

Picture Brides

写婚妻

**“Young women
crossed the ocean
holding a photo of
the husband they
had never met”**

Miyoko Kudo

Translated from Japanese
by Fumihiko Torigai





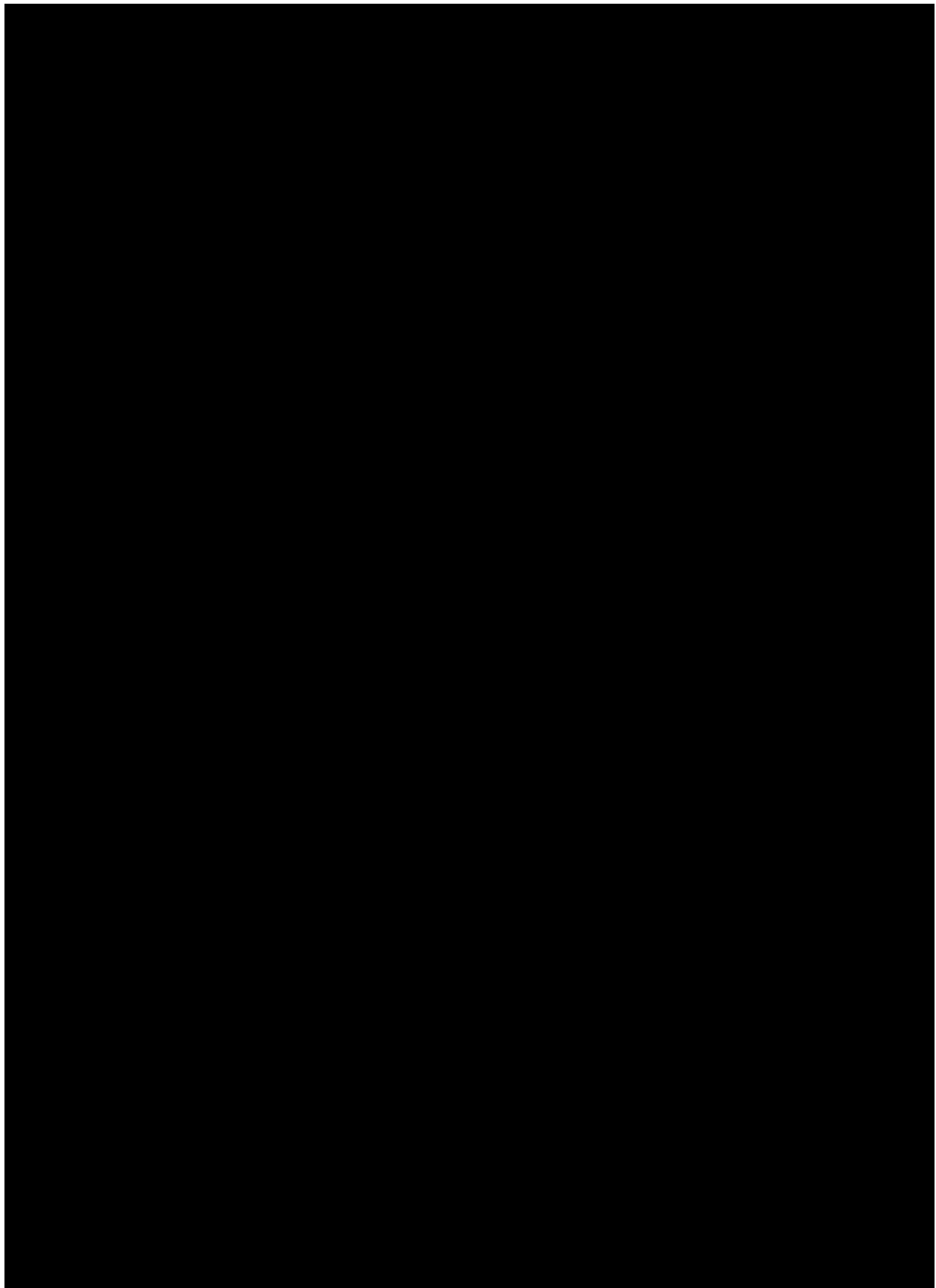
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Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre



Mankichi & Hanayo Iyemoto 1911.
Courtesy Maple Ridge Museum.

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Kinori Oka picture bride, 1922. NNM 2001.28.2.1.4

Preface

It was an unbearable burden.

I was on a journey, from spring to autumn last year, visiting picture brides who were scattered all over Canada and Japan. Each time I managed to locate and interview a picture bride, I felt something inexplicably heavy on my shoulders, and on my psyche.

Picture brides: I doubt there are many people in Japan nowadays who know the meaning of these words. It happened during the Meiji and Taisho eras. Young women from poor farming and fishing villages in Japan went abroad one after another, all with high hopes for a happy new life in a foreign country with a husband whom they had never met.

In most cases, a Japanese immigrant living in North America sent a letter with a picture of himself to his hometown, requesting a search for a bride for him to marry. A matchmaker looked for a suitable candidate and sent a picture of a prospective bride to the man. If both parties agreed to call it a match after looking at each other's picture, the soon-to-be bride had her name entered in the man's family register in Japan as his wife, to make their marriage official. After a six-month wait for the issuance of an immigration visa, she boarded a ship for North America, where her husband was eagerly waiting.

Everything was decided on both ends by a single picture that the man and woman exchanged. Hence this type of marriage was called "picture marriage," and women who got married through this process were called "picture brides."

I wondered how on earth a woman could go to a strange, faraway country to marry a man whom she saw only in a single picture. It's true that we all encounter a situation or two in our lives when we must make a hugely important decision. But marriage is definitely one of the most, if not the most, significant decision that

a person encounters. Judged by the common-sense standards of today, taking that step would be considered foolhardy and reckless.

That was all the more the reason why I wanted to know more; I wanted to trace the thinking and feelings behind the women's decisions. What drove them to faraway countries? My research always starts with this kind of simple curiosity. My journey of speaking to picture brides and documenting their stories began in the spring of last year.

The peak of picture marriages in Canada occurred in the second year of Taisho (1913). It was silly of me, I suppose, to expect that many picture brides from 70 years ago would still be alive. But, to my surprise, 11 picture brides in Canada and two in Japan responded to my request for an interview.

After having listened to their stories, I found myself overwhelmed, not by their reasons for accepting picture marriage, but by the depth and weight of the life experience that each woman had to go through. When a 90-year old woman told me her story as if she were releasing her most intimate thoughts that she had had to keep hidden for 90 years, it made me cringe. I realized I was too young to fully appreciate the incredible weight of the women's life experience; I was scarcely over 30. The more stories of other picture brides I listened to—and they told me their stories with the utmost sincerity—the more crushing the weight I felt within me.

With the mountain of materials and data I accumulated, I must now face the enormous task of putting all these records into print. The best I can do, I suppose, is to faithfully document what I saw and how I felt. To create a full and complete story of the picture brides who lived their incredibly tough lives to the best of their ability in a foreign country far away from home is beyond my capability. In order to do some justice to picture brides, who otherwise may be forgotten in history, the least I can do is to compile an accurate record of them, albeit incomplete. By doing that, I sincerely hope that readers will understand and share the heavy burden I still carry within my heart.

Miyoko Kudo (1983)





Kinori Oka studio picture, ca 1922. NNM 2001.28.2.1.5

Preface to the English translation of Picture Brides

写婚妻

I will be 70 years old in March of 2020.

I contemplated what it would look like if I were to write a letter to my 30-year-old self.

At that time, I was living in Vancouver, Canada. I was terribly poor, and my only concern was making ends meet each day. I devoted myself to studying English, spending at least eight hours a day at my desk. Despite my effort, my English proficiency never improved as I wished. I felt that, even if I were to graduate from university, there was no hope that I could secure a decent job at a Canadian firm.

One day around that time it dawned on me that *issei* (the first generation of immigrants who came to Canada from Japan) must have experienced the same difficulty and frustration in expressing themselves in English. Here was a group of old people who were about to leave this world without speaking their minds. Was it not an important task to collect their stories, their testimonies, before they were all gone? Was I not the most suitable person to do that very task since I resided in Canada? Thus, I began writing a book with the women who were called picture brides as the central theme.

Now that 40 years have passed since that humble beginning, I would tell my 30-year-old self this:

“What gave you the idea that you had the ability to write a book? You never had any experience writing a book before. You began collecting stories when you were twenty-seven years old. You travelled all around Canada to visit issei people scattered around the country,

all of whom are quite old already, to collect their life stories. You didn't have any acquaintances in Canada who could help you, did you? In spite of that, you just kept phoning the numbers you managed to find on the list of Japanese Canadians—'Hello missus, I'd like to hear your personal story; what it was like when you were young. Could you tell me why you came to Canada?' you would ask, and more often than not your request was refused. There were, however, some people who responded to your request in a friendly manner. To your surprise, the issei women who left Japan during the Meiji and Taisho era spoke to you quite frankly and openly. They told you the stories of what happened in their long lives since arriving at the port in Vancouver.

"When you were 30, you began writing the draft of Picture Brides. It seems strange to me now. How on earth did you feel so bold and confident? You were somehow convinced that the collection of stories you gathered from issei women was going to be published someday. You had no idea which publisher was going to accept such a risky proposition. Still, you knew it would happen.

"Looking back now, as a 70-year-old woman, I can fully understand it; it was those issei women who gave you the creative power to write a book worthy of publication. They told you all of their stories, some with very painful memories of a difficult life, yet always with a gentle smile on their face. Not a day passed, they said, that they didn't yearn to be back in their homeland while they struggled to survive under severe working conditions. The nonchalant manner in which they displayed their firm resolution as they reminisced about their past life appeared quite dignified and beautiful. They left a deep impression on you that made you feel you could do it. It was those issei women you met in Canada that encouraged you and convinced you to take the bold step to become a writer.

"As a woman of seventy, I would like to tell you, a young woman, that you were so fortunate. As a young woman then, you were always lamenting about your poor living conditions and your perceived lack of ability. Your encounter with those old issei women of Canada taught you that, if you tried hard enough, the future would open up for you; it commanded you to stop worrying and start walking toward your goal.

“How fortunate you were! Because the success of a writer depends 99% on if and when you take the initial step to become a writer. The remaining 1% is your talent. You were so fortunate that those old women gave you the power to make an initial move, believing firmly that it was you and only you who could write a book that chronicles these women, the first generation immigrants from Japan to Canada. With the wisdom of being 70 years old, I now fully appreciate how fortunate you were.”

The next 40 years of my life went by in a flash. My conviction that I could write a book, as long as I really wanted to write and as long as I could get started, kept pushing me to continue my life as a writer. I still hold that conviction today.

Just when the memories of my life in Canada were fading away, out of nowhere arrived an email from Mr. Fumihiko Torigai, telling me of a plan to publish an English translation of my book *Picture Brides* from 1983. In light of the current situation of the publishing industry, to be honest with you, I could not fully believe that it would come true. Now that I know the English version is about to be published, I am so grateful for the effort of so many Japanese Canadians who made this a reality. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all those involved.

Literary works by Japanese Canadian *issei* were once called a literature with no future, oeuvres of no inheritance that were destined to die away. The thoughts and experiences *issei* people wrote down for the record in Japanese would not be read by their descendants because it was not their mother tongue. All of the stories told to me by the picture brides—their hardships, successes, joys and sorrows—were also in Japanese by necessity.

This English edition will enable Japanese Canadians, including all of the descendants of picture brides whose native tongue is English, to read and find out the life stories of their ancestors and predecessors as well as the historical background in which they lived their lives. As the author, this gives me immense gratification.

Nowadays, it is my humble dream to take a solitary journey across Canada, tracing the footsteps of those old women whom I

had the fortune to meet, with the English version of *Picture Brides* in my hand.

Miyoko Kudo 工藤 美代子
New Year's Eve, 2019

Chapter 1

Picture Brides in Steveston



Mrs. N with children on Steveston dock ca. 1908. NNM 2010.23.2.4.548

We all came without any knowledge

“My eyesight is getting poor, so I can’t see very well. I’m 94 years old now. I came here when I was 20.”

An old woman of porcelain-white complexion, clad in a blue dress, sat on a chair all alone in a room. This was Mrs. Tsune Murakami, most likely the oldest surviving picture bride in Canada.

I met her in a room at a nursing home run by a *hakujin* (white person) manager in Steveston, near Vancouver. The petite lady was dwarfed by the large beds and furniture made for *hakujin*.

“I originally came from an island called Innoshima. Where did I board the ship, you ask? Well, I don’t remember. I boarded the same ship together with my friend, but I don’t remember much. We all came without knowing anything ... not much at all. Yes, it was a picture marriage.”

She told me about things that happened a long, long time ago, intermittently and laboriously. It appeared to require considerable effort for Mrs. Murakami to remember those long-ago stories.

“My husband came to Victoria to welcome me. He was a fisherman in Steveston. I wasn’t able to go out to work at the cannery or anywhere else; I couldn’t do anything much after I had children, except for maybe babysitting.

“I went back to Japan (to visit) only once. I didn’t particularly want to go back again after that. My husband was always busy. He was the kind of man who helped other people all the time.”

After telling me these stories with a hint of pride in her voice, Mrs. Murakami looked down and appeared to be lost in thought. “If you wanted me to summarize my life of 94 years in a few words, this is it; this is the whole story,” the expression on her immobile face seemed to be telling me. She stayed silent for a while.

It must have been around the 41st year of Meiji (1908), based on her stories, that Mrs. Murakami came to Canada. She was 20 years of age then. It happened to be the year that the Lemieux

Agreement was signed, restricting the maximum number of Japanese immigrants to Canada to 400 a year. It did not, however, restrict the number of wives and children who could reunite with an immigrant already in Canada. This caused a sharp increase in picture marriages that year.

Mrs. Murakami suddenly broke her pensive silence. "It's been already seven years since then." She probably meant seven years since her husband had passed away.

I asked her if she had any old photos.

She replied very slowly. "Photos? ... Well, I didn't bring any photos here. I'm really old, you know. My daughter-in-law is at home. There's nothing for me to do there. That's why I came here. I left everything at home. I didn't even bring my own nightwear."

In her very slow pace, she added that her eldest son's family lived nearby. After the interview with her, I went to visit the home of her eldest son, Kiyoshi, because I wanted to at least see a photo or two of Mrs. Murakami in her youth.

"Really? Did she talk that much?" Kiyoshi was incredulous.

"When you told me that you came from the nursing home, my heart almost stopped!" His wife stared at me with a look of surprise.

No wonder. They explained to me that it was only a few days ago that their mother came out of 24-hour intensive care after being in critical condition. That's why Kiyoshi's wife panicked when she heard that I had come from the nursing home, worried that Mrs. Murakami was in critical condition again.

Neither Kiyoshi nor his wife was aware that his mother had recovered enough to have a conversation with a stranger. To me, Mrs. Murakami had not looked like a seriously ill patient. I supposed the occasional drifting of her mind was the remnant of the critical condition she had just come out of.

Kiyoshi showed me a family album without hesitation. As Mrs. Murakami had said, there were many photos of her late husband, but hardly any photos of herself. The only photo with her in it was a photo of the whole family taken on the occasion of their homecoming to Japan. It was taken in the early Taisho era (1912-

1926) and shows five- or six-year-old Kiyoshi with his parents. Just by looking at it, you can immediately sense the warm atmosphere of the Murakami family.

Both Kiyoshi and his wife were *nikkei nisei* (second generation Japanese Canadian), but their Japanese was perfectly fluent, no different from that of native speakers.

“I became ill, and I couldn’t do as much as I wanted to take care of my mother-in-law,” Kiyoshi’s wife said. “She said that she wanted to go to that nursing home because her friend was there. She went there of her own accord.”

Kiyoshi’s wife sounded like she was feeling guilty, although no one would blame a sickly woman for sending her mother-in-law to a nursing home. Her excessive concern suggested that she was more compassionate and caring than an average daughter-in-law back in Japan.

Mrs. Murakami was the first woman I interviewed at the beginning of my research into how picture brides lived their youthful lives. What I was able to actually witness in this interview, however, was only the final portion of her long life that began as a picture bride. Though in hindsight, this interview was strangely indicative of where this research would take me.

At the beginning of my research, my curiosity was mainly focussed on the image of a young woman who made the long voyage across the ocean with a single photo of a husband she had never met. But picture brides did not just exist on a ship travelling 4,000 nautical miles from Japan to Canada. What awaited picture brides in Victoria Harbour was decades of difficult, arduous living in a faraway, foreign country. The complete story of picture brides would only emerge after careful examination of all the years they had lived.

Mrs. Murakami was quietly waiting for the end of her life in a pastel-coloured room in a nursing home in Canada. What, then, is the difference between that and somebody else spending the final portion of her life in the room of a farmhouse in rural Japan? I don’t have the answer yet. At any rate, she is one of those women who lived a long life, and in her case, on the other side of the

ocean. Beyond the image of an almost-blind old woman of 94, I began to see the deep chasm of a generation gap in front of me.

Okame-san was the first Japanese woman to live in Canada

The 41st year of Meiji (1908) was said to be the year in which the picture marriage system started. That is not to say that there were no picture marriages before that date. Unfortunately, there is no record of who the first picture bride was. The first Japanese woman who landed on Canadian soil was said to be Okame-san, the wife of a Scottish man, George Taylor. According to “North America: Field Study,” published in the second year of Taisho (1913), she came to Canada in the 19th year of Meiji (1886) with her husband who was an engineer at the Kawasaki Shipbuilding Company.

The records suggest that Okame-san helped a lot of early immigrants from Japan.

“She valued a good relationship with Japanese people, and, along with her husband, helped them with kindness. Our countrymen of the time visited her home every now and then to enjoy a rare treat of miso soup, during a time when things like miso and shoyu were not readily available.” (“Compendium of Japanese Compatriots in Canada,” 10th year of Taisho)

The couple operated a Japanese general store in Vancouver. They were believed to have left the city and moved to Yokohama, Japan, in the 22nd year of Meiji (1889).

No other description of Okame-san was found anywhere else, except a rather archaic-sounding phrase in the same publication: “With beautiful eyes and pearly teeth, she was truly a single rose among cluster of thorns, *ominaeshi* (yellow patrinia) in a field of

weeds.” Not even a single photo of her was left, and neither the year of her birth nor her personal history was known.

A Japanese language paper in Vancouver, *Tairiku Nippô* (Continental Journal), ran a round-table discussion with local seniors in its issue for the 11th year of Showa (1936), and they talked about Okame-san.

