The Origins and Construction of Korean America: Immigration before 1965

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While comparatively little scholarship has been undertaken to study the small waves of Korean immigrants who arrived in the United States before the 1960s, these pioneer generations laid the foundations for today’s Korean American communities. Moreover, their significance was not limited to the United States alone. As this chapter demonstrates, US Korean migrants had a central role in the Korean independence movement of the early twentieth century and in the peninsula’s contested transition to self-government after World War II. The impact of their activism reverberated far beyond the United States, shaping the future of the Korean peninsula and Korean people in indelible ways.

The United States was one of several destinations for Koreans fleeing Japanese colonialism, but the US Korean community played an outsized role in the Korean independence movement that belied its small numbers. At no time before 1965 did the Korean population in the United States—including Hawaii—exceed 50,000; in fact, before the Korean War, the community on the US mainland numbered closer to 10,000. US Korean communities also played a pivotal role in Korea’s division and future after 1945. Long-time Korean residents of the United States, became some of the most prominent founding figures in the creation of the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) under US influence. Syngman Rhee, who became the first ROK president in 1948, was the most prominent example. Rhee and other Koreans with strong ties to Washington, DC, spearheaded the politics of anti-communism that dominated the peninsula well through the 1960s and which continue to underpin South Korean relations with North Korea today.

This chapter overviews historical scholarship on pre-1965 Korean immigration to the United States, which has given greater attention to such topics as racialization, gender dynamics, colonial, and transnational connections over time. On the one hand, these shifts have tracked broader trends within the

history academy: the rise of women’s history and ethnic studies in the 1970s and early 1980s, the “cultural turn” of the 1980s and 1990s, and the “transnational turn” of the early twenty-first century. At the same time, contemporary events—most notably the 1992 Los Angeles riots—also shaped the field. In the wake of what Koreans often refer to as Sa-I-Gu (literally April 29), the small handful of scholars working on Korean America plumbed their research to make sense of what happened and to offer productive solace to devastated communities across the usual dividing lines of race, class, gender, and geography; however, few of them looked to the years before 1965. More recently, US historians of diplomacy and migration have renewed their attention to the work of US-based Koreans in the Korean independence movement from Japan, as well as the US military occupation of Korea (1945–1948) that resulted in the peninsula’s partition and an as-yet-unresolved civil war.

**Historiographical Overview**

Scholarly writings on pre-1965 Korean migration mirror the growing professionalization of Korean American history as an academic subfield. Beginning in the 1970s with a handful of general works penned by observer–participants, the field grew steadily through the 1980s and early 1990s as more graduate students and junior scholars across disciplines—many of Korean descent themselves—applied their academic training to produce rigorous studies of early Korean migration. Bong-Youn Choy and Kingsley Lyu, two amateur scholars, provided a useful framework and structure for thinking about the early history of Korean America. Because Choy and Lyu participated in some of the events they documented, however, their accounts were overtly partisan at times, demonstrating a pronounced anti- or pro-Rhee bent. Graduate students and junior scholars influenced by the rise of Asian American studies published academic articles on specific waves of Korean immigration to the United States. In 1974, historian Lee Houchins and co-author anthropologist Chang-su Houchins chronicled Korea’s “pioneer generation” in the *Pacific Historical Review*. Lacking secondary sources, they culled from Korean historiography and primary sources to construct a historical overview of the Korean American community between 1903 and 1924.2 Sociologists also wrote about Korean American communities, but their work focused on the post-1965 immigrants.

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