transaction towards exploitation. A male American citizen spouse “feels that he has ‘bought’ the mail-order wife and, therefore, owns her and has power and control over her.”<sup>60</sup> Glodava and Onizuka agreed with the sentiment of there being an unlimited supply of desperately poor women who would do anything to become a US citizen. Despite the early bias against mail-order brides in the United States, Constable’s book contained a

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<sup>58</sup> ZHENG, ROBIN. “Why Yellow Fever Isn’t Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes.” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2, no. 3 (2016): 400–419. doi:10.1017/apa.2016.25.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 71.

contrasting viewpoint of the ‘exploited’ women. While Glodava and Onizuka argued the women were poor women desperate to escape their situations, Constable argued the women had the agency to list themselves with a pen pal agency and were very selective of who to continue correspondence with. The women in Constable’s research were able to voice their opinions and thoughts about their own experiences while Glodava and Onizuka only considered these women’s experiences as “trafficked women” or being duped or seduced into these relationships.

Due to these emerging mindsets, it became acceptable to intermarry within the United States. There were more interracial marriages after the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws and threats towards the current existing racial order between the majority and minority groups. Since Asians are labeled as a ‘model minority,’ their achievements are not only used as a means of keeping the status quo of racial hierarchies but also justification white Americans needed to intermarry with Asians. To retain the racial preference of a white population in America, it was acceptable for white men to marry Asian women due to Asian women fitting the criteria of a ‘white person.’ The acceptance of white men marrying Asian women is the shift in the racial hierarchy that prevented and actively opposed this pairing during the age of Asian Exclusion.

Another reason for the increase of interracial marriage may be due to the sexual attraction of Asians in America. We not only see an increase in Asian media consumption, Korean idol music or Japanese anime, but also sexual preferences. According to Pornhub Insights, ‘hentai’ (Japanese cartoon pornography) became number one and ‘Asian’ at fifth place for search terms for Pornhub in 2021.<sup>61</sup> Other than the pornographic influence and

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<sup>61</sup> “2021 Year in Review,” – Pornhub Insights (Pornhub, December 14, 2021), <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/yir-2021>.

preference American men had for Asian women, this preference was also changed the relationship between white men and Asian women.

While researching mail-order brides and pen pals across international lines, Nicole Constable met and interviewed many Chinese and Filipinas who chose to participate in writing letters to unknown men. She noted the differences between the age groups, mannerisms, and cultural preferences among the mail-order brides. The Chinese mail-order brides are often teachers, office managers, librarians, translators, and secretaries; Filipina mail-order brides were of a lower socioeconomic class compared to the Chinese women with jobs such as shop clerks, domestic helpers, and college students. While the Chinese women were older in age and individually wealthier, Filipinas were more informed of American cultural customs.

Since Constable's research was conducted in the 1990s, the rise of internet cafes and new technology provided a new perspective on courtship; this allowed for men of different ethnic identities to find a wife from China or the Philippines. Although the Chinese women were not as young or familiar with American culture, Chinese women had economic access and educational opportunities that allowed for the communication with the American pen pal. Filipino women on the other hand were very familiar with American culture and expectations due to their own neighbors, cousin, and sisters marrying American men. Constable's work as a white anthropologist offered a compassionate interpretation of mail-order brides as women who possesses the agency to make their own choices about their marriage is very different compared to other historians' interpretation of mail-order brides.

Because Chinese women were not as familiar with American culture, these women would often ask Constable about the meaning of the pictures they received from their pen pals. Questions such as why a fifty-year-old man would flex his muscles for a photograph or the definition of 'semi-retired' were raised due to being an outsider of the cultural nuances of their American pen pal.<sup>62</sup> An indication of the cultural differences between the American man and Chinese woman was the preferences of photos being chosen by the American man to initiate the correspondence between the pair. A woman considered attractive by Chinese standards would not hold the same level of attraction for Americans. Women the Chinese standards deemed as fat, plain, or faces too flat or wide received more letters. When asked to recommend alternative photographs for the less popular women, Constable and her friend chose more natural poses compared to the Chinese expectation of elaborate studio shots of women against false backdrops. The Chinese standard of beauty countered the American standard of beauty. The Chinese believed these studio photos were meant to look "one's best" even if it doesn't look like them at all. While this practice was not considered as wrong or dishonest by Chinese customs, this belief is a stark contrast to the Western belief of a professional photograph's purpose is to capture the likeness of the subject as much as possible.<sup>63</sup>

One method of viewing how the general public felt about mail-order brides is examining the products of popular media. Products such as musicals, movies, and television shows are some of the most prevalent forms of consumed media that allows for the space to voice opinions on a public forum. Comments, video interactions, and social

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<sup>62</sup> Constable, Nicole. *Romance on a Global Stage Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and "Mail-Order" Marriages* /. *Romance on a Global Stage Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and "Mail-Order" Marriages* /. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 44.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

media traction of certain topics offer insight into the current media that is perpetuating the stereotypes about these Asian women. While there is a difference between the display of the women's agency for white vs. Asian producers, these products of popular culture encourage discussion and allow for new interpretations of the phenomenon of picture brides and mail-order brides.