“Host: How did Powell Street look back then?

Nagao: The sidewalks were covered with wooden boards. Hasting Street looked like a bridge because the boards were laid unevenly. Hotel Vancouver was not built yet. The present building is the third one they built.

Host: I heard there was a Japanese woman.

N: Yes, there was. It was Mrs. Taylor.

H: A Japanese woman with a *hakujin* name?

N: That’s right. She’s Japanese, but she was married to a Scottish engineer. They were married in Japan and came to Canada later. She was the first Japanese woman in Canada.

H: Was she a beautiful woman?

N: I suppose she was, when she was young. (All laugh.)”

Tadakazu Nagao came to Canada in the 19th year of Meiji (1886), and, at the time of this interview, he was one of the oldest seniors among Japanese immigrants. He seemed to be saying that Okame-san was already past middle age and was not particularly beautiful. Powell Street was the area where a large number of Japanese immigrants were concentrated, and where *Nihonmachi* was later formed.

Following in Okame-san's footsteps, Yôko, the wife of Shûji Ôya, immigrated to Canada in the 20th year of Meiji (1887). She and her husband settled in Vancouver for good, so some documents call Yôko the first Japanese woman to immigrate to Canada. Either way, the first Japanese woman arrived in Canada about 10 years after the very first Japanese immigrant, Manzô Nagano, had set foot in Canada in the 10th year of Meiji (1877).

As with Okame-san, only a few records on Yôko remain. According to her husband, Shûji Ôya, after roaming around the world as a sailor, he decided that Vancouver had a lot to offer him, and he took Yôko with him from Yokohama to settle in Canada. It happened to be the year that the ocean route between Vancouver and Yokohama was opened. There were no other married Japanese men besides Shûji Ôya in Vancouver then, but in the following year, 21st year of Meiji (1888), Asajirô Ishida brought a wife from Japan.

- [Photo: Portrait of Yoko Oya](#)

Quite a few Japanese people were fishing for salmon in Steveston around that time, and there were also believed to be around 30 Japanese immigrants in Vancouver. But another rumor has it that there were only 12 in Vancouver. Vancouver had just been incorporated as a city in the 19th year of Meiji (1886), and it looked like a little village at that point, not much more than a tent city.

“Powell Street and Alexander Street are full of puddles and weeds, so you couldn't walk without rubber boots. Cordova Street seemed to have fair amount of pedestrian traffic. There were only two houses on the east side of Dunlevy Ave, and a little dingy shack near Hips (?) Lumber. It was the kind of place where it was not safe for women to walk alone. *Hakujin* women got into trouble quite often. Policemen were not helpful nor trusted anyhow, so women always went out in groups of three to five. They carried guns with them. It might sound like a terribly dangerous place, but I'm sure it

was this way everywhere in the pioneer days.” (“Compendium of Japanese Compatriots in Canada”)

Mr. and Mrs. Ôya opened Ôya grocery store and imported Japanese rice for the first time. Yôko passed away in the fifth year of Taisho (1916), possibly due to the stress of overwork.

There is no clear historical record for even the approximate year of the first picture bride landing in Canada. In the round-table discussion quoted above, Tadakazu Nagao said: “In around the 27th or 28th year of Meiji (1894, 1895), I saw women who had just arrived from Japan changing from Japanese clothes into Western clothes on the CPR dock. Looking back, it was rather comical, I’d say.”

Almost all picture brides would board the ship in Japanese clothes (*nihongi*: even to this day, this is what Japanese immigrants call *wafuku*, or Japanese clothes), then meet their husbands who were waiting at Victoria Harbour with Western-style clothes for them to change into. Imagine the scene of early picture brides hurriedly changing clothes on the pier.

- [Photo: New Immigrants arriving in Vancouver](#)

The *Tairiku Nippô* (Continental Journal) that ran this round-table discussion was the oldest Japanese-language paper in Canada. Its first issue was published in the 41st year of Meiji (1908). Therefore, to find out what happened before that date, you must research English-language papers.

The oldest record of a Japanese bride in an English language paper appeared in *The Province* in the 36th year of Meiji (1903). It was an account of the first Christian wedding ceremony of a Japanese photographer and his bride. It stated:

“A charming Japanese lady who had just arrived from her home country did not understand a word of English. The ceremony was officiated in Japanese throughout by Reverend Gorô Kaburagi.”

There is no proof that this woman was indeed a picture bride. All the interviews of surviving picture brides, however, corroborated the general pattern that they had been legally

married in Japan, but then had Christian weddings at a church or community centre upon arrival in Canada. It seems reasonable to assume that the system of picture brides became established around this period. Eventually, the system became known in English as “picture bride” or “photo bride,” which translates literally to 写真花嫁 in Japanese.

It is difficult for me, who was born and raised in Japan in the Showa era, to imagine what it must have been like in Canada in the Meiji era. The same would have been true for the picture brides: it is doubtful that they would have had much of an image of the country they were going to live in. Even today, when there is abundance of information on North America everywhere in the media, Japanese people’s knowledge and understanding of Canadian society is limited and unreliable; how much less would a young woman from an isolated rural area of Japan in the Meiji era have known? Yet even so, young women went willingly, one after another, to a country that they had never seen, to live with a man whom they had never met. Why?

Money grows on trees in America

“Around that time, picture marriage was very popular and fashionable; all the girls wanted to do that. Canada, America, Seattle, or Vancouver; everything was simply America to them. They just wanted to go to America. Nobody wanted to get married in Japan anymore. Everyone wanted to go to America through picture marriage. They all said America was a good place; ‘Let’s go to America.’ And that’s why I came here. But actually, it didn’t turn out to be such a good place.”

Sato Yoshida (pseudonym) was 93 years old. She had come to Canada from Hiroshima by picture marriage in the 44th year of

Meiji (1911). She lived in the same nursing home where Mrs. Murakami lived. In contrast to Mrs. Murakami, who smiled and nodded repeatedly, Mrs. Yoshida kept her lips in a tight, straight line except when she had to speak.

“Our matchmaker? Well, who was it? ... Someone in our neighbourhood, I’m sure. I was the fourth one in our area. So and so, such and such were going, they said. Well, that sounded good, I thought. And I said, me, too! That’s how I came to America [actually Canada] to get married.”

Young girls are easily tempted to follow trends, that’s an age-old truth. For young Mrs. Yoshida who grew up on a farm in rural Hiroshima, America seemed like a utopia. It is understandable that she did not want to be left behind her friends who were getting married and leaving their hometown. More than anything else, though, what grabbed the hearts of those young girls was the myth that “money grows on trees in America.” Mrs. Yoshida truly believed, when she left home, that in America you could simply knock money off a tree and sweep up from the ground as much as you wanted.

I wonder who started such an irresponsible myth. It is true that many successful immigrants who went to America and Canada often treated people in their hometown to a lavish feast when they returned home. Even those who had not prospered returned home wearing Western-style clothes, which undoubtedly looked modern and smart to villagers’ eyes. You cannot blame young girls for being unrealistic or gullible.

“When we made a homecoming trip, we didn’t mention anything bad about Canada, and often exaggerated good things a lot,” said one old *Issei*. It is human nature after all to try to make yourself look as good as possible when you return to your hometown after a long absence.

“I took a ship from Yokohama. That was the only way to go then. The voyage took a long time. I suffered serious motion sickness and became terribly weak. I left in November, so the sea was continuously stormy and rough. The ship was rolling and swaying all the time day after day, night after night. There were no

beds on the ship those days, and we all lay down directly on the floor to sleep. When a strong wind blew and the ship tilted to one side, sleeping passengers rolled over to my side. Then the ship tilted the other way, and I rolled over to their side. This back and forth motion went on and on. I couldn't eat anything for 10 days."

After the long and arduous voyage, she arrived in Victoria, only to find that her husband was not there to welcome her. She spent a night alone in a hotel that a representative for her husband secured for her. Her husband showed up the next day.

"When we first met, I didn't know what to say to him. We'd never met before, not even once. Well, what can I say? It was the same for my husband. What can we say to each other? Nowadays, boys and girls meet each other and know each other before they get married. In olden times, we would exchange pictures with each other, total strangers, and we would agree to marry. Well, he agreed to marry me, after looking at my face. I guess he liked my face. This face!"

She patted her own face lightly a couple of times. I looked at her small, pleasant face more carefully this time and realized that she must have been very pretty when she was young. Picture marriage may have served as a gauge to measure a woman's looks; that is, it could serve as proof of her beauty if a man chose her by merely looking at her picture alone. This was the only time in our two-hour interview that Mrs. Yoshida showed a smile.

All women had to work

"After I arrived, I was allowed to take it easy for a few weeks in the hotel. Then I moved to the back country to cook for 25 men, all men and no women. In Japan, I never cooked rice, not even once. My mother took care of everyone in the family. I didn't know how

to cook rice. Imagine that; all of a sudden, I was told to cook for 25 workers.

“Day after day, I did a terrible job of cooking rice; one day it was burned, the next day it was undercooked and hard, and the next day it turned red, and so on. I had to apologize every day and cried and cried in my room. My husband would scold me and yell at me, ‘What’s the matter? Can’t you even cook rice properly?’

“After about 10 days, I finally started to cook rice okay. I was so happy. I got better and better every day. I finally learned to cook rice well. Still, there was not a day I didn’t cry by myself. It was tough; I was very unhappy. I was wondering every day for a month if I could keep doing this, wondering what I should do.”

For a young woman of 19 or 20, having to live with a man she had never met before, in a foreign country where a strange language was spoken, already represented a severe challenge. These women came to Canada to be brides, not to work as labourers. But, from the perspective of the men, picture brides were a welcome and important addition to the labour force.

In any immigrant community where 80 percent of the population is male, married couples are always welcomed. Labour camps in the back country were in constant need of women who would take care of cooking and washing. Immigrant men brought in picture brides as labour in the same way that homesteaders purchased animals to do farm work. There was no room for romantic sentiments like love to enter. Only harsh reality awaited the new brides.

“In those days, all women had to work. In order to make ends meet, we all had to work. We went out to do washing or housework for somebody else. After I had children, I worked at the lumber mill to cut shingles with an eight-foot saw. I was really miserable. Compared to women these days, there’s a world of difference.”

Wearing the same work boots as men, with her baby securely tied to her back, Mrs. Yoshida worked in the bush for the lumber mill among male workers. Such was the reality of life in a new foreign country. It was a far cry from the utopia she had dreamed of back in Japan.

“I don’t know any English, even now. I never had a chance to listen or speak, let alone to study. No English after 70 years! People these days are really fortunate. They can study English right after they arrive in Canada.”

The sadness and bitterness on Mrs. Yoshida’s face made me uneasy. When she talked about “people these days and women nowadays,” I’m sure she was including me. “Do you understand what I went through?” Her deep-seated resentment, I sensed, perhaps wrongly, was directed towards me.

- [Photo: Strawberry farm workers, Haney BC 1920](#)

“Before the war (WWII), we had a big farm in Haney. When our children grew up and had to go to school, we quit working in the lumber industry. My husband wanted to do farming, so we grew hops and strawberries and other things. Do you know hops? They grow flowers like this. We manufacture lots of things out of that. We had five boys, so we were the best grower in Haney. That’s why our farm grew big.”

Obviously, this was the best and happiest period in Mrs. Yoshida’s life.

She was speaking normally up until that point. Suddenly she stopped talking. After pausing for a moment, she spat, “The war broke out, and they took everything away from us. Everything!”

They took everything away from us

Of course, she was referring to the Pacific War (WWII) that broke out in the 16th year of Showa (1941). This is a topic that we cannot avoid when we talk about the Japanese Canadian experience. Perhaps the situations in Canada and America were somewhat

similar. As for Canada, more than 20,000 people of Japanese descent who were living in British Columbia at the time were labelled enemy aliens and forced to relocate to the Interior, at least 160 km (100 miles) away from the coastline. Almost all old Japanese Canadian *issei* and *nisei* experienced a life of fear and anxiety inside internment camps in the Interior of B.C. during the war.

Every time I hear mention of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, I feel enraged. How many Japanese politicians failed to foresee the seriousness of the possible backlash that a sudden attack would cause against *nikkei* living in North America? When people in Japan were jumping for joy about the success of the attack on Pearl Harbor, on the other side of the ocean, Japanese in North America were thrown into an abyss of despair. It was an easily foreseeable tragedy. Why didn't they try to prevent it from happening? This question refused to disappear from my mind.

All the fortunes and social status that *nikkei* people had built up through hard work in North America since the landing of the first Japanese were lost overnight. Only three days after Pearl Harbor, some *nikkei* people were arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). None of them had any criminal records or were suspected of spy activity or anything else.

Along with all the other Japanese Canadians, Mrs. Yoshida was forced to relocate to the B.C. Interior without being given any reason or information.

"I heard that it wouldn't be long, maybe only for a week or two. We thought we'd be able to come home after a short while. We just threw all our belongings upstairs—kimonos, tools, imperishable food, everything—and nailed the doors shut. I asked the renters never to touch these things, and then we left. We left home in casual wear, something like work clothes.

"A few weeks later, we all ran out of clothes, because we left home with only what we could carry. A few years passed, but still we were not allowed to go home. We couldn't visit anyone, because we didn't have any decent clothes to wear. In the end, we never returned home, ever. That was it. Our house was the biggest house in Haney. Everything was taken away. Kimonos, tools, the house;

everything! We were completely stripped naked of all our possessions. I was robbed of everything and was sent off into this place.”

As she told me this, Mrs. Yoshida pointed at the light green wall of the nursing home. I was so shocked at her words that I was left momentarily speechless. The war was over in the 20th year of Showa (1945), and some time later Japanese Canadians were allowed to return to Canadian society. On one hand, Japanese Canadians lost everything because of the war, but on the other hand, the end of the war marked a new beginning for the *nikkei* community. Japanese Canadians finally won their long-awaited voting rights after the war, and all in all, Japanese Canadians came to enjoy the same rights as white people. But now, it had been more than 30 years since the end of the war.

Mrs. Yoshida had come to this nursing home only a couple of years earlier, according to the person who introduced me to her. I wanted to know what kind of life she lived between the time she left the internment camp and the time she came to the nursing home. No matter how many times I asked her the same question, she repeated the same answer.

“Well, you know, ... I left that place [internment camp], and then I was thrown into this place.”

For her, the post-war era did not exist. That span of time, three decades of time since the end of the war, had simply vanished from her memory.

The nursing home, operated by a *hakujin*, was clean and full of light. Nurses walked around confidently and purposefully. Occasional high-pitched voices speaking English broke the silence.

In the lobby, several old Japanese women were sitting with Mrs. Yoshida. Each of those women had lived their lives in a foreign land. It is quite normal that a person who grew old in Canada would spend the final part of her life in a Canadian nursing home. Why, then, do I feel pain at the sight of something that is supposed to be normal?

Life in a shabby shack that was hastily put together in a ghost town in the Interior of B.C. and life in this modern, well-equipped nursing home: these two lives were strangely fused into one in the memory of Mrs. Yoshida. Realizing that it would be nearly impossible to separate them, I decided not to pursue the topic any further.

I know how silly it is to ask, “At this point, do you want to go back to Japan?” It’s only when you have a choice that you can answer yes or no. Most picture brides didn’t have such a choice. They were already in their 80s or 90s now. Their children or grandchildren were firmly settled in Canada. There would be no community in Japan to welcome them, even if they did return.

Picture brides were not property that was sold to be brought to Canada; nor were they forced to come. They chose to come, even if they were victims of rumours and poor information. If they were to answer “I want to go back to Japan,” after having lived in Canada for more than half a century, it would be tantamount to admitting that their entire past lives were a mistake. Their past lives were too long and too significant to deny or disown.

Still, I did ask Mrs. Yoshida, and all the other picture brides, this question. Strangely enough, their answers were almost identical.

“I returned to Japan three times already, but I don’t want to live there. You know why? My old home was a big farm. I couldn’t live there for good. I stayed and had lots of fun there for a month or so. Sure, it was fun. It was fun because I was there for a visit. But still I prefer this side, Canada. Oh, yeah, this side is better.”

All the picture brides told me that it was okay to return for a visit, but not to live there. Here, we must not forget that there is a factor of economic reality for them. After getting well established in Canada, it is too big of a risk to start all over again in Japan. Also, there is the issue of old age pension; the Canadian pension is far larger than the Japanese pension. Nostalgic sentiment for their old home was nothing more than a luxury; survival was a matter of necessity.

“Now that I’m not writing letters to them, I don’t know how my siblings are doing. My sister passed away. My brother went to Korea; I wonder how he is doing. I’m old now, so it’s a lot of work to write a letter. I hardly write them. I don’t follow news from Japan anymore.”

Mrs. Yoshida slowly stood up. She started to walk down the hallway with her cane, dragging her feet. I caught up with her and asked her where her children lived, because I wanted to see some old family photos. In response, she turned and spat out these words.

“Children ... they don’t think of their parents as much as the parents think of them.”

I was unable to respond and simply watched the old woman as she slowly shuffled away from me, slouched over her cane.



Portrait of Yoko Oya, first woman in Vancouver 1888. NNM 2010.3.1

[\[RETURN\]](#)



New Immigrants arriving in Vancouver 1907. NNM 1994.70.23
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Strawberry farm workers, Haney BC 1920. NNM 2010.23.2.4.708
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Chapter 2

Picture Brides in Hope



Sugae Sasaki and family Vancouver 1932. NNM 2011.68.1.32

Proprietress of 'Matsu no Yu' on Powell Street

“I made a homecoming trip to Japan four years after I got married. My friends and neighbours came to see me, and said, ‘Hey, I heard that America isn’t a nice place to live after all.’ So, I asked them, ‘Why do you say that?’ They replied, ‘I hear people live like beggars.’ ‘No, that’s not true,’ I told them. ‘But I hear you work in a cannery with your kids tied to your back.’ ‘Sure. Some people do, but not everybody.’ Naturally, some people had to work like that to make ends meet. I told them, ‘I don’t work like that.’”

Mrs. Sugae Sasaki was originally from Hidaka-gun, Wakayama prefecture, and is now 86 years old. She lived in a town called Hope, about two hours by bus from Vancouver. Blessed with an incredible memory, she was able to recall what happened during her first year in Canada and everything that ensued.