One of the earliest products of popular media on the topic of picture brides was the musical, "Flower Drum Song," by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II in 1958. This musical comedy was considered one of the first Hollywood feature film to have a majority Asian-American cast in the Asian-American story. Although the musical's main theme was the generational gap of understanding for Asian Americans, the picture bride Mei Li provides insight into how foreign Asian brides were seen during the 1960s. Although Mei Li and her father entered the United States through illegal methods, the contract was considered legally binding. Sammy Fong, the original groom of the arranged marriage, was romantically involved with another woman, Linda Low, so he attempted to dissolve the marriage contract but found it easier to push the arranged marriage onto another family. Deeming Mei Li as appropriate due to his traditional Chinese mindset, Wang Chi-Yang attempts to allow for Mei Li and Wang Ta, his son, to fall in love "American style" rather than the traditional method of marrying at the command of the family elders. Although the musical didn't focus much on the personal characterization of Mei Li, the audience is able to see her anguish of having an unrequited love for Wang Ta and later pursues Sammy Fong to fulfill the marriage contract. She expressed personal agency to marry a man in

America and was not characterized as a victim of marriage but a victim of the whims of the men.<sup>64</sup>

Another product of popular media produced in America about the picture bride/mail-order bride topic is *Picture Bride* by Kayo Hatta in 1995. This movie follows the journey of a young Japanese woman who arrived in Hawaii as a picture bride to marry a Japanese man who worked on the plantation fields. Although Riyo initially looks forward to starting a new life outside of the unfriendly Japanese society, she later changed that optimism to displeasure after meeting Matsuji who had sent a photo taken when he was a young man. Feeling deceived, the movie follows Riyo's personal journey of accepting Hawaii as her new home.

Hatta's *Picture Bride* expresses the lonely and isolating journey of a young women entering an unwelcoming country. Hatta considers the emotional turbulence that impacted their experiences with the plantation, racial bias, and family relations. Although Riyo was initially deceived into the marriage with Matsuji, she was also deceiving his family of her family's status. During this time period it was taboo to marry a woman whose parents died from tuberculosis.<sup>65</sup>

The Learning Channel, also known as TLC, is an American television channel that has many shows about various niche topics. One of the franchises TLC is known for is *90 Day Fiancé*. Airing in 2014, the show's premise creates an interest for the lives of foreign

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<sup>64</sup> *Picture Bride*. Produced by Kayo Hatta. [https://www.amazon.com/Picture-Bride-Toshiro-Mifune/dp/B007Z9QW31/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=2NNRFU5EMLWGM&keywords=picture+bride&qid=1648672718&s=instant-video&prefix=picture+bride%2Cinstant-video%2C145&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Picture-Bride-Toshiro-Mifune/dp/B007Z9QW31/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2NNRFU5EMLWGM&keywords=picture+bride&qid=1648672718&s=instant-video&prefix=picture+bride%2Cinstant-video%2C145&sr=1-1).

<sup>65</sup> In East Asian cultures, it is seen as inauspicious to marry a family with a missing parent(s). It is seen as a broken or incomplete family therefore the marriage will not be seen as prosperous or auspicious. Because both Riyo's parents passed from tuberculosis, the match would have been seen as inauspicious and not completed. Information based on East Asian cultural understandings.

spouses who come to the United States.<sup>66</sup> Although most television is mainly scripted or staged, rather than examining the testimonials of the relevant women from the show we are able to examine how an outsider would perceive any couple's relationship. The name *90 Day Fiancé* comes from the K-1 visa requiring a legal marriage to take place in the United States or the foreign spouse will be deported. Each season, the show typically focuses on four to six couples from various countries and, at the end of the season, broadcasts their wedding if the couple decides ultimately to legally bind their marriage status.

Due to the availability and spreading of viral clips, not only is there the producer's intent to consider but also the everlasting stream of viewers funneled into the show. The virality of clips not only affects public opinion but also creates conversation across multiple platforms. After season two, *90 Day Fiancé* started releasing an extra episode after the nuptials to interview the couples about public comments that questioned or criticized any behavior broadcasted.