There was a traditional Japanese-style bathhouse in Nihonmachi that was similar to bathhouses from the Taisho era. Mrs. Sasaki was its proprietress. She remembered in exact detail things like what the architecture of bathhouses of that time were like and what they used for fuel. Her recall of precise details could be considered a significant archival source on the history of Japanese immigrants.

In writing nonfiction, what is important is not how much material you can collect, but rather to know how much to discard. All the materials and data you collect seem so precious to you that you feel that everything must be put to good use. Simply presenting all the bits of information one after another, however, would not make for good reading. I know that well; I have had many painful experiences discarding data I did not really want to discard.

In the case of Mrs. Sasaki, I often felt an urge to write down everything so I could present it exactly as she said it. But, in the end, I resisted the urge; her stories went into too much detail. Instead, I decided to try to retain the unique characteristics of her interview.

“I came to Canada in the sixth year of Taisho (1917); that was already 66 years ago. It was a picture marriage, with a distant relative as the matchmaker. I had a hard time deciding whether I should accept it. I wasn’t even 20 yet, and my husband-to-be was already 36. There was a large gap between our ages. My brothers told me that I wouldn’t have to do any physical work, that it would be a fairly easy life. You see, I never wanted to live in a rural area, away from the city. But somehow I ended up in a small rural town like this.”

Hope is a small town with plenty of green space. Mrs. Sasaki moved here only recently, though, to live with her youngest daughter. Before the war (WW II), she lived on Powell Street in Vancouver. That was why she survived in a foreign country without any problem. If she had had to live in a camp deep in the mountains or something like that, she might not have made it, she said. To me, it sounded logical that these words came from the youngest girl and the baby of a family of eight siblings, one who enjoyed being the centre of attention while she grew up.

Her wedding was held in Japan.

“It was just a small celebration party, with only our parents and siblings. We didn’t even try to have a proper wedding ceremony since the bridegroom was not present. Besides, in our time, brides did not usually wear *uchikake* (traditional luxurious wedding kimono) unless they were from a wealthy family. I wore an ordinary *montsuki* (formal coat with a family crest) with my hair done in *Shimada* style (a hairstyle for weddings, simpler than a formal *bunkin-taka-shimada*). That’s all. We only exchanged cups of sake with the parents, rather than properly exchanging nuptial cups, because the bridegroom was absent. We also had a small table set up for him to pretend he was there.”

Most likely, all picture marriages would have been similar to this. Daughters of commoners did not wear luxurious *uchikake*, and they did not change into fancy formal kimono for the reception, unlike many women these days. In most cases, the wedding reception was held at the bridegroom's home, typically a modest affair with only close relatives invited. For the spot where the bridegroom would normally be sitting, they would set up his photo on a chair in front of a small table. Such a ceremony must have been lacking in genuine excitement without the groom present.

The parents of the groom begged young Mrs. Sasaki, "Please come stay with our family as a bride. We realize we're asking a lot, but we have traditional customs that we follow, and we want you to learn them." She honoured their request and stayed at their home for six months, spending carefree days learning to play the *shamisen* (a Japanese traditional stringed instrument, a bit like a banjo) and visiting her old home every so often.

One peculiarity of picture marriage, it is often pointed out, is the minimal need for dowries. Since the bride is going overseas to get married, there is no sense taking furniture, kimonos are not suitable for life abroad, and Western clothes made in Japan would be out of fashion. Even so, Mrs. Sasaki took with her to her in-laws' home a chest of drawers, an oblong floor chest, a dresser, and a full sewing set to the bridegroom's home. When she left Japan to start her new life in Canada, she left it all behind. Some picture brides were said to have boarded the ship with only one piece of baggage.

"I heard many women came to Canada because they didn't have to worry about the dowries. Some of them had even graduated from a school for girls [equivalent of high school]; they were well educated. It turned out that those women were not happy later. We even talked about them, saying, 'They married a foreign country, not a bridegroom,' and laughed about them. They must have imagined their husbands working in offices and wearing neckties. We knew the situation better, because we lived close to Mio-mura village."

Mio-mura was the village that sent a large number of immigrants to Canada. Mrs. Sasaki was able to receive fairly accurate information about the reality of immigration from them. As she pointed out, many well-educated women with graduation diplomas believed that they would be marrying a white-collar worker wearing a necktie. The reality was that over 90 percent of Japanese immigrants were engaged in physical labour, and, in many cases, their level of education was lower than that of their spouse.

“In those days, it usually took six months for visas to be issued after a picture marriage. In my case, my visa was approved after only three months. When I went to pick it up, an officer at the police station in my little village refused to give it to me, saying it was ‘too quick, impossible, this has never happened before.’ I said to him, ‘It was already approved, so, please give it to me.’ No matter how much I asked and begged, he refused to give it to me. A police officer in a tiny rural country village! In the end, I had to wait for six months.

“I went to Kôbe and stayed at the Takaya inn, where I had to go through a medical examination and get vaccination shots for trachoma, duodenal, etc. After all that was done, I had to win a lottery to board the ship and had to wait until we won, no matter how long that took.

“Apparently, before I arrived, there had been many cases of picture brides getting into trouble on the ships. There was a supervisor for the women on board. Can you imagine? Even married couples had to stay in separate rooms. In the morning, the husband would visit the room where eight or so women were staying. He would ask his wife, ‘Are you okay? Nothing happened last night?’ The supervisor was normally an older woman who was affiliated with a church.”

The fickle heart of a young woman: Romance on the ocean

When Mrs. Yoshida crossed the ocean in the 44th year of Meiji (1911), men and women on board slept crowded together in the same room. In Mrs. Sasaki's time, in the sixth year of Taisho (1917), men and women were strictly separated. It might sound extreme that even married couples were separated, but this was because many young women fell in love during the voyage.

Generally speaking, women tend to have romantic fantasies about travel. Just as modern-day office women fantasize about travelling abroad with JAL-Pac (a package travel plan), these young women fantasized about their journeys during the Meiji and Taisho eras. Even though picture brides were legally married, they were still young girls, socially and emotionally immature. They must have felt lonely and homesick, travelling alone to a faraway country. In the enclosed space of the ship for weeks on end, some women were not able to resist temptation and fell in love with another passenger or one of the ship's crew.

All kinds of things can happen during the long voyage from Japan to America, some comic and some tragic. What happens most frequently is a relationship between a man and a woman that is outside of the standard moral codes: forbidden love. This is the first part of the story of a young man; a tragedy that started at the end of last year and concluded in March this year.

With this preface, a series entitled "The Woman Who Toyed with Men's Hearts" began to appear in the *Tairiku Nippô* (Continental Journal) in the 9th year of Taisho (1920) and eventually ran over seven issues. It was based on the journal of a real-life woman who fell in love on a ship, despite her status as a legally

married woman. The following is an excerpt from the story. It is a good portrayal of the fragile emotional state of a young bride who is travelling alone.

“(February 8) Life aboard the ship is so monotonous. I often fall into a state of deep anguish and sorrow beyond my control. I can not sleep because the unfortunate incident keeps bothering me. (sic)

“(February 9) There is no escape from the deadly boredom on this ship with nothing to do but look at ocean waves. How much more unbearable would it be had I not had Mr. Shimokôchi near me. But we must part in six days. Do we have to live apart for ever? It is so painful to bid farewell even with the promise of meeting again someday in the future. Under the same sky in a foreign country ... America! But we will be living far apart from each other; one in the east and the other in the west. Even fog and mist would stand between us and interfere with our communication. Sigh ...”

Her diary went on like this. This new bride finally arrived in Seattle, Washington. As could be expected, life with her new husband, who was waiting to meet her at the harbour, did not go well. Not long after that, she divorced her husband and returned to Japan. This type of incident occurred so frequently that the Foreign Ministry of Japan issued an edict called Ship Passenger Behaviour Guidelines in 10th year of Taisho (1921):

Ship Passenger Behaviour Guidelines

- Casual wear on the ship must not expose one's chest or thighs, as in Japanese (men's) casual wear. Men must always wear clothes and shoes. Women must always wear *hifu* (a casual coat to put lightly over a

casual kimono). Walking around the deck with exposed shins or bare feet is prohibited.

- Males must never enter the female's room or washrooms. Females must never enter the male's room or washrooms. When entering someone's room, be sure to knock first, and wait until there is a response before entering.
- Women are advised to be on guard, especially around crew members or single immigrant men.
- Be particularly cautious with any crew member who appears to be excessively kind. Always be on guard. (*The remainder is omitted.*)

This was precisely why Mrs. Sasaki was wary when crew members asked her to play *shamisen* at a variety show on board the ship.

- [Photo: Tairiku Nippo Staff, Vancouver 1910](#)

“Everyone gets awfully bored during such a long voyage. That's why I said ‘no’ right away when they asked me to play *shamisen* at a variety show. Rehearsals would be held at night, and a young woman couldn't go to a place where there would be only male crew members around. And then, the supervisor of women on our ship came forward and asked me, ‘I'll come along with you, so please help them and play *shamisen*.’ So, I did.

- [Photo: Sugae Sasaki, Shamisen player](#)

“The title of the play we did that night happened to be ‘The Arranged Marriage.’ In that story, when a woman met the man that the matchmaker picked, she would tap her forehead if she liked him, and pinch her nose if she didn't. On the night before we

arrived in Victoria, one of the crew members who was in the play said to me, ‘Mrs. Sasaki, when you meet your husband in the harbour, make sure to send us a signal like the woman in the play, OK?’

“The next day when we arrived at the harbour, my husband was there to meet me. While we were all saying farewell to each other, everybody who took part in the play came out on the deck and shouted at me, ‘Mrs. Sasaki, what’s your verdict? Let us know!’ I tapped my forehead right away, and they clapped their hands and burst into laughter.”

The moment she tapped her forehead, her new married life began. She said she immediately thought, ‘Oh, it’s going to be OK,’ when she saw her husband. Mrs. Sasaki was one of the lucky ones. There were many picture brides who would have pinched their noses instead of tapping their foreheads.

The unluckiest picture brides were not even able to meet their husbands at the harbour. Japanese-language papers during the last part of the Meiji era reported that many women were temporarily stopped by the immigration office and were not allowed to meet their husbands. The official reason for holding them was incomplete paperwork or the need for a medical check for trachoma or hookworm. The real reason was something else.

A crooked translator takes advantage of picture brides

When talking about picture marriage, there is one Japanese person’s name that comes up without fail. One *issei* old man even declared that, without a full investigation into what this person had done, the full truth of picture marriage would not be revealed. Let

us call the person in question “A” for convenience. “A” was working as a translator at the immigration office in Canada. He would mark and remember any good-looking picture bride and challenge her eligibility at the time of her clearance. The reason for the challenge could be anything at all; it did not matter. The picture bride, who understood not a word of English, would cringe in terror when “A,” who was immaculately dressed in a frock coat, yelled at her, “No, you are not allowed to enter the country.” Her husband would be chased away quickly without any explanation.

The picture bride was then held in the Immigrant Holding Building. In reality, the building was not much different from a prison. She was not allowed to leave or to speak to any visitors. She simply waited and waited for clearance to come, all the while fearing deportation. She had already cleared a number of difficult hurdles: red tape in Japan, medical exams, hotel stays at the harbour, and temptations on board the ship. All of these were new experiences for a naïve young maiden who had probably never been outside her tiny village. They must have been terribly stressful for her. And now that she had arrived in Canada, she was being held in the Immigrant Holding Building, without being able to see her husband for weeks on end. It is not difficult to imagine how worried and terrified she would have been.

When the picture bride was sufficiently stressed out, “A” would approach her and would whisper in her ear, “If you listen to me, I will be able to let you go free.” According to the moral standard of the Meiji and Taisho eras, it was almost a crime to have sexual relations with a man before marriage. Most picture brides were virgins, even though they had been legally married for six months. Although they would have resisted “A”’s demands, psychological pressure caused by isolation from their husbands or any other Japanese person to talk to, plus the loneliness of being alone in a strange foreign land, pushed these poor picture brides to desperation. This was how “A” managed to violate the chastity of tens of beautiful picture brides.

This despicable story does not end here, though. The husband, after getting kicked out of the immigration office, would attempt to

get his bride back. When he returned to the Immigrant Holding Building, “A” would approach him and demand bribes. “Your wife had some problems with her paperwork. Under normal circumstances, she would be deported. But I can ask the immigration officer to allow her to enter the country. Of course, I have to bribe the officer for this special treatment. You have to pay me the bribe money to pass on to him.” The husband had already spent plenty of money, including the fare to bring his picture bride to Canada. He couldn’t bear the thought of seeing his investment go down the drain. In addition to the economic reason, there was also the psychological pressure of knowing that his bride was in the building, and yet he could not take her home with him. The husband would end up paying an exorbitant fee to “A” and finally get his wife out of the Immigrant Holding Building.

The new couple would finally settle into their new life. To their horror, “A” would somehow find out where they lived and invade their new home to extort more money. He would threaten the wife to tell her husband about the physical relationship she had had with him and would demand more money or even sex. And “A” would threaten the husband that, since his wife was in the country illegally, she could be deported at any time unless he paid hush money to “A.”

“Once you were caught by his trickery, that was the end. There was no way out. He was despised by everyone in our community.” All of the *issei* seniors told me the same story.

The main reason “A” was able to perpetuate these evil deeds for so long was the general lack of English proficiency among most Japanese immigrants. The official title of immigration officer was enough to give him authority that other people respected and feared. However, the evil deeds of “A” did not go on forever. At the beginning of Showa era, he finally got caught together with his accomplice, a white man, for extorting enormous bribes from innocent immigrants. Both men were fired from their positions. Having threatened many immigrants with deportation, in the end “A” himself was the one deported to Japan.

The story of “A” was one of the saddest parts of the history of Japanese immigration. Although it was widely known among *issei* immigrants, it was not much more than a rumour. Due to a lack of solid proof, his real name must be withheld in this book.

I hardly ever quarrelled with my husband

Let us return to Mrs. Sasaki’s arrival in Canada.

“I wore a kimono on the ship from Japan. My husband told me beforehand not to make Western clothes, because the style was totally different, and they would be useless. Sure enough, lots of women on board were in Japanese clothes.

“When I arrived in Canada, my husband was running a Japanese bathhouse called Matsu-no-Yu (Pine Tree Bath). It was only the second day of operation. I had brought with me a lot of stuff like towels that I had made in Osaka with Matsu-no-Yu dyed on them. We offered our customers those towels for in-house use; one Japanese-style towel and one Western-style towel. We served them to each customer nicely folded. We had enough bars of soap to go around. For the women’s bath, we put them on a shelf.

“Our bath areas were all covered with tiles, just like in Japanese bathhouses. We had separate men’s and women’s entrances, and the change rooms had baskets for clothes for each customer. Half the wall was covered with tiles and the rest was painted white.

“Around that time, we didn’t have coal, so we burned firewood that was four feet in length in a huge furnace. We had separate furnaces, one for the main, large bathtub and another for the hot water tank. Our customers could use plenty of clean hot water to wash their bodies and faces before bathing in the tub. The body washing area was quite spacious, and it was always filled with lots of customers.”

I still hear, to this day, nostalgic stories about the bathhouses of the pre-war era. So long as Japanese immigrants stayed within the boundary of Nihonmachi, they could talk loudly in Japanese without any concern about who was around them. The moment they stepped out of Nihonmachi, however, they were made acutely aware that their broken English did not work, their skin colour was different, their mannerisms were funny, and so on. They were always ridiculed and mocked. While it must have been tough enough for them to endure hard physical labour, they also had to bear the burden of racial discrimination. Public bathhouses in Nihonmachi were a safe haven for those immigrant labourers in which to wash away all the hardships and troubles they encountered in their daily lives; an opportunity to re-energize. There were seven or eight bathhouses crowded together over just a few blocks in Nihonmachi, such as Nishiki-Yu, Kotobuki-Yu, Goshiki-Yu, Tokiwa-Yu, and Chitose-Yu, in addition to Matsu-no-Yu. Incidentally, there were also 22 restaurants, 39 barbers, and as many as 80 simple inns or rooming houses. (カナダ同胞発展大鑑 Compendium of Japanese Compatriots in Canada, 11th year of Taisho or 1922)

Mrs. Sasaki's husband operated a rooming house in addition to the bathhouse. He must have been a good businessman. His wife, 16 years his junior, never had to worry about money.

“We had a woman cooking for us, and a person from Shizuoka coming in to clean up. A dressmaker was brought in to make my clothes right away, since it wasn't good for me to go outside in Japanese clothes. I'm so tiny that I couldn't find any ready-made clothes that fit me. I went to a *hakujin* tailor to have a coat made. When we had children, we hired a babysitter all the time.

“I hardly ever quarreled with my husband. He encouraged me to take lessons for anything, so I took lessons in *nagauta* (Japanese traditional singing). I also had a teacher coming to my house every Sunday to teach me *ikebana* (the art of flower arrangement) and tea ceremony.”

It was a leisurely life for her, except for occasionally lending a hand in the bathhouse. If it was a gamble to bet your whole life on a single picture, Mrs. Sasaki's gamble turned out to be a huge win. Her early happy life in Japan as the youngest girl at the focal point of her parents' love transitioned smoothly into her later life as a young wife dearly loved by her husband, completely free from life's worries.

But God is sometimes cruel. No, He may not be acting cruel; He may be fair in a way. Mrs. Sasaki, one of the exceptionally fortunate among all of the picture brides, had to face her own time of trial. It was a trial that all picture brides, regardless of being fortunate or unfortunate, had to face without exception.

Let's say our fortune was washed away by a flood

“When the war (WW II) broke out” Mrs. Sasaki continued, “we suddenly became poor. Before the war, we owned Hotel World. It's still standing on Powell Street. It had as many as 125 rooms. Tamura's Bank was under the hotel, so we had to be extra careful. We rented out rooms in one particular section only to the customers we knew very well, because those rooms were adjacent to the bank. We didn't want any trouble, like a bank robbery.”

“When the war broke out, lots of people tried to buy our hotel; lots of them. We consulted the manager of the bank. He advised us, well, virtually he asked us not to sell our hotel. ‘Think about it, Madam. I know most Japanese people have already sold everything. But Japan will surely win this war, I'm certain. Then, after our victory, all kinds of Japanese people will flood this area, and this will be the only place to stay. You know, Japanese people

always want to stay at Japanese hotels. If you keep it without selling it, you can start business again on the day of our victory. I'm leaving this bank as is without selling it. Let's gamble on this.' Well, he might be right, we thought. In the end, we decided to leave things as they were, as if nothing had happened.

"The situation of the war went bad to worse; you know. When we bumped into the bank manager in the area where we were forced to live, he apologized repeatedly: 'I gave you the wrong advice when you came to ask me for my opinion. I'm so sorry.' To that, I said to him; 'Don't worry about it. It doesn't matter anymore.' I also told him what my husband said. 'We have three children: all girls. If they were to be assaulted or hurt in a terrible riot or something, that would be the real disaster. As long as our three daughters are safe and sound, it's okay. Let's just say that our fortune was washed away by a flood or something. Let's forget about it.' Things had changed, and so did we. I know that the bank was impounded."

Although she said, "I don't care anymore," deep inside her, she must have felt profound resentment for the injustice done to her. The fortune that was impounded had not been inherited from parents; rather, it was what she and her husband had worked hard to build from scratch. Her determined tone, though, from my point of view, represented the strength of someone who had been pushed to the limit and forced to face a crisis. Forced relocation and the loss of all their possessions were realities that all Japanese Canadians experienced equally at the time. How they faced that reality was different from person to person. How Mrs. Sasaki dealt with the crisis must have come from necessity, yet it ultimately came from her profound wisdom. Before I heard this story, I had considered her one of the luckiest picture brides. But now I realized that Mrs. Sasaki was a person who possessed the innate wisdom to find her own happiness in any situation she found herself in.

"Next year will be the 33rd year since my husband passed away. He died in the 26th year of Showa (1951). After the war, we were

living in Midway, B.C., near Greenwood. We stayed there for four or five years. Then my husband became sick, so we moved to Vancouver. He passed away in the city hospital.

“The whole family came out to stay with him. My daughter and her husband, my youngest daughter, everybody. We rented two motel rooms on Kingsway, and stayed with him at his bedside, every day, 24 hours. It was cancer. He was 70 years old.” Mrs. Sasaki let out a long sigh. The days after her husband had passed away must have been very lonely. He did not drink nor smoke, and he was always kind to her.

Her daughter, who had been sitting quietly beside her throughout the interview, suddenly spoke. “Obaachan (Mrs. Sasaki was called a grandma by her family members) still cooks for the whole family even today. She’s 85 years old! And she’s still the best cook among all of us!”

Now I understand. This time, she had transformed herself from a wife who was dearly loved by her husband into a grandma who was adored by her daughters and grandchildren. What a wise and sensible woman! She must have had a unique virtue, probably innate, to be loved by everyone who came in contact with her.

Although I did not want to, I asked her the final question.

“Would you like to go back to Japan?”

“The first time I returned to Japan was four years after I immigrated to Canada. But my second homecoming didn’t happen until the 48th year of Showa (1973). My cousins welcomed me warmly, though. ‘Welcome home! It’s really good to see you again. We thought you would never come back again!’ I felt I must take time to have a good conversation with them.

“But by then, my three siblings were already gone. It was also sad that my favourite cousin was also gone. I would feel lonely if I returned to Japan. It was good to go back to visit once in a while, but I like living here [in Canada]. I think my husband wanted to go back to Japan to visit, but the war started, and then he fell ill. Too bad. In my life, the saddest time was when my husband passed

away. Right now, my daughter and her husband are very kind to me, so I'm quite happy here.”

- [Photo: Sugae Sasaki ca. 1960](#)



Tairiku Nippo Staff, Vancouver 1910. JCCC 2001.11.33
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Sugae Sasaki, Shamisen player, in performance troupe Vancouver 1928. NNM
2011.68.1.8
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Sugae Sasaki ca. 1960. NNM 2011.68.1.47
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Chapter 3

Picture Brides in the H City



Picture brides arriving on ship, Vancouver ca 1907. NNM 1997.200

Men line the pier at Victoria Harbour

Imagine, in your mind's eye, a ship full of picture brides entering Victoria Harbour.

The first thing that would have caught the attention of the picture brides was the huge green pine tree standing on the shore. Indeed, the area was known for an abundance of tall pine trees. They would have been a comforting sight for the women on board the ship. (Note: Many shorelines in Japan are lined with tall pine trees.)

The next thing that would have caught the attention of the picture brides was the sight of scores of men lining the pier. At first, they looked like clumps of black objects, but then gradually they were revealed to be groups of men standing side by side. All of the men were dressed alike, in dark suits and hats, standing in groups of two or three. They were dressed in the finest clothes they owned. Stashed in the suit pocket of each of the nervously waiting men was a picture of the bride they were expecting to meet. They must have stared at the picture so many times that the image of their bride must have been clearly imprinted on their mind's eye. Even so, some of the men took the picture out and looked at it once again.

Let us look at the scene from a different perspective. One old record reported that a picture bride mentioned her surprise at the sight of white men working on the pier as labourers. She must have imagined that only non-white people, mostly Orientals, worked as labourers. Canadian society is in fact composed of a mixture of people of various racial origins. It is not uncommon to see white labourers. There must have been a lot of white people on the pier who came to greet their acquaintances. And there were government officers, such as immigration officers; they were all white, of course. What did those white people think of the picture brides?

“The arrival of picture brides would always generate a lot of curiosity from onlookers. Their strange Japanese hairstyle, brightly coloured kimonos, wooden sandals on their small feet, and brightly rouged cheeks; all of these peculiarities stood out from the other European-looking

passengers. (*The Daily Colonist*, March 30, 15th year of Taisho, 1926)

This is an excerpt from an article entitled “Picture Brides Arrive from Japan.” The entire article was written in a spiteful tone. Even if we put aside the strong anti-Japanese sentiment that was prevalent at the time, picture brides must have looked out of place in the eyes of Canadians. In most cases, when they arrived, the picture brides dressed and behaved exactly as they would in Japan.

The main reason for white people’s aversion towards picture marriage was the idea: “How barbaric to marry someone whom you haven’t even met!” This was understandable, because white people had no custom of arranged marriage in their culture.

No matter how strange it looked or how outrageous the system it seemed to white people, picture marriage was the only way for an ordinary Japanese immigrant in North America to find a wife, unless one was lucky enough to make such an enormous fortune that he could return to his hometown to hand-pick a bride to bring back.

At last, the ship filled with picture brides was securely anchored in Victoria Harbour. Both those who had just arrived and those who had come to meet them were at the height of excitement. Their first encounter and their marriage ceremony would take place here at the same time, same place, *en masse*. Their honeymoon trips would follow immediately after. The ceremony would begin the moment they acknowledged each other, and, once started, it was an unstoppable and irreversible procedure, like it or not.

**If not for the Pacific Ocean, I would walk all
the way home**

“I was really shocked at that time. I said many times, ‘I want to get back on the ship and go home.’

“When the ship arrived in Victoria Harbour from Japan, a Japanese local helper showed up to tell each one of us which one was our husband. The helper told me in his nasal voice, ‘There’s your husband. Yeah, that’s the one.’ But the man he pointed out didn’t look at all like the one in the picture; he looked like a different person. So, I said to the helper, ‘I’m staying on the ship and going home.’ He insisted that the man was indeed my husband; his name was correct, so there was no mistake, the helper repeated. He told me that I had no choice but to get off the ship. I kept repeating that I didn’t want to get off. It might sound funny, talking about it now, but I was really shocked and didn’t know what to do.”

Repeating ‘I was really shocked’ many times, with a pleasant smile on her face, Mrs. Nishikawa (pseudonym) told me the story of her arrival as if it had happened yesterday. There is a saying in English: “The show must go on.” The ceremonies on the dock had to go on regardless of Mrs. Nishikawa’s astonishment.

“I received one letter from him [her husband] while I was in Japan, and I sent one in return. I received his picture, too, but the man I met at the harbour and the one on the picture looked totally different. So I asked him why. My husband replied that the picture he had sent showed him as a young man when he arrived in Canada 10 years earlier. He explained that he wouldn’t have been able to attract a bride if he had sent a picture of himself now, after 10 years of hard work, looking worn out and shabby. Well, well ... what could I say? I was truly astonished.”

She was able to laugh at the story now, but at that time, she said, she just looked down and kept crying. She was 22 years old when she came to Canada from her hometown of Kumamoto to get married. It was in the 5th year of Taisho (1916). “Oh, don’t cry so much. It’ll be all right. You’ll get used to it,” said the helper in a comforting tone, who had seen similar situations many times. Her husband also did his best to comfort her. “Thank you for coming to

marry me. Everything will be okay. Please bear with me.” That did not do much good. Mrs. Nishikawa could not stop crying. She kept repeating, “I want to go home,” her eyes filled with tears.

It must have been a pitiful sight. A deep sense of resentment overwhelmed the women who felt cheated and betrayed at the very moment that should have been a celebration of the beginning of their new lives. Tens or possibly hundreds of picture brides had to go through this miserable experience. Still, the ceremony continued.

“The same helper took us to a church to have a quick wedding ceremony. After that, my husband said that we were going home. I was expecting him to take me to a nice house. Well, we got on a train and sat there for a long, long time. We stayed on the train way past Whonnock and got off the train at a tiny little station in the middle of nowhere. I saw only a few houses in the distance. I complained to my husband, ‘What is this place? What do we do here?’ Then he got a little mad and said, ‘Be quiet and follow me.’

“He took me to a lumber camp of mostly Japanese men. His work was to cut down tall cedar trees. The camp was located deep in the mountains with several Japanese and Chinese workers and lots of ravens cawing in the forest. Oh, there were no *hakujin* in sight; and this was supposed to be America (actually, Canada)! I was so sad, and I cried and cried. ‘If not for the Pacific Ocean, I would walk all the way home!’ I said this to my husband so many times.”

When considering all instances of picture marriage, women were cheated or deceived by men much more often than men were by women. I do not know why. Sending a picture that had been taken a long time ago or hiding one’s true age was, relatively speaking, not all that serious. In one case though, a man sent a picture of himself standing in front of somebody else’s mansion, shamelessly claiming that he owned it. The reality of picture brides was that they came to Canada with a one-way ticket. No matter how miserable the situation was, returning home was not an option. All picture brides were hurriedly taken from the ship, taken

to the church, and then thrown into their new married lives, whether they liked it or not.

Mrs. Nishikawa repeated the phrase “If not for the Pacific Ocean, I would have walked all the way home,” as many as five times in an interview that was less than two hours. The frequency and the serious tone in which she repeated the phrase clearly indicated how severe the conditions were for her in that foreign land.

‘Failed Love’ in the land of immigration

I heard numerous stories, some tragic and some comic, about the arrival of the picture brides. In rare cases, the new bride was an ugly woman who did not even resemble the picture that had been sent, so the husband cursed the photographer for touching up the photo too much. In most cases, the bride was disappointed by a husband who was much older than she had expected. There were some exceptions to this, however.

This was a story I heard from Yoriki Iwasaki, a 90-year old *issei* gentleman in Toronto. His acquaintance crossed the ocean as a picture bride at the age of 18. After arriving in Victoria, her friends, who had also come as picture brides, found their new husbands, and departed one by one, until she was the last one left, still waiting for her husband. She looked around the pier and found a boy in shorts with his hands in his pockets, chewing gum. She was skeptical but approached the boy anyhow, and asked “Are you [husband’s name]?” He answered, “Meow,” like a cat. In fact, he answered, “Me ya,” (That’s me) in a unique immigrant dialect. An 18-year-old bride discovered that her husband was also barely 18 years old, and was shocked beyond belief.

“I would often tease her, ‘If both of you were 18 years old, then as a woman, you must have taken the lead on the first night,’” laughed Mr. Iwasaki. He had been a reporter for *Tairiku Nippô* (Continental Journal) before the war, so he knew a lot of interesting stories.

When he came to Canada in the 44th year of Meiji (1911), Mr. Iwasaki happened to be on the same ship as the niece of Shigenobu Ôkuma (former Prime Minister of Japan), who was travelling as a picture bride. The woman occupied a first-class cabin, and she would take walks on the deck every so often. “She was a woman of fine, dignified presence. I don’t remember her face very well anymore, but I remember that she had a sweet, pleasant smell; every time she passed near me, I could smell her.”

Mr. Iwasaki told me that the pre-war *nikkei* community included a surprising variety of people. Picture marriage was not limited to common people. One of those examples was the case of a diplomat stationed in Vancouver who married a picture bride. It sounded like a rather exceptional case, so I looked up the issues of *Tairiku Nippô* from the time in question. Sure enough, I found a serialized story entitled “Marriage without Love.”

‘Marriage without Love!’ We hear this phrase often in immigrant communities. Is this an inevitability of picture marriage? Is it the fault of women who romanticize life in a foreign land? Or is it the end-result of the exaggerated stories of a con man who lied about his life to attract a bride? At any rate, stories about ‘Failed Love’ occur all too frequently. The case of ‘S’ is one of them.

With this sensational opening, a series of stories ran over five issues (April 3 to 7, the 14th year of Taisho, 1925) to report in detail the marriage of ‘S’ that ended in miserable failure.

Typically, it was the Japanese-owned Ôsawa Inn or Ishida Inn in Victoria that would host newly arrived picture brides on the first night of their marriage. They would stay one night there, then take a ferry to Vancouver. For the clerk of the Japanese Consulate,

known as “S,” however, those ordinary inns were not good enough. He and his bride stayed at the Empress Hotel, the first-class luxury hotel that is still popular among tourists.

The first night after welcoming his bride at the harbour, “S” had to stay in a separate room because they had not yet been married. The bride was staying in the same room as the wife of the Consul General, who had come out to welcome her. In the middle of the night, “S” barged into the women’s room wearing only a shirt and underwear. The following dialogue ensued, in which Madam B is the Consul General’s wife, and “K” is the bride:

Madam B awoke at the sudden noise. “What is the matter? How could you barge in without knocking in the middle of the night? And you’re not even properly dressed!” Madam B glared at “S” in disgust. “S” quickly grabbed Madam B’s coat that happened to be nearby and covered himself up. With a devious grin on his face, he proceeded to give an English lesson to the bride who was still only half awake. “I am going to avoid using Japanese with you as much as I can from now on. I will no longer eat Japanese food.” The bridegroom’s bizarre act clearly disgusted the bride, “K.” “S” went on, ignoring the women’s disgust, until five o’clock in the morning.

The next night, he again walked into his bride’s room at midnight without permission and inspected all of her belongings. Having read this far, readers of the story would probably surmise that “S” was a man with some serious mental and psychological problems. Despite all that, the wedding ceremony went ahead as planned, and their new life together began. “K” was in the same predicament as other picture brides: she could not “walk all the way home across the ocean.” Six months later, when “S” was ordered to return to Japan for his official duty, “K” finally was able to seize the opportunity to liberate herself from the clutches of a madman. There was a brief article in the June 22 issue of *Tairiku*

Nippô, in the 14th year of Taisho (1925). This was probably the original model of the story of “K”:

Divorce of Mrs. Tsuji: Madam Fumiko, the new wife of the consulate clerk Tsuji, returned to her hometown of Ikeda-machi, Kita-Azumi-gun, Shinshû. From there, she made an official request for divorce.

During their six months of married life, “S” kept even the bread box locked, and he never allowed his wife to use any money, not even a penny. It was obvious that her request for divorce was reasonable by any standard. This story represented one of the worst possible outcomes of picture marriage, where the mental issues of the prospective husband were not detected in advance. It is conceivable that this article was an attempt on the part of the writer to sound the alarm about the potential ill effects of picture marriage.

Incidentally, it was only in Canada that picture marriage continued as of the 14th year of Taisho (1925). The continental United States banned the practice in the 9th year of Taisho (1920), and so did Hawaii in the 13th year of Taisho (1924).

Being fully aware that I have reiterated this point many times already, I’d like to say again that the decision to enter a picture marriage rested solely on a single picture that was sent by another party. There simply was no guarantee that your prospective partner was going to be good; it didn’t matter if he was a diplomat or a fisherman, not to mention the unreliability of the matchmaker. If you look at it rationally, a picture is nothing more than a piece of paper. It is bound to cause all kinds of mistakes, intentionally or otherwise. Many women made the irreversible mistake of relying on a single picture for an important life decision. What did those women do after they realized their mistakes? The ex-wife of the diplomat was able to return to Japan. What about those women for whom going back to Japan was not an option? How did they spend the rest of their days in a mistaken marriage?

Eight children were born one after another

“At the sawmill, women told me to ‘accept it and try your best, and you’ll get used to it’, because that was precisely what they had done when they arrived, they said. I had no choice but to follow their advice. After a while, though, seeing me not happy there at all, my husband suggested that we move somewhere else, where there were more people around. We had a little bit of money left between us, so we purchased land and started to grow strawberries in Pitt Meadows, B.C. The real estate then was really cheap. We paid 300 and something yen [she meant dollars] for ten acres of land. Maybe tens of thousands of yen [dollars] nowadays.”

Mrs. Nishikawa seemed to be saying that, once she accepted the reality that returning to Japan was out of the question, she decided that it would be wise to figure out how best to put down roots.

“And then, babies started to come; eight children in all! Feeding our children well was the most important thing, of course, so, we didn’t eat very well. It was tough! We worked like crazy! Taking care of children and growing strawberries; it was hard work. I started picking strawberries from the early morning, and I came back home at 11 a.m. to prepare for lunch. Right after eating, I did the dishes quickly and went out to the field. I came back to nurse my babies in between, but by then they were crying with hunger. Some babies cried awfully hard. Eight babies were born one after another, so I was running around all the time. Oh, those days! When I was young, it wasn’t easy at all; it was terrible!”

- [Photo: Picking Strawberries with children, Abbotsford ca. 1927](#)

Marriage is a strange thing. She had as many as eight children with her husband, whom she originally hated so much when she first met him that she asked him to send her back home. As I was listening to her story, I wondered about something else. Having

eight children one after another, and putting down roots in a foreign country, far away from home—where did this hardiness and resilience come from? Is it a power of vitality that all women innately possess? To put it another way, what is marriage? What does it mean to live together as wife and husband? Whether the pairing was a mistake or a tragedy, does sharing life for some appreciable length of time inevitably melt away all the problems and conflicts they once had, as if no struggles existed?

“I sewed all the clothes for my children by myself with a Singer sewing machine. Making clothes using cloth on sale at the store is much cheaper than buying them ready-made. I sewed everything for my husband, too. I did the sewing on rainy days when I couldn’t work in the field.