As of 2022, the franchise has showcased forty-six couples in the main series. Out of the forty-six couples, there were 8 couples who had an Asian fiancé. All the foreign spouses came from various backgrounds; the most popular countries showcased in the show are the Philippines, Russia, and Ukraine. Another detail worth noticing about the data in relation to widespread technology is how over half of the couples met online. Of the relevant couples, seven started their courtship online. Some examples of the mediums used to connect the couples are international dating sites or Facebook.

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<sup>66</sup> *90 Day Fiancé* (Silver Spring, Maryland: TLC, n.d.).



Throughout the show, testimonials are often used to help the viewer understand the thoughts and difficulties of each person on the screen. By using these testimonials, we are able to understand the women's agency to live with their partner despite facing harsh backlash from the American spouse's friends and family. Of the relevant couples, all the couples were interracial. Most of the American men were White except for one – which was a Black American and a Filipino woman. Although mostly scripted, being able to see the common tropes and events staged by the show producers provided insight into how the general American public viewed these couples. Some common situations the couple faced was interactions with the children of the groom's prior marriage, family debate of the woman's intentions of marrying a foreigner, cultural differences & expectations. During the seasons' final episode, all the couples are gathered to answer comments posted publicly on social media platforms. One of the main topics that was mentioned during the episode was how friends and/or family members were skeptical about the relationship. Every foreign spouse would face judgement how women were using the American man as a ticket into the United States.

Chart 3.1: Percentage of Couple Consisting of an American Man, Asian Wife on *90 Day Fiancé*

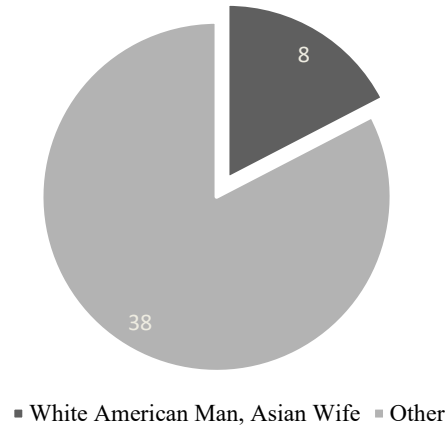


Chart 3.2: Percentage of Couples on *90 Day Fiancé* that Met Online

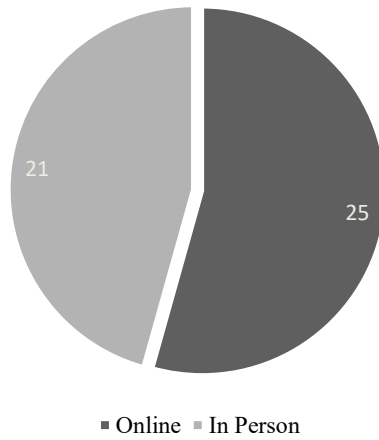


Chart 3.3: Countries and Number of Nationalities of the Foreign Spouse on *90 Day Fiancé*