“Our meals consisted of miso soup, vegetables from our own garden, and fish. We bought fish from a Japanese fishmonger delivered by truck to Japanese customers only. Salmon was too expensive for us to buy. When I was young, we sure had difficult times. But let me tell you something. Because I said to him, ‘If not for the Pacific Ocean, I would walk all the way home,’ so many times, my husband treated me really nice; oh yes, he really took a good care of me. He cared for me a lot.”

A well-known Japanese author once said, “The beginning doesn’t necessarily determine how long the marriage lasts.” Or, perhaps, all marriages at their starting points appear unnatural and awkward. Regardless of how it looked at the beginning, if it reaches a goal after a long run, the marriage is a winner, like a marathon race. Or is it?

Mrs. Nishikawa seems to be an optimist; she was probably born with an optimistic outlook. Every woman has an internal mirror that reflects an image of the reality of her life. The same reality may give a different reflection in a different mirror. Strawberries reflected in Mrs. Nishikawa’s mirror, I’m sure, give a brighter and more vibrant red colour than in the mirrors of other women.

“My husband used to drink a lot. I would be working hard on the farm when I’d notice that he was not around. I thought he was going to the washroom, but actually he was drinking at home. All of

our hard-earned money went into his drinking. No matter where I hid the money, he would find it somehow. He drank in the morning, he drank during the day, and he drank at night. Finally, one day I got so upset that I cried and screamed at him, ‘If you keep drinking like that, I’m going back to Japan.’ He replied, ‘If you insist, then I’ll stop drinking,’ and he quit drinking, just like that.

“After a while, though, he suddenly became ill, and he died in a hospital beside a lake in Toronto. He was in the hospital for a long time, and I commuted to see him every day, making the long bus trip from our home. He didn’t recover and passed away. He was buried in the graveyard on Yonge Street in Toronto. It was a stomach ulcer.”

The passing of her husband marked the end of Mrs. Nishikawa’s married life. It was almost half a century after the beginning of their marriage in Victoria Harbour. There is simply no such thing as a perfect marriage in this world. There are so many variations in colour between marriage and divorce; sometimes the colour of divorce becomes bright and strong, and sometimes the colour of marriage fades to a pale and faint tinge. Married couples do their best to carry on their long journeys to the end, absorbing reflections from the ever-changing colour spectrum. The bride who cried and begged, “I want to go home on this ship” managed to successfully navigate her long marriage to the end. Her love for her husband was so strong that she made the commute to her husband’s deathbed every day. I’m sure I’m not alone in seeing, in her life story, a kaleidoscope of married life that is far too complex and strange to explain in words.

Her married life came to an end with her husband’s death, but her life story did not end there.

I don’t want to return to Japan any more

“After I became a widow, my son said that I should live with his family. My daughter-in-law was also a *nisei* like my son. She never allowed me to do anything by myself, not even my own dishes. So, I had nothing to do all day. I used to walk about one mile every day.

“One day, someone told me about a vacancy at a nursing home. I decided to go and live in the nursing home when I was 75 years old; that was 11 years ago. My son was kind of upset, but I told him that it was quite okay; there were some old people in there who were richer than I was. These days, my family comes to visit me once in a while.”

Mrs. Nishikawa looked comfortable in her nursing home in the suburbs of Toronto. I wondered what had happened to the ties between herself and Japan. So, I asked the usual question.

“Would you like to go back to Japan?”

“When I went back to Japan 10 years ago, I felt that America [meaning Canada] was a good place to live after all. When I got there [to Japan], my relatives’ children gathered around me, expecting me to give them some money. The first time I returned, a long time ago, I had to travel by ship, because there was no airplane service. At that time, I gave a 10-yen bill to every small child. That’s why they crowded around me at this visit, hoping that I would give them money again. I regretted giving them money the first time. I felt really awful.

“I am no longer a Japanese citizen. I could go back any time if I wanted to, but I don’t want to anymore. Ever since my eldest boy became 14 or 15, he helped me a lot. Everything started to get better after that. I now feel it was good that I came to Canada. I have no intention of going back to Japan.”

Although Mrs. Nishikawa’s interview was filled with stories of serious problems and hardships, it did not make me feel depressed to hear her stories. That was probably due to her warm personality and her optimistic outlook. Or, perhaps, because her personality was nurtured by the warm southern, semi-tropical climate of Kumamoto, where she had spent her most sensitive stages of life. I was grateful that she told me her life story so frankly and openly.

Before I said goodbye to Mrs. Nishikawa, I shook her hands many times. I felt as if I was parting with an old friend. Just then, she hesitantly asked me if I could use a pseudonym for her. I have no objection to using a pseudonym, of course. But it came so suddenly that I was caught by surprise.

She explains herself like this: She still has relatives in Japan, and she did not tell her children about this interview in advance. I promised her that I would not reveal her real name or home address or anything like that. I shook her hands one last time, and I left the nursing home.

On the way to the next destination, I gave some serious thought to the limitation of the spoken word. Mrs. Nishikawa had declared that she did not wish to return to Japan. Leaving her son's home of her own accord to live in a nursing home, she appeared to me to be a very independent woman. But deep down, there must have been some kind of bond that still existed, an unseen bond, between her and Japan and between her and her adult children. I simply failed to see those bonds during our interview.

Words are after all merely one of the layers of the complexity of our consciousness. Underneath that topmost layer—that is to say, words—there lay countless layers of consciousness that cannot be expressed in words. It would have been impossible to dig them all up and see and understand them, even if I tried.

How well can I really understand the deep sorrows that picture brides had to endure in a faraway country? How well can I imagine their aches and yearnings for the homes they left behind? How well can I do that through words? I was overwhelmed by a sense of doubt and futility about the goal of my project. Suddenly, an image appeared in my mind—the image of a young picture bride crying on the pier of Victoria Harbour. A moment later ... it disappeared.



Picking Strawberries with children, Abbotsford ca. 1927. NNM 2001.28.2.1.9
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Chapter 4

Picture Brides in Beamsville



Tame and Jusuke Ishikawa, from Yamaguchi Ken, Hammond BC ca. 1910
NNM 2009.15.4.12

I entrusted everything to God

The Nipponia Home was located in the community of Beamsville near the famous Niagara Falls. As the name implied, it was a nursing home exclusively for *nikkei* seniors; it was built about 20 years ago. It housed about 30 *issei* seniors. In a brightly lit, clean building, residents were served Japanese food every day, cooked by a Japanese chef. Residents could get by using Japanese only for all their daily necessities, and Japanese books and video cassettes were also available to them. All in all, Nipponia Home offered *nikkei* seniors a comfortable environment to live in.

When I checked with the head of the Home, Mr(s?). Sawada, before I left Vancouver, s/he was fairly certain that there were a few picture brides among its residents. So I decided to pay a visit.

The first thing that caught my eye was a picture hanging in a brightly lit hallway. It was an ancient-looking wedding photo of the Japanese emperor and empress in a gorgeous gold frame, clearly showing its age with its sepia colour. At the time of their wedding, thousands, or even tens of thousands of copies of this photo must have been printed. One of them had been sent across the ocean to Canada and was still displayed on the wall of this nursing home. That seemed impressive enough to me, but directly below it was a recent photo of the emperor and empress in full, bright colour. Looking at them, I couldn't help think that time flew equally fast for the noble couple in these photos and for a *nisei* couple in a picture marriage. I imagined that both couples must have lived

through hardships of their own, equally difficult, though vastly different in many respects.

After having asked all the female residents about their marriages, I found that two of them had come to Canada as picture brides. I began their interview in the corner of a hobby room, which was part of a recent \$200,000 addition to the Nipponia Home.

“I entrusted everything to God throughout my life. I married my husband without knowing what kind of person he was, you know, except having seen him in a picture. In the very first week I came to Canada, I was taken to a church, and I’ve been with the church ever since.”

The first word Mrs. Suno Yamazaki mentioned was God. She was born in the 23rd year of Meiji (1890), and was now 92 years old. She was originally from Ueda, Nagano prefecture, and came to Canada in the 42nd or 43rd year of Meiji. Her life since then has been supported by her beliefs.

“My husband worked as a gardener for a *hakujin* millionaire in Vancouver. My husband was also a Christian, so I wasn’t worried about anything when I came. If he hadn’t been a Christian, there could have been trouble; you never know. As long as we believed in the church, there was no trouble. Our *hakujin* boss was also a Christian, and a good man. His family was very nice to us, too. They took us to their vacation home in Crescent Beach and built a house for us on their property. So, I lived in a church community the whole time. Whenever I had any trouble, I went to the church.”

Mrs. Yamazaki spoke in a positive and pleasant tone. It made me appreciate the important role that religion had played for a couple struggling to build a new life together in a foreign land.

Religious belief often helps people to respect and love each other despite differences in skin colour or social status. Mrs. Yamazaki had many happy memories of her *hakujin* boss so it was quite natural that her view of *hakujin* was entirely positive.

There were many Christians among *issei*, so Mrs. Yamazaki was not an exception. According to *White Canada Forever*, by Peter

Ward, by the 6th year of Showa (1931), about one-third of *nikkei issei* had become Christians. This proportion became larger for *nisei*, of course. At least 230 organizations, religious or otherwise, were established by the early Showa era.

The stories of Christian *issei* made me realize that God was very close to their hearts and was an integral part of their daily life, rather than some abstract concept. In their new country, their religion and their daily lives were inseparable, and faith formed a necessary condition for their lives. If you look at this from another angle, the strength of their faith in their religion, be it Christianity or Buddhism, is explained by the level of hardships they faced and the degree of their need for spiritual support.

“I became 92 years old before I knew it. I’m absolutely healthy; I have no ailments to this day. In my younger years, I even went to help as a volunteer nurse when there was a flu epidemic in Vancouver. I never got really sick. I hardly ever catch a cold. Over 90 sounds old, but I’m doing fine.”

Mrs. Yamazaki didn’t look 92 at all. With a well-built physique and healthy-looking body, she appeared to be in her late 70s. It was easy to imagine her as a young girl; she must have been a lively, energetic girl back in Japan.

“When I was living in Ueda, brand-new telephone lines were installed, and I worked as an operator. The telephone office was run from the second floor of the Ueda post office, near the elementary school. I went there to help, because I had nothing else to do after I graduated from my school.

“I had to take a little exam on speaking and writing, and a little bit of math. I went to work in my kimono and a *hakama* (Japanese traditional pants). At the Ueda post office, there were fewer than ten operators working; all of them were women. Our supervisor was a man. Since we were able to talk to people in Tokyo or Yokohama, we did just that at night, after work. We worked shift work, alternating day and night. It was fun, and we enjoyed it.

“You see, I simply wanted to go somewhere, do something; I wanted to work away from home. All I wanted was to leave home,

no matter what.”

I can clearly see what happened: A young telephone operator full of curiosity about the outside world seized the opportunity and hopped on board a ship to Canada in a kimono and a *hakama*.

Rice with Miso soup, and a Japanese style bathtub

“Around that time, picture marriage was in vogue. I really wanted to come to Canada, that’s why I came. Everybody came by picture marriage. I was 22 then, and my husband was 24 or 25. He came from a rural place called Shiojiri, and I came from Ueda; both of us were from Nagano prefecture. We had a local matchmaker.

“My family was originally from Shiojiri, so we checked and researched his family as much as possible. My parents wanted to be certain that I was marrying a good man before they allowed me to go to a foreign country.

“We had a wedding ceremony at our home in Ueda. We placed my husband’s photo where he was supposed to be seated. It was kind of strange, but that was all we could do; it was a picture marriage. I lived in Shiojiri at the home of my husband’s parents for about six months. I was treated well by his parents; they were very kind to me.

“Since I was coming to Canada, I didn’t prepare very much stuff; I couldn’t bring it anyhow, you know. I wore a kimono and a *hakama* on board the ship. Even for our wedding ceremony at the United Church in Canada, I was dressed the same. On the ship to Canada, there were many picture brides, so we talked a lot among ourselves about our concerns and worries. When the ship arrived

in Vancouver, only a few people got off; the rest of them went to Seattle.”

Mrs. Yamazaki’s husband never gambled, never drank; he was a devout Christian. Before she knew it, 70 years had passed without any trouble. Even the war-time experience, which no picture bride was able to avoid, was not such a terrible experience for her.

“During the war, I moved to Kaslo [B.C.]; yes, with my husband. We rented a place from a good farmer there, who had a fruit orchard. We were quite comfortable there. It was a pretty easy, carefree life. I honestly didn’t have much hardship in my life.”

It was all because “I entrusted everything to God,” she repeated, with a gentle smile. All of her stories sounded so simple and straightforward, I could hardly believe it. I threw at her a few last questions:

“Why did you choose to do a picture marriage? Would you like to go back to Japan? What is the life at Nipponia Home like? Are you happy here?”

To all these questions, Mrs. Yamazaki repeated the same answer, always with a pleasant smile on her face.

“I really wanted to go to a foreign country. I really did, no matter what. That’s why I came to Canada. And I feel secure because I entrust everything to God.”

Religion has the power to cleanse all the evil and ugly things from our mundane world. After listening to her story, even a non-believer like myself had to admit the benefit of religious belief. I was fully convinced that Mrs. Yamazaki must be living her final portion of life happily in a foreign country. I had concluded my interview with her when I heard a voice calling behind me.

“Mrs. Yamazaki, *o-furo* is ready for you.”

The Nipponia Home had an *o-furo* (a traditional Japanese bathtub), and it was made available twice a week. There were Western-style bathtubs as well, of course, and they were available every day. Residents had to sign up for their turn to use the *o-furo* on those two afternoons. The person just before Mrs. Yamazaki’s turn came out of the *o-furo* and called her up. She rose from her chair and went to her room to pick up her towel.

From the dining room next to the hobby room came the delicious smell of miso soup. After using the *o-furo*, it would be suppertime. *O-furo*, supper with miso soup, and a pension from the Canadian government; on top of this, she had God. What an ideal combination! As I watched Mrs. Yamazaki walking toward the *o-furo*, I was wondering if Nipponia Home was a paradise.

Mr. Toyoshi Hiramatsu, a board member, posted a detailed financial report on the management of Nipponia Home in the *New Canadian* (a Toronto-based Japanese-language paper) on May 5 in the 57th year of Showa (1982). Here is an excerpt from that report:

The Nipponia Home serves Japanese supper every night. According to a recent government report, our meals were ranked at the top. And yet, the cost per person per day calculated over the last year was \$15.80, which was the second lowest in the province of Ontario. At most of the privately-run nursing homes of a similar type, the cost per person per day was more than \$30.

I report further in this regard for your reference. If the cost per person per day stays at or below the level of \$25.20, which is the minimum level of the government guarantee, residents would pay their old age pension and the welfare payment into the home, and in return they receive \$96 each month in return. ---- *omitted* ---- To explain further, if a nikkei senior wishes to enter Nipponia Home solely with the old age pension, s/he is required to pay approximately \$230 in addition to the old age pension per month, whereas at the similar but privately-run homes in Toronto, s/he is required to pay about \$670 extra per month. We must keep in mind the significant difference between the for-profit homes and Nipponia Home that is run by the nikkei community.'

To summarize, Nipponia Home is managed in a conscientious manner. Seniors without savings had to pay with their old age

pension and welfare cheques, and in return received \$96 of spending money per month. Those who had savings had to pay \$230 per month, but that was about ¥46,000, which was very reasonable. Canada seems to be way ahead of Japan with regards to its policies on senior issues, and Nipponia Home should be considered a success story.

My father taught me the ways of a woman

Mrs. Machi Fujita, 90 years old, had been living in Nipponia Home for almost 20 years since its opening. Her husband had passed away, so she was a widow. She was a picture bride who crossed the ocean in the second year of Taisho (1913).

In that year, 472 Japanese wives were sponsored into Canada, the highest number on record. The population of Japanese in Canada at that time was 9,443 males and 2,330 females.(カナダ同胞発展史 *History of Japanese Compatriots in Canada*, 6th year of Taisho or 1917) If you look at those numbers—of just over 2000 women, 472 were newly arrived brides—you can see how popular picture marriage was then. Between the 45th year of Meiji (1912) to the sixth year of Taisho (1917), the total number of sponsored wives from Japan climbed as high as 1,898. It was estimated that more than 90 percent of them were picture brides. If women are considered to be supporting half of this world, then perhaps picture brides were supporting nearly half of the Japanese community in Canada at the time.

“I didn’t know anyone other than my husband before I arrived. My parents didn’t say it out loud, but I knew they were worried. But they said, ‘if you want to go, then go. It may be a good idea for you two to work together and try to make lots of money while you are young.’ They decided to trust me and let me go.

“Before I left home, my father told me, ‘It’s a picture marriage, so you don’t know what kind of man he is. No matter: a man can be controlled by a woman to turn in whatever direction she wishes. Of course, you don’t want him to face the wrong direction, or make a bad choice. At the beginning, you just say to him, yes, yes, you are right, and accept whatever he says. After a while, you start controlling gradually which direction he is facing.’ That’s how he taught me the ways of a woman, so to speak.”

Mrs. Fujita followed the ways of a woman, as she was taught. She has lived for 70 years in Canada. She still looks young for her age and retains the demeanour of an amiable young maiden.

She was also the only one out of 13 picture brides I interviewed who had kept the picture that introduced her to her prospective husband. Many *nikkei* people lost most of their pictures in the chaos of forced relocation during the Second World War. Mrs. Fujita’s introduction picture was small compared to the size of pictures today. It was not even pasted on a firm backing paper, so it was very delicate and easy to lose. A young woman with a full-fleshed face and dark eyes is sitting properly but nervously in a chair. Her hairstyle, called *Nihyaku-san-kôchi* (203 Hill), was in vogue right after the Russo-Japanese war. As I looked at the picture, I imagined the faces of young male labourers whose days were filled with nothing but hard work, yearning for the arrival of brides.

“It was really funny; he was so shy that he hid behind his brother’s wife when we first met in Victoria. You know, we didn’t know each other at all before. His sister-in-law was talking to me, but he was hiding behind her.

“I boarded the ship [from Japan] in Japanese clothes. My husband brought his sister-in-law’s Western clothes to Victoria because what we could buy there wouldn’t fit me.

“Our wedding was done at the Immigration Centre. Many couples were married there.”

Soon after picture brides had landed in Victoria, the wedding ceremony usually took place at the church or at the Immigration Centre. One picture bride was made to have a wedding ceremony at a women’s home, but this must have been an exceptional case.

There is no record of a women's home in Victoria. A women's home was supposed to be an institution for women who had problems fitting into society for some reason; much like temples in Japan that served as shelters for battered women. It makes one wonder why a picture bride would have a wedding there. All picture brides were supposed to have just landed, so there shouldn't have been any reason for a picture bride to have to go to a women's home. Perhaps there was a mistake in the records.

When Mrs. Fujita arrived, so many picture brides landed at the same time that a mass wedding had to be held at the Immigration Centre. It must have been much easier to bring a priest to officiate at a mass wedding than to take a large group of brides and grooms to a church.

Some brides attended their wedding dressed in kimonos, and some dressed in Western clothes. Some husbands brought Western clothes that they had bought to the harbour, some borrowed clothes because they didn't want to buy clothes that might not fit, and some brought somebody else's old clothes that had been given to them. Different people, different stories, but one thing was the same for everyone: Husbands brought Western clothes for brides—because once picture brides disembarked from the ship, they were not able to walk around in kimonos.

Imagining those rough and rowdy pioneer men trying to buy, ask for, or otherwise collect brides' clothes, underwear, corsets, or stockings makes me chuckle. To my question about the difficulty of adjusting from kimonos to Western clothes, all of the picture brides replied that it was no big deal at all because they were young. Their youth was the only valuable possession they brought with them.

A reception often followed the wedding ceremony.

“We held a reception in Vancouver. We didn't have it at a restaurant, but at my husband's friend's house. I guess there were 50 or 60 people. We served sake and good food. I didn't do anything; the people of the house prepared everything. I don't think we gave the guests any gifts or souvenirs to take home. We just served sake and food. The guests gave me lots of clothes as wedding gifts, and they were quite useful.”

An open letter from a young man to the consul

It must have been a proud moment for a bridegroom to show off his long-awaited new bride, and to treat his friends to sake and food. The proportion of male to female in the immigrant population at the time was five to one. Only immigrant men who had saved the required money were able to sponsor a bride to marry. Quite a few men ended up working their entire lives without being able to save enough. Most of them ruined their lives with gambling, drinking, or prostitutes. Gambling, in particular, was the cause of much misery for Japanese immigrants during early pioneer days. They lost enormous amounts of money at Nanking Gambling in Chinatown. A Japanese businessman later opened a new gambling establishment, and it was much of the same. No matter where you gambled, whatever money you won disappeared as quickly as it came in. Too often, stories would appear in Japanese-language papers of men with no money for boat fare to return to Japan dying in a rooming house.

Incidentally, around the same time, the proportion of male to female in the Chinese immigrant population was a whopping 28 to 1.

The number of picture marriages peaked in the second year of Taisho (1913), the very year Mrs. Fujita came to Canada, and began to decline after that. There were several reasons for the decline, but the main one is that critical voices among *hakujin* had gained momentum. The fact of the matter was that there were some cases of picture marriage among Italians and other European

immigrants, but only Japanese immigrants were singled out for criticism because of anti-Japanese sentiment.

No matter how much picture marriage was criticized as being barbaric, it was the only hope for a single immigrant. And it came at a dear price, often requiring significant personal sacrifice. The level of sacrifice required for a man to sponsor a bride from Japan was described eloquently in “an open letter from a young man” that was printed in the *Tairiku Nippô* of January 19, the ninth year of Taisho (1920).

The young man wrote to the consul in Vancouver, requesting an explanation regarding a statement he made to *nikkei* immigrants to “forget about making money and returning to Japan. Get settled permanently.” The young man wrote:

To get settled means sponsoring a wife and children to come to Canada, I believe. In order to sponsor a wife and children, I am required to have \$800 to \$1,000 in my bank account. Without it, the Consulate General won't issue a permit for sponsorship.

I understand that this is because there was a woman from Japan who did the laundry work at in a hakujin's home and then engaged in prostitution after work. I heard that the consul made it more difficult to obtain sponsorship permit in order to reduce the incidents such as this. It is certainly understandable for the consul to take such measures, but I don't think there are that many women who would engage in such undesirable business.

It is also not an easy thing to keep \$800 to \$1,000 cash deposited at a bank for mere 3 or 4% interest. And yet, if I wanted to go back to Japan to marry, I could only stay there for one month. Even if I did manage to visit my parents and also get married in such a short time, I could encounter considerable difficulty in obtaining a permit to leave the country again. If a person has not sent much

money back to Japan in the past, he will not be allowed to return to Canada. If he has saved money in a Canadian bank or made investments in Canada, how can he send money back to Japan?

In my hometown, when I request a permit to leave Japan again, a policeman will visit me and check how much money I have already sent back to Japan to date. If I haven't sent much money, they won't issue a permit for me to leave the country. ---- *omitted*----

Two issues were raised here. One was that, in order to apply for a sponsorship, a person needed to have \$800 in the bank. At that time, \$800 was half of the annual earnings of an average worker. On top of that, the man had to pay for the boat fare for the bride and had to prepare a new home as well. That required a sizeable amount of money.

The other issue was that a person could stay in Japan for only one month, even if he had returned home to find a bride. This was due to the law regarding conscription in Japan. Any young Japanese man who stayed more than a month in Japan was required to join the military, and, once enlisted, he would not be able to leave Japan. Therefore, most young men had to visit parents, relatives, and friends in a great hurry, and they returned to Canada within a month.

On one hand, you tell us to forget about making money and returning to Japan, and on the other hand, you make it difficult to sponsor a wife, and you don't give us sufficient time to get married in Japan. On one hand, you encourage saving with a Canadian bank, and investing in Canada, and on the other hand, you give us a hard time if we don't send money back to Japan. As immigrants, we are totally confused and don't know what to do or where to go.

The consul posted a response three days later, on January 22. According to his response, the Foreign Ministry's policy was to discourage picture marriage as much as possible, and to encourage men to return to Japan to get married. The Ministry declared, however, that picture marriage purely on account of economic reason was outrageous.

And with regards to conscription:

For those who are within conscription ages, generally speaking, the current rules are clearly inconvenient. Consulate offices located along the coast do understand this predicament, and have been requesting that the government of Japan revise this rule. This office in Vancouver has put forward a particularly urgent request, and the Foreign Ministry understands the situation. However, the Army Ministry is quite stubborn on this issue. ---- *omitted* ---- The issue will be resolved one way or the other in due course.

With regards to proof of money in the bank, the consul responded as follows:

We require proof of \$500 in savings for a married man and \$800 for a picture marriage. These are our guidelines. It usually costs this much money in order to establish a household. The amount required for picture marriage is larger, simply because it costs more for a single man to bring a bride than for a married man to get established here in Canada. Without this much money, it is impossible to bring a bride to get married, or to sponsor a family.

We have no intention of applying this guideline in a rigid manner. We just use it as a reference point to assess the viability of the applicant's financial success.

In the hometown of the young man who wrote the letter, it appears that a police officer visits the home of the applicant to check the amount of money that he has sent from Canada. I understand that this kind of practice is still taking place in many locales in Japan. Indeed, this practice stems from outdated thinking that mayors or other local leaders still adhere to, and it is contrary to the thinking of the Foreign Ministry. If you experience such a refusal to approve a visa to return to Canada, make sure to report it to the consulate office. We will see to it that the visa be granted.

For Japanese immigrants to successfully integrate into Canadian society, they had to reject the mentality of a migrant worker—making money and returning home—and, instead, try to get settled in Canada for good. To achieve the goal of establishing a family, they faced many hurdles, such as having a different culture and language, facing limitations on choices of occupation, dealing with the occasional revision of agreements between the Japanese and Canadian governments, and so on. Mrs. Fujita and the other picture brides managed to survive hardships and difficulties such as these.

I don't know what the most difficult thing was

“I just wanted to come to Canada. It's as simple as that.”

Mrs. Fujita smiled as if she was laughing at herself, as she finished recounting a story about some tough times she endured at the sawmill deep in the mountains, cutting railway ties (sleepers)

by hand. Though it wasn't paradise, she said that it was still a good thing that she came to Canada, all things considered. The main reason she thought so must have been the fact that she got along very well with her husband. After all their children had grown up and left home, they both decided to live together at Nipponia Home.

When I asked Mrs. Fujita about the happiest memory of her life, she answered:

“You see, my husband worked at a number of sawmills, so we travelled around to many different places. When we went to work at a sawmill about five miles away from New Westminster, there were eight or nine Japanese people living in the area. I had been feeling lonely because I hadn't met anyone from the same region of Japan that I came from. But then I bumped into a woman who was from the same village as me, from the Yamaguchi prefecture. I was overjoyed; I'll never forget the excitement I felt then. We've been best friends ever since. I knew her back in my hometown. She also came to Canada to get married.”

The sense of camaraderie among Japanese immigrants from the same area, be it prefecture, town, or village, is unique and strong. Particularly before the war, the power of prefectural associations was so enormous that they controlled the politics of Japanese immigrant communities. In the vast majority of cases, picture marriage couples originated from the same prefecture. The strong bond that bound those from the same prefecture was beyond my comprehension. Mrs. Fujita's story, however, helped to solve the mystery for me; her direct manner of speaking made it easier for me to understand. When one lived in a foreign land, meeting someone from the same town was uplifting. No matter how many years it had been since the two immigrants had last spoken, they could talk about the food, people, or scenery of their hometown, or other topics; they had a common understanding and could communicate very well. When they were living in an immigrant community where members came from many different areas of Japan, it was that much more important to connect with people from the same hometown; those were the friends they could trust.

I asked Mrs. Fujita, “What was the saddest thing in your life?” Her answer was that of a kind, caring daughter:

“I was hoping to go back home to visit around three years after I left Japan, but it took seven years. I wanted to thank my father for the excellent advice he gave me when I left. Unfortunately, he was already gone by then. That was the only thing I regret in my life.”

When I asked if she followed her father’s advice and never disobeyed her husband, she replied with a playful grin on her face:

“Did I follow my father’s advice to the letter? Well, at first, I said to my husband ‘Yes, yes, you’re right, you’re right’, all the time. When we got a little older, I forgot about my father’s advice, and I had occasional quarrels with my husband. At any rate, I’m grateful for his excellent advice.”

Mrs. Fujita apparently possessed both of the seemingly opposite virtues of *yamato nadeshiko* (a traditional Japanese woman)—dutiful obedience and inner strength. Some married couples argue about everything as they navigate life’s problems. Some avoid bringing conflicts to the surface and manage to deal with them quietly. Every couple has its own way of handling life’s crises. It was the superb wisdom of Mrs. Fujita’s father that guided her to the traditional way of Japanese woman and taught her how to control her husband; his foresight that she must expect a turbulent life because she became a picture bride was amazing.

“I guess I’ve been through many hardships in my life. But now, looking back, I don’t know what the most difficult thing was that I had to overcome. I just kept trying very hard as best I could, working together with my husband. And here I am, now.”

Mrs. Fujita, looking young in a flower print blouse, told me her life story with a friendly smile. If the final balance sheet is revealed at the end of a person’s life, the lives of these two women at Nipponia Home—Mrs. Fujita and Mrs. Yamazaki—clearly ended in black. Their lives saw happy endings, successfully overcoming the initial handicaps; one supported by religious faith and the other by her father’s teaching.



Popular hairstyle and western dress Tame Ishikawa ca. 1910. NNM
2009.15.4.14



Ishikawas with Yamaguchi Kenjin (people from Yamaguchi) ca. 1911. NNM
2009.15.4.20

Chapter 5

Picture Brides in Toronto



1917



BRITISH
MILITARY CONTROL OFFICER.
JAPAN.

DATE. Dec 7 1916 Visa No. H 2403

gaining her husband

at Fraser B.C.

TAKEN AT THE BRITISH
CONSULATE GENERAL
YOKOHAMA.

Hamachi

For H. N. M. Consul-General,
YOKOHAMA.



Tamaki Toda Passport. JCCC 2020.03.01.02

Recurring cases of eloping picture brides

“How many times has it been now?” I wondered as I dialed yet another number. It was not pleasant to talk to a stranger on the phone for the first time, especially when I had to abruptly ask her, “Did you come to Canada as a picture bride?” It was uncomfortable, as awful as having to swallow cold medicine powder without water.

After completing the interviews in Beamsville, my next stop was Toronto. I asked an *issei* senior, an acquaintance in Toronto, for the phone numbers of all the elderly women over the age of 85 that she knew. I phoned each one of them at random. As soon as I mentioned the words “picture bride,” the voice on the other end became hesitant. The answer was invariably NO.

Why did they refuse to accept an interview? To be truthful, I knew the reason. It is well known that *issei* seniors are reticent with reporters from Japan. I’d heard that some reporters didn’t return precious old photos they had taken, despite promising to return them after use. Some reporters published stories that were told to them off-the-record and used real names in their articles when they were asked not to. I also recall many angry comments about reporters who took advantage of the kindness of the seniors but did not send a single line of thanks in return.

“Well, I just wish they hadn’t written a false story,” sighed an old man as he told me what had happened. One Japanese reporter had written about a large number of suicides by *issei* seniors in a town where many *nikkei* had settled due to forced relocation at the beginning of WWII. In reality, there had not been a single suicide in that town for over 20 years. For the *issei* seniors who were peacefully living out their retirement days, it was an unbearable humiliation. They sent numerous letters of protest to the publisher of the paper, but to no avail; the publisher posted neither a correction nor an apology.

Because of these past experiences, mistrust of journalists in general was deeply ingrained among *issei*. However, the real reason that my interview requests were rejected lay elsewhere. If the reason had been mistrust of journalists, I could have somehow persuaded them to accept the interview one way or another; after all, I was neither a journalist nor an author; I was just an independent amateur writer. In addition to that, I was actually living in Canada, doing research on the history of *nikkei* immigration. Therefore, I could not afford to commit any ungrateful act to *issei*.

The real reason was something else: a powerful preconception associated with picture marriage that many people held, both in Canada and in America. That was the reason that picture brides were cautious about unnecessary publicity.

Even the most cursory observation would show that the immigrant community was dominated by men. Healthy and energetic men in their prime worked as single men for many years. When they stopped to look around, they noticed young Japanese women: picture brides that some men had brought from their hometown. Only a lucky few managed to do this, by spending a large amount of money that they had saved over the years. It inevitably created unnatural and dangerous situations in work camps when a lone woman joined hordes of working men. This led to unfortunate outcomes such as the following:

The Elopement of a Married Woman

Taki (20), wife of Eijirô Uchida, boss of Union Bay lumber camp, originally of Kumamoto prefecture, came to Canada in March of this year. After serving lunch to camp workers last Friday, she left the camp, telling everyone that she was going to pick strawberries. Then she took off and ran away with Tomehiko Tateishi, originally of Wakayama prefecture, in a gas-powered boat that had been tied to a bridge at Union Bay a mile and a half away from the camp. ---- *omitted* ---- Even considering that she

came as a picture bride, it is a huge disgrace that she eloped with another man while she was married to a husband of respectable standing. (*Tairiku Nippô*, July 31, the 41st year of Meiji, 1908)

This was the oldest incidence of a picture bride elopement on record in Canada. The first thing to note about this article is the woman's young age. In that era, 20 would be the equivalent of 19 now (due to the old customary method of determining age). It was not uncommon for women to marry at a young age in the Meiji era. Still, a woman of 19 could possess only the knowledge and wisdom of a 19-year-old. In comparison, her husband must have been well over 30, judging from his title of "boss of a lumber camp," and the paper's description of his "respectable standing."

Let us suppose: Here was a young woman who, following her dream of going abroad, came to Canada as a picture bride with high expectations. When she arrived in Canada, she found a husband who looked much older than his age due to years of hard labour, much older than she had expected. She resisted, but in the end, she was taken to a lumber camp deep in the mountains, and made to work day and night serving meals, washing clothes, and cleaning for the camp workers. Her home was nothing but a drafty hut with snow blowing in through the cracks, a far cry from the Western-style house with a red roof and white walls that she had dreamed about before leaving her hometown. Even if she wanted to escape and return to Japan, it was too far away—so far away that she could hope to make the return trip only a few times in her life, if she was lucky. The situation was totally different from the jet plane era of today.

There is no doubt that she was unhappy. Many picture brides had likely grown up with doting parents in a sheltered environment. It seems that there was little difference between the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of a young woman from the Meiji era compared to the Showa era. Young women dreamed of a glamorous life abroad and decided to come across the ocean without considering what was really waiting for them on the other

end, much like butterflies fly across wide rivers without knowing what might be waiting on the other shore. The reality they had to face in the new country was far removed from the life they envisioned. For a 19-year-old woman, the difference between the two would have been intolerable.

Eloping, of course, could not be condoned; let alone the fact that they stole \$160 that was to be used for food for the camp workers. Even knowing all of this, the image of the miserable life that drove this unfortunate, lonesome young wife to the desperate act of eloping was so vivid that I could almost feel it myself. I could not imagine how dreadful and harsh the couple's lives as fugitives would have been.

A few weeks after they escaped, *Tairiku Nippô* ran an ad offering a reward for their capture. In this ad, Taki Uchida's age was 19. The male accomplice had a reward value of \$50 listed under his picture. That \$50 reward would be worth \$1,000 today. The size of the reward reflected the frustration and resentment of a man who had had his wife stolen. Now the two were real fugitives in the wild west.

As could be expected, within a week of the ad appearing, the two were found, and a news story ran in the *Tairiku Nippô* dated August 27.

Arrest of the Runaway Wife

Just off Union Bay, in a small boat, Tomehiko Tateishi of Wakayama and Taki Uchida of Kumamoto had eloped hand in hand and escaped over the mountains and along the shores. Both of them were found living in a hideout deep in the country, away from people's eyes. Heaven must have sympathised with the former husband Uchida, and the two were arrested by police a few days ago.

Considering the ethical standards of the Meiji era, the spiteful tone of the article was understandable. The title "Arrest of the

Runaway Wife” created the impression that society considered the woman more responsible than the man.

Akiko Yosano’s view of picture brides

News of this kind often appeared in Japanese-language papers right up to the early Showa era. Missing or wanted ads with large photos and descriptions of the women and headings like “A Beautiful Woman Lost” or “More Adultery Cases” filled the pages of newspapers every day. In fact, a private *hakujin* detective called Baron used to run an ad in the *Tairiku Nippô* specializing in finding missing wives at the end of the Meiji era. This demonstrated how frequently these runaway bride incidents were happening.