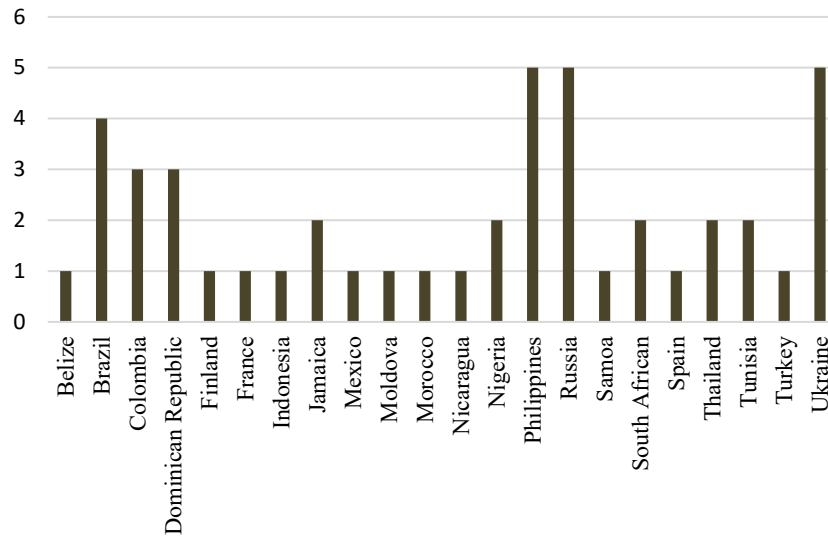


Chart 3.4: Percentage of Relevant Couples from *90 Day Fiancé* Still Together

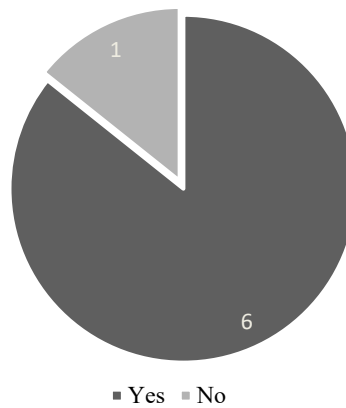
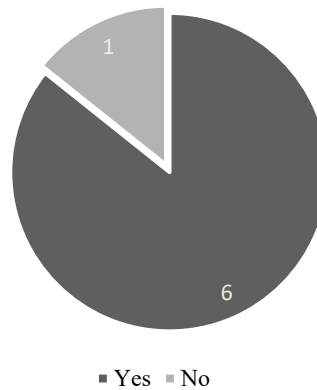


Chart 3.5: Percentage of Relevant Couple on *90 Day Fiancé* who had a Prior Marriage



During season one of *90 Day Fiancé*, four couples were introduced. One of these couples was Louis and Aya. Throughout season one, Louis was introduced as a divorced dad in Indiana who chose to participate in an international dating site. He met a Filipino named Aya on January 15<sup>th</sup> and later proposed March 10<sup>th</sup>. Although she agreed to marry Louis, she tried to persuade Louis to move to the Philippines but chose to immigrate into the United States for Louis's two young sons. The couple's main televised struggle was Louis's ex-wife, Tonya, criticizing Louis's decision of marrying a foreign woman and questioned the validity of Aya's romantic feelings for Louis.

To better compare the differences between how the producers viewed the couples and their stereotypes, a comparison between Louis & Aya and Mike & Aziza will better exemplify how racial identity labels impacted the televised scripts. Aya came from the Philippines while Aziza came from Russia. Although both couples met through an online medium, only Aya was called a mail-order bride.<sup>67</sup> While Aya's relationship was interracial, Aziza's relationship was considered White. Both women had the agency to

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<sup>67</sup> *90 Day Fiancé*. (2014). Season 1, Episode 2. (Silver Spring, Maryland: TLC, n.d.).

move into the United States to be with their spouse but were questioned of their intentions for agreeing to marry a stranger they never physically met. Despite these similarities between an international interracial couple and an international White couple, we see the differences in treatment by their peers and family members. Currently, both couples are still married and have children with each other. Most of the couples that met online also faced the same initial backlash and criticism from close friends and family, but some foreign Asian fiancés were labeled or referenced to mail-order brides.

Brett and Daya were introduced in season two of the show *90 Day Fiancé* and had one of the most memorable scripted storylines. When Daya reached the United States, she questioned whether or not the ring Brett used to propose to her was real. Feeling dissatisfied with Daya questioning her son's intentions, Brett's mother vocally opposed the marriage union and later refused to attend the wedding. Despite the opposition of a parental figure, the couple are still together. Daya chose to resist all the hostility that impacted her journey into the United States and welcomed a daughter with Brett.

Asian women during the age of Asian exclusion and the age of technological advancements both faced prejudice from the American communities surrounding their daily lives. Not only are these women leaving behind a familiar culture and a similar phenotypic population, they are also entering the American coastline with structures hindering their journey in creating new families. The label "picture bride" or "mail-order bride" provides how complex, yet fluid, racial hierarchies are during their respective time periods.

During the age of Asian exclusion, the majority of picture brides entering the United States were Japanese. Arranged to marry a man through an absentee marriage, these

women's agency for making the journey across the Pacific Ocean were strongly related to filial piety and racial preference. Because of the legal barriers and agreements that prevented the rise of an Asian American population, the phenomenon of picture brides came from the lack of wives immigrant Japanese men were able to marry. The women called picture brides had the unique experience of never physically meeting their marriage partners but decided to marry and immigrate into the United States due to filial piety. To maintain their social harmony preserved through arranged marriages, family elders carefully consider how compatible and beneficial the marriage union will affect both families. Although the elders decided who married who, the women also had opinions which impacted the final decision before legalizing the marriage.

The main reason for the Japanese picture brides' immigration was to strengthen the overseas Japanese community that was slowly building a foundation for themselves in the United States. As the Asian diaspora is challenging to differentiate, the laws preventing immigration for Asians focused on each ethnic group. Even though the laws focused on specific ethnic groups, the similar phenotypic features Asians share, black hair and dark brown eyes, often make it hard for the average White American to differentiate between the different ethnicities. Due to the influence of how Chinese immigrant marriages were perceived in the United States, negative stereotypes and connotations were associated with Asian women. Despite the vast cultural differences between Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, the monoethnic identity of "Asian" was the only significant racial identifier that mattered on the American racial hierarchy.