As for adultery, letters from readers containing gossip and rumours appeared as often as once every three days. For example, one letter read: “Why are there so many cases of adultery in recent years? Almost everyone, particularly men, seems eager to initiate conversation to tempt a woman into an affair. It may be a peculiarity of the immigrant community that even women initiate such conversation these days.” And in the women’s column, an essay condemning adultery ran under the title “A wife must obey her husband.” The debates and general atmosphere surrounding the frequent occurrence of adultery were quite strange, to say the least.

Even without reliable statistics, we can surmise that there were many more cases of adultery happening in immigrant communities than back in Japan. Almost all members of immigrant communities were those who came from Japan with virtually nothing: no social status, no particular prestige, no property, and no possessions to speak of. Wives did not feel bound by the typical societal or material constraints that might have helped them resist the

temptation of an extramarital affair. However, while the extremely small number of women among the total population was no doubt one of the primary reasons for adultery, we must not overlook the inherent problem of picture marriage.

The frequently heard criticism voiced by the *hakujin* population—“How can a person marry someone that they had never met before, and expect to get along?”—was correct in many ways. No one could deny that the probability of a successful marriage was low.

This did not mean that the immigrant community was tolerant of adultery. Once a woman was stigmatized with the label of adulteress, living in a foreign country became truly miserable, far worse than it would have been in her home country. There were very few paths open to her at that point.

On January 1 in the seventh year of Taisho (1918), an article was posted in an issue of a Japanese-language paper in Canada, written by Akiko Yosano (a renowned Japanese female author), entitled “To women who reside in foreign countries.” The article can be considered a representation of the general perception that the populace of Japan at the time had of picture brides. Here is an excerpt:

With regards to picture marriage, men rather than women, generally speaking, should be more cautious and thoughtful. Women who are reckless enough to go thousands of miles across the ocean to marry a man they had never met and seen only in a single picture must assume some responsibility. I understand that picture marriages are causing numerous unfortunate incidents lately.

One little careless mistake or a thoughtless action could lead to grave misery. The man might ruin or abandon his family, and the woman might live a miserable, homeless life in a foreign country, and might even end up selling her body for a living. If we become wrongly

characterized—such as “All Japanese women abroad are prostitutes”—because of some of these women, it will be a serious national disgrace.

The article reflected the common perception that picture marriage was closely associated with adultery and prostitution. Needless to say, not all picture marriages involved adultery and prostitution. Far from it. Those women were indeed a small minority. But still it was enough to build a dreadful reputation.

My phone calls to request interviews were cut off abruptly many times.

“What do you want to write about, after so many years?” one old woman shouted at the phone in a rage.

Shortly after I arrived in Toronto, I asked Mr. Kenzô Mori, president of the *New Canadian* (a Japanese-language newspaper) to introduce me to picture brides. Apparently, he was also refused by every one of them. He told me, scratching his head with a smile, that they said “No, I don’t want to talk about it anymore. It’s too embarrassing.” If Mr. Mori, who enjoyed an enviable reputation and trust among the *nikkei* population, could not persuade them to accept the request, how could I, an outsider?

I was at my wit’s end after over a dozen interview requests were turned down. I finally called Mrs. Kin Izumi, an old acquaintance.

Mrs. Izumi was a well-known master of *ikebana* (flower arranging) in Toronto. Prior to WWII, she was active in the women’s division of the Japanese Labour Union; she was a well-educated woman. I asked her to introduce me to any of her *ikebana* students who might have come to Canada as picture brides. Her reply astonished me.

“To tell you the truth, I was a picture bride myself.”

Marriage should be a matter of love

It was author Toshiko Tamura and her husband Etsu Suzuki who argued against picture marriage in the pages of Vancouver's *Tairiku Nippô* from the end of the Taisho era to the early Showa era.

Let me explain briefly. The reason Etsu Suzuki and Toshiko Tamura came to Canada in the seventh year of Taisho (1918), one after another, was because each of them had been married to another person before they fell in love with each other, and they wanted to make their union legitimate by relocating to a new country. As editor-in-chief of *Tairiku Nippô*, Suzuki brought a new perspective to journalism in Vancouver, and introduced the immigrant community to many of the progressive ideas of the time. His work naturally led to the founding of the Japanese Labour Union, where he worked on educating Japanese workers. Tamura was the leader of the women's division and assisted with her husband's work.

Two of the key issues that Tamura and Suzuki tackled head-on were the labour issue and the women's rights issue. Leaving aside the labour issue, the women's rights issue had a lot to do with picture marriage. In fact, when Suzuki crossed the ocean, he was on a ship that was full of picture brides. He wrote about the astonishment he felt upon seeing picture brides for the first time in an article entitled "On board a ship; my first address as the new editor-in-chief." (*Tairiku Nippô*, June 15 in the seventh year of Taisho, 1918)

Suzuki thought picture brides were "truly bold and daring." Then he realized that "I shouldn't be surprised about picture marriage when I consider the traditional Japanese marriage system." He meant arranged marriages (in which prospective marriage partners meet as arranged by a go-between). After a discussion of potential weak points and faults with picture marriage, Suzuki arrived at the following conclusion:

It boils down to the fact that the woman doesn't think for herself or about herself. That is to say, the woman doesn't think much about the fact that it should be totally up to her how to build her own life; it should be she,

herself, who decides her own fate. The woman does not realize that marriage should not be a matter of system and process, but it should be a matter of love.

To summarize, astonishment at the idea of picture marriage must translate into astonishment at the idea of the traditional Japanese marriage system itself.

Apparently, this argument was more progressive than that of Akiko Yosano. The real problem of picture marriage lay not in the fact that the bride crossed thousands of miles of ocean with only a single picture in her hand, but rather in the old custom of arranged marriage that gave consideration only to external factors, and excluded any consideration of love between the man and woman involved. Suzuki's argument revealed that the complete lack of awareness of the woman's true self was what allowed the old system to exist without any questioning. During an era in which the vast majority of women accepted marriages arranged by their parents without much time to get to know their future husbands, Suzuki's statement was a bold and daring one. It could have only come, I must say, from Etsu Suzuki, a man who came to Canada in order to build a new life with Tamura, the woman he loved, despite the fact they were both married to others. They both had to make great sacrifices in status, position, and the reputation that they held in Japan.

Throughout his stay in Canada, which lasted until he returned to Japan in the seventh year of Showa (1932), he never changed his view on this. With amazing tenacity, he continued to argue against picture marriage, and kept working to advance the equality of men and women. Naturally, Tamura worked together with him in his fight for feminism. And it was Mrs. Kin Izumi who was an activist in the women's division of the Labour Union, working as a close assistant to Tamura. It was quite difficult for me to put these two images together in my mind: the image of Mrs. Kin Izumi as a union activist who worked with Tamura, and the image of her as a picture bride.

To my surprise, I was made aware of a serious mistake I had made as I interviewed her and listened to her story. Unconsciously, I was beginning to form the stereotyped notion in my mind that all picture brides were more or less the same kind of woman. That was wrong! Each one of these women lived her own life as an individual human being. Each picture bride had her own unique story to tell. I had set myself to the task of recording these stories accurately. I had to keep reminding myself how difficult my task was: to search for facts and truth, and record them accurately, without being influenced by preconceptions.

Planning to return in a few years

“My mother’s cousin in Canada asked me if I wanted to marry Mr. Izumi of Funaki-mura village. I got married in the fourth year of Taisho (1915) when I was 19 years old.” Mrs. Izumi continued.

“We had the usual wedding ceremony, although my husband was absent. We were all dressed properly in *montsuki* (formal coat with house crest), and we put my husband’s picture where he was supposed to be sitting. We did everything in the traditional way. After that, I stayed at the Izumis’ home for about 40 days, then I returned to my home. I visited his home occasionally for special events, like the moon festival.”

The Izumi family was a farming family. The bride was astonished at the number of large rice-cooking iron pots lined up in the kitchen. Her mother-in-law told her with a sense of pride that they hired so many helpers during rice-planting season every year that even with all of these pots in use, they were scarcely enough. The bridegroom was the eldest son of the family, so he was expected to inherit the entire property: farmland and a huge house.

Mrs. Izumi's family was also a well-established, respected family in the area. She had been trained in *ikebana* since the age of 13. She still had a noble, dignified atmosphere about her. Her mother-in-law loved the beautiful and clever bride who joined her family. "My mother-in-law would tell me that I would be pretty all of my life," Mrs. Izumi reminisced fondly about her brief stay at her in-laws' home.

"After a while, I received my certification in *ikebana*, and that prompted me to get ready to leave Japan. Actually, I didn't have much to prepare; I only took a few things with me that I needed right away. My parents told me that they would have everything necessary made for me when I came back. I did have a Western dress made in Hikone, so I was wearing a Western dress when I landed. I felt as if I was in a dream; I had never worn a Western dress before.

"Seriously, there's no telling what your fate will be. You never know what will happen in the future. My husband took me by train from Vancouver to a sawmill far, far away over the mountains. That's where he was working. I never expected I would go to such a place. But at that time, I was planning to return to Japan in a few years. I never imagined I would settle here for good."

Every picture bride I interviewed told me that she had been planning to return to Japan in a few years. Mrs. Izumi was no exception. Every time I heard that, a question occurred to me. Did their husbands, who had sponsored them, really believe that? The homecoming of an immigrant always meant returning triumphantly with the fortune they had built up. Did the husband not realize that he would not be able to earn and save a significant amount of money in a few short years, even if he had managed to get a bride?

The protagonist of Yasushi Inoue's novel *Wadatsumi* is a young Japanese immigrant. After a meeting for an arranged marriage during his homecoming, the young man says: "I would be too scared to do it, be it picture marriage or arranged marriage. It involves a certain amount of deceit (to marry a woman to take to

America); it's more like forcing her to become your travelling companion (without her full knowledge), so to speak ...”

Women were easily deceived and made into travelling companions, enduring all the hardships of having children, growing old, and dying on foreign soil. Didn't they feel anguish at the prospect?

Mrs. Izumi continued:

“I thought of returning home so many times when I was young. Particularly, when the cousin of my mother, who had acted as our matchmaker, returned to Japan five or six years after I came to Canada. I thought, I want to go home, too.

“My first homecoming was when my now-65-year-old daughter was three years of age. At that time, it did cross my mind to remain in Japan and not return to Canada. But it wouldn't have worked well for me and my daughter to stay in Japan, leaving my husband in Canada. I came back to Canada with my daughter after a couple of months.”

If Mrs. Izumi had been unhappy with her husband, she might not have returned to Canada. After finishing sawmill work in the mountains, they had moved to Vancouver. Her husband was always a kind and reliable person. He sympathized with the ideas of Etsu Suzuki and Toshiko Tamura. He became an active worker for the Labour Union. For Mrs. Izumi, who worked so hard with her husband and helped Tamura found the women's division of the Union, her husband must have been far more important to her than Japan was.

Mrs. Izumi once commented that the life of Toshiko Tamura, who stayed in Canada for 16 years despite suffering from severe homesickness, had certain similarities with her own life. She said:

“She (Tamura) was an intelligent person. But her ideas were so far out of sync with the prevailing ideas of the time. Her ideas were way ahead of their time, and the people were way behind the times.”

These words could also be used to describe Mrs. Izumi in her youth. Around that time, union workers were treated with derision and scorn, and ridiculed as pawns of the Reds [the Communists].

They were even ostracized from the Japanese immigrant community. I sensed Mrs. Izumi's confidence in her quiet tone; she was obviously satisfied that she did what she believed was right.

Her husband passed away 15 years ago at 83. He died in the home where Mrs. Izumi now lived. She said that every time she thought of her husband, the image of Funaki-mura village {her in-laws' home} and her old home came back.

“My mother-in-law said repeatedly that she did not want to pass it [her house] down to my husband's younger brother, but it didn't matter what she said. At the end, it went to my brother-in-law. Regardless of who wanted who to inherit it, it was ultimately decided by the monk of the local Buddhist temple; that was how things were decided at the time. Now, my brother-in-law is gone, and his son took it over. My house here is such a small house, as you can see, but I hear that his house is a gorgeous house, more like a mansion. Everything has changed since then. Only a Japanese maple tree that my husband planted in the garden when he left for Canada is still standing, or so I was told. I always imagine that his maple tree knows exactly how we feel.”

Time flies like an arrow; it is heartless. The house that they had believed rightfully theirs became somebody else's house. Their long absence did not allow them to cling to their old possessions; the passing of time forced people to abandon their possessions with the old sentimental values still attached. This was the harsh reality, a cause for grief that all immigrants had to face. They had to accept the reality that they had no home to return to in their old country.

Mrs. Izumi talked more about stories in Japan than about her life in Canada. Toward the end of her interview, she showed me a letter she had received from a relative in Japan only a few days earlier. It was too much of an undertaking for the 84-year-old woman to write a letter, since she had had a serious illness the previous year. Her youngest daughter, Eiko, a single woman who lived with her, was able to speak Japanese but could not write it. Mrs. Izumi's niece, whom she had never met before, wrote from Japan, “We always think of you although we live far, far away from

each other. We wish you a quick recovery.” As I left her home, I promised Mrs. Izumi that I would write a reply to this letter on her behalf.

My husband gave me all sorts of trouble

I could not stop from sighing as I sat in front of the telephone in my hotel room. I had dialed over and over with the faint hope of getting one more interview. I felt it would be a pity to leave Toronto, the city with the largest nikkei population in Canada, after only one interview.

Mrs. Yokoi (pseudonym) was the third woman I called. She answered in a beautiful, strong voice. As soon as I mentioned picture marriage, she gave me the same answer that I had heard many times before.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not feeling very well, so I don’t want to see anybody.”

I felt an overwhelming sadness. These old women were living in a big city with a hidden past they did not want to reveal. I was sorry that I had to make them relive such painful memories, and that they had kept those painful memories inside for so long.

“I understand. Your health is much more important than my interview. Please take good care of yourself. I wish you a quick recovery.”

As I was saying goodbye, she may have heard the tears in my voice.

“Wait ... are you going to use my name in the story?”

“Oh, no. If you don’t want me to use your name, I won’t.”

After a moment of silence, she said in a clear voice, “Okay! Come over. I’ll tell you everything!”

The blinds in Mrs. Yokoi's home were all closed, even though it was daytime. Gradually my eyes got used to the dim light in the room, and I spotted the faint shape of her face. She was a graceful old woman of fair complexion. She was indeed not in the best health, recovering from a stroke that she had suffered the previous year. She had recovered enough to be able to walk only this spring, I was told. She lived with a bachelor son. That reminded me of Mrs. Izumi, who lived with her unmarried daughter. There was some commonality between them there.

I am not a sociologist, so I realize that I am not well equipped to discuss in detail the issue of the adaptation of Japanese immigrants to Canadian society. I can say at least that the differences between the value systems of the two generations—the *issei* and the *nisei*—are far greater than that of average parents and children in Japan. The most significant difference between the two generations in Canada and in Japan becomes evident when looking at the marriage of children. In Canada, generally speaking, children who live with aging parents to look after them are not regarded as highly as in Japan.

“I was born in the 27th year of Meiji (1894), so I am 88 years old now. I came to Canada from the Hiroshima prefecture when I was 19. That's too young, don't you think? Of course, it was a picture marriage. I tell you; I was shocked at first when I found out that my husband appeared to have all of the bad qualities of men on this side of the ocean. He gave me all sorts of trouble, really. Well, I have to tell you about my husband first, I guess.”

Mrs. Yokoi began her story in a clear, firm voice. In fact, I had been wanting to know more about the men who sponsored picture brides. Unfortunately, all of the picture brides I interviewed were widows, so I had not been able to listen to stories or opinions from the male perspective. In most instances of picture marriage, there was a fairly wide age difference between the men and the women; also, women tend to live longer. Naturally, there were few surviving picture marriage husbands.

Just as you cannot put all picture brides into one stereotype, you can not put picture marriage husbands into one stereotype. Each husband was a unique and individual person. One may have been a loving and caring husband, while another may have been a terrible tyrant. The common trait that bound the husbands was the energy and ambition that drove them to leave their homeland and go to a foreign country. A man of weak will would not run the risk of putting himself into an unknown frontier. In that regard, all early Japanese immigrants were men of great ambition, full of adventurous spirit. In some instances, their strong personality found a suitable outlet to blossom, and that led to great success. In some cases, however, their energy failed to find a suitable target, and their ambitions led to an unfortunate demise.

“My husband only had three years of elementary school education. He said that he hated school and quit despite everyone’s advice not to. He then went to America and started to work for a railway company when he was 15. His boss there happened to be a person from Okinawa, by the name of Ômisha. I don’t even know what *kanji* he used for that name. The boss told my husband, ‘You must stop drinking and fighting all the time. You have to study.’ As it turned out, the boss had taught English and Japanese for 10 years. With his help, my husband became fluent in English and learned to write Japanese very well, too.

“Then suddenly, the boss was killed in a train accident. The company picked my husband to succeed his deceased boss, because there was no one else who could speak English. At that point, he was still fairly young to be a boss.”

When the marriage with Mrs. Yokoi was proposed, her husband owned a translation office in Vancouver’s Nihonmachi. Even without proper schooling, he had achieved so much. He must have been a very strong-willed person.

A woman must be chaste, first and foremost

“The parents of the other party [my husband] sent a proposal before I finished my schooling. Although we were from different villages, we had the same family name; we shared a distant ancestor. My village was a tiny village in the mountains, and we had no girls’ [high] school. We were not poor by any means; we lived a slow-paced, peaceful life.

“I actually detested the word, girls’ school, but I enjoyed learning and studying. My father knew that, so he sent me to a girls’ school in town. I’m grateful to my father for that. I was living in the school’s residence because the school was 2 ½ or 3 *ri* (10 or 12 km) from my village. Because the suggestion of marriage came while I was still living in the residence, I was teased by my friends.

“My husband was 30. I finished school at 19 [by the old Japanese method of counting age, which made her 18]. Our marriage was arranged before that, and he sent me a few letters. In the very first letter he sent me, he wrote what he expected from me. ‘A woman must be chaste, first and foremost.’ I never forgot that.”

A man who had only three years of elementary school education was going to marry a girl who had graduated from high school. Could his demand that ‘A woman must be chaste, first and foremost,’ be a sign of an inferiority complex?

Mrs. Yokoi was a bookworm. In the luggage box she brought with her on board the ship, she had stuffed plenty of books. Her book-loving father was excited to send his daughter overseas. As he bade farewell to his daughter at Kobe Harbour, he firmly believed that he could gain new knowledge from abroad by marrying his daughter to a man in a foreign country. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that his only daughter would encounter a tough life full of hardships in Canada as a picture bride.