Inspired by the Japanese picture brides, Korean picture brides also entered the United States to meet their husband without physically meeting the men first. Contrary to

the Japanese picture bride's agency of strengthening oversea Japanese communities, Korean picture brides wanted to escape oppressive Japanese rule. While Japanese picture brides entered the United States through a loophole, Korean picture brides were often pardoned if their transit could be considered as illegal by Japanese standards. This partiality is attributed to the United States choosing to manage Korean immigration with the KNA rather than imperial Japan and the lack of threat from Korean immigrants taking laboring jobs from other Americans.

Compared to the women in the earlier time period, the women during the end of the twentieth century often did not want to leave their country of residence. These women, mainly Chinese and Filipino, only wanted to marry a man who offered a different perspective on life compared to their cultural standards. From the interviews of Chinese by Nicole Constable, the individual stories of the women who chose to marry a stranger they have never physically met was not easily understood by Americans. A portion of women were labeled as opportunists who wanted to pursue the American Dream; these women were questioned upon the validity of their romantic feelings and motives of leaving their home countries. Other women, who were labeled as victims of sexual fetishization, were unable to share their own personal narrative due to White Americans casting judgement upon these Asian women with racial stereotypes.

Chinese women called mail-order brides did not know of the label Americans had used to describe the phenomenon of their marriages in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Of the women interviewed and documented in Constable's book on the topic, most of the women were older or previously divorced women who felt they needed to marry due societal structures. Other men in the same situations as the Chinese women did

not face as many difficulties since their target demographic for marriage partners were of a younger age group and within China. Because these local Chinese men preferred a younger woman, many divorced Chinese women who wanted to remarry did not have as many choices available as the Chinese men. These societal structures along with the spread of the internet allowed for the formation of couples that were almost impossible to achieve for a native Chinese woman.

The other ethnicity interviewed by Constable were Filipino women. Contrary to the Chinese women's demographics, Filipino women were not only familiar with American culture but also practiced passing along possible matches to their neighboring peers. Due to each Filipino woman knowing at least one peer who married a foreigner, the practice of obtaining a foreign husband was more open and informative compared to the Chinese women in similar situations. Being able to judge whether their pen pal was the right marriage partner was much easier to discern due to peer confirmation in comparison to Chinese women who were usually more confidential about participating in the conversational exchange.

In spite of the fact that both time periods had their marriages initiated through a photo, each time period had their own unique motivations and circumstances that facilitated their experiences with their marriages. While the women in the age of Asian exclusion focused on leaving their countries in pursuit of a better life, the women in the age of technological advancements were not as economically motivated. In the earlier time period due to poor economic statuses and arranged marriages, the Japanese and Korean picture brides' agency to leave their home countries in pursuit of an improved lifestyle and improve their respective ethnic American communities isolated from their native countries.



Currently, these women do not possess as much agency to leave their countries but wish to marry a man outside their local communities. Many women in Constable's book and the show *90 Day Fiancé* expressed reluctance about leaving their home countries but finally decided to move to the United States to be with their partners. Throughout their respective time periods, all these women first met their partners through a photographic. For the age of Asian exclusion, the photo was presented in a marriage meeting between matchmaking families or peers. On the other hand, the photo used in the age of technological advancement was introduced through internet dating platforms.

In conclusion, despite the political, societal, and cultural structures that have blanketed these women's agency, we can see that the women were able to individually decide how to live the rest of their lives. In the Age of Asian Exclusion, women chose to go to the United States to fulfil their filial piety to their families but also help strengthen the isolated communities that were effectively stuck in the United States due to exclusionary acts. On the other hand, the Age of Technological Advancements was a period where both men and women were able to personally choose their own partners without too many traditional values rejecting interracial marriages or interactions. Both groups of women were able to pursue a better life in the United States even if their agency and structures were not the same.

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Michelle Nguyen is an Interdisciplinary Studies and History major. Her concentration minors include technical writing and professional design and disability studies. She has interned for the Center of Research for Teaching and Learning Excellence (CRTLE) and Electronics and Information Resources (EIR) at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Currently her research interests are based on immigrant women who married American men and design justice. While this paper focuses on the first research interest, her future research on design justice will utilize her other academic minors. Design justice is the belief that not all people interact or get information from a graphic interface (such as websites or pdf documents) the same way. By advocating for the marginalized groups unable to get the best possible use out of the interface, we could design for a more accessible cyberspace.

She plans to pursue a career as a user experience/user interface researcher as well as advocate for better graphic interfaces and experiences for all people using the idea of Universal Design.