“I knew my husband right away when I saw him in Victoria.” said Mrs. Yokoi. Other picture brides were frantically trying to identify their husbands by looking at the pictures they had in their hands. At that time, she thought that a woman should be able to identify her husband without looking at a picture.

As a brand-new wife, however, she was confused at the many unexpected things she encountered in Vancouver.

“When new brides arrived from Japan, many immigrant men would gather to look at them. Many of them would make crude remarks like ‘Since he got a new wife, the price at the Alexander came down.’ The Alexander in Vancouver was a place for prostitution. It was closed about three years after I arrived. Some of them said right in front of me, ‘Since he’s got his new wife, guys are running out of spending money.’ He meant that my husband stopped paying for prostitutes, I guess. I didn’t know anything about what was going on at that time, you know. I didn’t understand what they were talking about.

“From the sixth night on, my husband came home very late, even past midnight. People around me were saying lots of nasty things, so it made me sad. I didn’t understand what was going on. All I did was wait, thinking he would come home early tonight, early tonight. I kept hoping, early tonight, and kept waiting. Foolish. I was foolish. People are foolish.”

After a while, Mrs. Yokoi found out that womanizing was not the only reason her husband came home late. He was also addicted to gambling. He was addicted to *hanafuda*, known as *gaji* among Japanese gamblers. It was also called *kumamoto-hana* and was the most popular game among Japanese immigrants. As well, he was addicted to Nanking *bakuchi* gambling.

“You know what, he was also getting into the real estate business, on top of his translation business. But the problem was that he didn’t pay the money he received from the purchaser to the seller. He put all the money into his own bank account and spent it all gambling.

“I was walking along the street one day, talking and laughing with my friend. Suddenly, a passerby walked up and reproached

me, ‘How can you laugh like that? Don’t you know what your husband is doing?’ I was so ashamed. My husband regarded everything he could get his hands on as his own. He couldn’t keep his personal life separate from his business. In the end, he didn’t know what to do. Within two years of my arrival, things went down the drain.”

During those two years, Mrs. Yokoi never had any money she could spend freely. Even for grocery shopping, she was given only a dollar or two each time. Once, she begged her husband to buy her a comb that she wanted very badly, and he gave in and bought it for her. That was the only good memory she had from the honeymoon period. When she told me about that good memory, and only then, her voice sounded dreamy and sweet; it was touching.

“In the end, we lost everything: house, office, chairs, and tables, inside and out; everything. We moved to a little place in the middle of nowhere, in an open field, just a little way from Vancouver.

“We heard about selling the bark of some tree to make money. It was the ingredient for a laxative called cascara. If you peel and dry the bark, you can sell it for some dollars per 100 pounds. We went to a flat field that was beyond the mountain near Port Moody, and we peeled bark from the trees.

“At that time, I had a small child. I couldn’t work very well with a child on my back, so I hired a 14-year-old orphan as a babysitter. We peeled bark from cascara trees for two years. There were no other Japanese there. We stayed in a little hut. At least we had a wooden floor. We used a little stove to cook rice. It was a miserable life. There were two big houses nearby where *hakujin* families lived. They were very kind to us.”

People’s bad luck often continues in a downward spiral. After two years of peeling cascara bark, Mrs. Yokoi and her husband were persuaded to move deeper into the mountains to cut wood to make shingles. Many picture brides worked with their husbands to cut the wood using a seven-foot saw. At the immigrant work camps, male and female workers were not treated differently. Women and children were all usable labour. But in the case of the Yokoi family,

they were not permitted to work on the good wood along with the other workers; they were allowed to work only on leftover materials after the rest of the workers had cut the shingles. No Japanese immigrant community would accept Mrs. Yokoi's husband, who had lost their trust completely. Mrs. Yokoi thought that it was enough that they could feed themselves to survive. 'I guess I'm a happy-go-lucky person by nature,' she said and smiled. Her husband continued to go to Vancouver, taking with him every tiny bit of money that they earned, and lose it all on Nanking gambling. No matter how hard Mrs. Yokoi worked, she never saw any of the money, let alone spent any on herself.

Some time later, three Japanese families heard about the work camp deep in the mountains and came to join the workforce. For Mrs. Yokoi, the new families were good companions at work, and her life seemed to stabilize somewhat. But just then, a terrible incident occurred to make even a happy-go-lucky woman like her tremble and turn pale with shock.

Is there such a thing as a living hell in this world?

"We were carrying shingles to the end of the railroad to be loaded. It was too heavy for me to carry, so my husband did it. Each load probably weighed hundreds of kilos. You had to carry it on your shoulders. Women couldn't move them an inch. Normally, it took four men to carry it on their shoulders. A *hakujin* guy told my husband several times that if he kept carrying shingles by himself like that, he would go insane. And he actually did. He went mad.

"One night, he punched me hard while I was fast asleep. He was a strong man, with big muscular arms. He punched me and

shouted at me, ‘You fool! Get up! Can’t you see those guys spying on us through the hole on the wall?’

“I was shocked. There was nobody spying on us, of course. I realized that he had actually gone mad. I trembled with fear. He was my only husband, no matter what kind of man he was. I depended on him.”

Mrs. Yokoi took her deranged husband to Vancouver. They had \$300 that they had saved up by scraping and scrimping. Back then, \$300 was a sizeable amount of money. She was planning to stay at Hiroshima-ya inn, which was run by one of the first Japanese immigrants, Mohei Saitô, and then take her husband to a hospital from there. The building on Alexander Street that was formerly occupied by registered prostitutes had been transformed into a hospital, and a number of Japanese doctors were working there.

Her husband insisted on taking care of the \$300 himself. Mrs. Yokoi begged him to let her keep at least half of it, with a promise to return it to him later. However, he was not in a state to be reasoned with. He disappeared with the money, only to return past midnight. Mrs. Yokoi asked, ‘Where is the money?’ and he answered, ‘I don’t have any.’

“I really didn’t know what to do. Now I couldn’t pay Hiroshima-ya for food and lodging. I asked the proprietress of Hiroshima-ya if she knew of any job I could do. She told me there would be some work at the cannery in the fall. But I couldn’t wait until fall; I needed the money right away. I had no money, not a penny. My husband had gambled away all of our money.

“I had to find a job, but it wasn’t easy for a woman to do. Finally, I found a job posting in a Japanese paper for a waitress at the restaurant Yoshino. The madam at the restaurant was a good woman, and she told me to simply serve the meals; that’s it, nothing else. I worked there for three and half years.”

By the end of the Taisho era, the number of Japanese women had greatly increased. The proportion of men to women became about two to one, but still there were many single men. Alongside stories of adultery, the common type of gossip that filled the Letters to the Editor column of the *Tairiku Nippô* were rumours about

restaurant waitresses. It was common for men to compete with each other to see who could conquer more good-looking waitresses. Some waitresses would even willingly play into the game. That is why the job of waitress was often looked upon with suspicious eyes. Mrs. Yokoi took the job because the madam at the Yoshino told her to serve meals, and nothing else.

“When things started to settle down a bit, I took my husband to a hospital, of course. In the hospital room, he opened a window, stuck his head outside, and started to breathe heavily. I asked him what he was doing, and he said, ‘I’m choking to death because of the poison gas. I’m trying to get fresh air.’ The doctor told me not to open it any wider, fearing that my husband might jump out of the window to kill himself. My husband kept shouting at me to open the door. I didn’t know what to do.

“It was decided to send him to a mental hospital, so the doctor started to fill in a form. At that point, my husband managed to come out of the examination room. He yelled at the doctor, ‘What are you trying to make my wife do? What are you two doing over here?’ Well, the doctor felt that his pride was hurt, I guess. He said to me ‘Okay, okay, you can just take him home now.’

The doctor wasn’t worried about my husband’s condition at all; he didn’t care. I had no choice but to take my husband home. It was terrible, awful! It was really tough. I lost a lot of weight around then.”

Is there such a thing as a living hell in this world? Mrs. Yokoi spoke as if a spirit had overtaken her. I saw fire in her eyes. They were the eyes of a person who had experienced hell. She recounted the hellish days she had to live through, dealing with fear in every moment. I felt some kind of demonic spirit emanating from her across the dimly lit guest room, and felt heaviness in my chest.

The two of us mutually agreed to divorce

“He never liked me to go out and work before, but when I started working this time, my husband was very happy. That’s no wonder; he took all the money I made and gambled it away. Well, actually the worst thing he did was to scheme to send our children back to Japan. While I was at work, he had to look after the children, you see, so he couldn’t go gambling. That’s why he wanted to send them back. He asked his acquaintance, without my knowledge, to take my children there. He told me to borrow \$100 from someone, anyone, so his friend could take them. I told him that I wouldn’t. I said that sending our children to Japan would not be not good for them. Then he threatened me, ‘Are you trying to kill me? If you don’t agree, I’ll go insane.’”

Suddenly Mrs. Yokoi stopped for a moment, then changed the topic. She started to talk about a pawn shop in Chinatown. After spending all the money he could get his hands on, her husband started to sell their belongings, such as coats, furniture, or anything that he could pawn for more money. One day, he took her handbag woven with delicate chains, a wedding gift from Mrs. Yokoi’s friend. It was a very special handbag that meant a great deal to her. Her husband was grouchy when he reported, ‘The pawn shop owner told me, “Why don’t you leave at least this one for your wife?”’ Mrs. Yokoi thought it almost comical that even a greedy pawn shop owner felt pity on her. In the end, there was only a bed and a sewing machine in the room. They were too heavy for her husband to take to the pawn shop.

As I listened to her story about the pawn shop, I started to worry that I might miss the opportunity to hear what happened to her children. The general rule I followed during my interviews was that when the interviewee’s story was flowing well, I kept my questions to a minimum so as not to interrupt the flow. I let the interviewee tell her story freely as she pleased. I could sort out the chronological order of the content later, during editing, and the order in which she told me her story often gave me a clue to which incidents had left the strongest impression on her. However, at this moment, my sixth sense told me not to follow the general rule. I had a strange feeling that if I didn’t interrupt now, Mrs. Yokoi might

never talk about her children. I suspected that she was avoiding the topic.

I had to interrupt her. I asked her:

“What happened to your children?”

She flinched, and her face immediately became pale.

“In the end ... I sent my children to Japan. And ... all of them ... died.”

Everything stopped. I felt something heavy sink down deep into the dark chasm between us. Several minutes passed while I waited for her next words. She was agonizing at the bottom of the abyss. How could I treat a frail old woman with such cruelty? I was overcome by guilt, feeling as if I were a predatory animal waiting to attack my defenceless prey. My breathing became shallow and fast.

“It was ... really painful. Terrible. It was by far the most painful experience I ever had. Even now, it gives me such pain just thinking about it. At that time, they were four, six, and eight; all of them so cute! The oldest one was a girl. She was very good at writing. She joined Sôka Gakkai [a religious organization; a Buddhist sect], and helped with the editing of its newsletter. She died two years ago from a stroke. The next one was a boy; he was handicapped. He had a learning disability. Very quiet and shy, and often cried when he was scolded even a little bit. He was helping on a farm in Japan. He also passed away.

“The youngest one was the smartest of the three. After an operation for appendicitis, there were some complications, and he died. My mother was still alive then, and she was at his bedside all the way through. She wrote to me that he passed away while sleeping. He was 15 or 16.

“Every time I see a child about four years old, I remember my children; I can still see their sad faces clearly. I feel particularly bad about my youngest child. On the deck of the ship, the two older children stood close together, hand in hand, looking at me. The youngest one just stood and stared at me with his eyes wide open. He just stared at me. He didn't say anything ... he wasn't even crying. He just stared at me ...”

A stream of tears began to flow down Mrs. Yokoi's cheeks. She must have been struggling with a deep remorse that she, as a woman, and as a mother, had not been able to raise her own children. Imagine the pain she must have endured! She became 88 years old without ever seeing her children or parents again. "I felt so ashamed and embarrassed to go back to Japan." These words made me realize that it was not only men who left Japan with high hopes for success and a triumphant homecoming.

"But in the end, you know, I honestly think that God was watching over me and protected me. One day, my husband showed up at the Yoshino restaurant where I worked while I was with the proprietor and the chef. My husband said to me, quite shamelessly and right in front of everyone, 'Hey, which do you want? Do you want to give me money and divorce me, or do you want me to keep coming to you for more money?' I was caught off guard and totally flabbergasted. I told him, 'You know, you got every penny you could get out of me. If you want a divorce, it's you who must give money to me!' But then the proprietor suggested kindly, 'Missus, if you have any money, why don't you give it to him? Don't you think that would be better for you?'

"I decided that his suggestion was right. I brought my bank book and showed it to my husband. It had a balance of \$51, filled with small deposits of 10 cents or 50 cents.

"I told him, 'This is everything I have. I don't really want to give it to you, but I will, if ...' I said no more. I didn't even ask him for a divorce. Well, my husband was happy to hear that. He came back the next day to pick up the money.

"Now, I want to show you something. Please take a look."

Mrs. Yokoi staggered to her feet. The effects of her recent stroke had made her unstable. She tottered over to a nearby shelf. I wondered what she was trying to find. She grabbed a worn-out black leather handbag from a shelf and tried to walk back to her chair. I instinctively offered her my hand to help. She grabbed my hands and exclaimed in surprise:

"Wow, your hands are so soft and smooth. My hands are bony; so dry and rough. See?"

Her hands were bony, gnarled, and leathery, reflecting the many years of hard physical labour she had had to endure. Holding her bony hands tightly in mine, I could not hold back my tears. Imagine how soft and smooth her hands must have been when she arrived in Canada! Overcome with sorrow, I just stood there, holding her hands and letting my tears run down my cheeks.

Mrs. Yokoi opened the black leather bag and very carefully pulled out an old document.

Upon their mutual agreement, the two undersigned parties have decided to divorce each other effective immediately. There shall be no provisions whatsoever for financial support or any other responsibility between each other, now or in the future. This contract is certified true by the two parties signed below.

The names of Mrs. Yokoi and her husband were written below and certified with their seals. The date was April 16, 1924 (the 13th year of Taisho). With the payment of \$50, she exchanged this contract and divorced her husband. "I was not at all emotional," she said. Three or four years later, her husband died from excessive drinking.

At that time, a brand of Japanese sake produced in Vancouver called Kaede Masamune was popular. This sake contained a large amount of salicylates as a preservative, which were quite toxic. The sake was said to have killed many Japanese immigrants. Mrs. Yokoi's husband was one of those. Incidentally, there was a rumor that Etsu Suzuki, husband of Toshiko Tamura, also drank too much of this sake and suffered from ulcers as a result.

After the divorce, Mrs. Yokoi trained as a dressmaker to support herself. Her second husband was a *nisei*; a kind, good-natured man who would never hit a woman. He passed away a few years prior to the interview. Mrs. Yokoi now lived with the children she had with her second husband. Both sons were very good to their parents, she told me contentedly.

“Well there, I told you everything. My stories are all true. There are no lies. I had a good day. Please come visit again.”

She walked me to the door. Her eyes were clear. The calm atmosphere that surrounded her must have come from the deep satisfaction of finally having released all the things she had had to hold inside for such a long time.

I, on the other hand, felt a heavy weight on my shoulders. I stepped onto the sidewalk, exhausted, and began walking towards the subway station. I slowed my pace and looked back. Mrs. Yokoi was standing by the window, watching me.





Examples of photos exchanged: Tamaki Toda age 17 picture bride photo ca.
1917. JCCC 2020.03.02.02.08





Takashi Toda exchange photo ca. 1917. JCCC 2020.03.02.01.011

Chapter 6

Picture Brides in Raymond



Kojun and Ito Iwaasa, Raymond Alberta 1915. Photo courtesy of Iwaasa family

A young girl depends on her parents, a married woman depends on her mister

“As a young girl I depended on my parents; as a married woman I depended on my mister; and as an old woman I depend on the government.”

A picture bride once told me the above; she almost sang it. Among the *nikkei* immigrants of the time, “mister” meant husband.

I was in a lovely village beside a lake, speaking to an old woman who was living on a pension from the Canadian government. Her wrinkled face smiled as she told me that she lived her entire life depending on someone else. This marked the beginning of my interest in making a journey to learn about picture brides. Her story left a strong impression on me, because I happened to hear it while I was mulling over the issue of women’s independence.

Five years later, when I tried to contact her, the old woman was already gone. Many of the old people I had become acquainted with had passed away. The village had boasted as many as four picture brides the last time I visited there. Now only one old woman remains, and she was not willing to share the story of her past. This made me think: In ten years time, there may not be any picture brides left anywhere.

It was while I was caught up in these thoughts that a friend informed me that there might be three picture brides in a town called Raymond, near Lethbridge. Lethbridge, Alberta ... the name somehow rings a bell, I thought. I hopped on a little propeller plane with that thought in the back of my head.

At the airport, I was greeted by two *issei* elders, Mr. Matsuki and Mr. Ôishi. The former was 90 years old; he came to Canada in the sixth year of Taisho (1917). The latter was 80; he had lost his first wife a few years earlier. He had remarried half a year ago and was accompanied by his new wife, a young and beautiful woman. Both gentlemen looked young, appearing to be only in their early 70s.

Raymond was about 18 miles from Lethbridge, roughly a 20-minute drive.

Mr. Matsuki told me that those who immigrated before the war (WWII) were called the *Senjûsha* (early settlers), and those who were forcibly dispersed from British Columbia to this area during the war were called the *Shinjûsha* (new settlers). Nowadays, however, the number of the *Senjûsha* has dwindled considerably, so the *Shinjûsha* group is the driving force in the community; so I was told.

I was not aware of the fact that there had been a community of Japanese settlers in Alberta since before the war. Ninety percent of the *nikkei* population was concentrated in British Columbia before the war—a stark contrast to the current spread of *nikkei* all over Canada. It seemed unreal to me, like a children's fairy tale, to learn that there had been a tiny community of Japanese immigrants in a village in the middle of the Alberta prairie since well before the war.

All of a sudden, Mr. Matsuki loudly asked Mr. Ôishi, the driver, to stop.

“Look at that!”

On our left stood a large signboard. It had English writing on the right and Japanese on the left.

“This is the entrance to Raymond. The board tells you something about the Japanese people here. You should probably take a photo.”

Mr. Matsuki strode toward the signboard, apparently not noticing the fierce wind; I found out later that this area was well known for strong winds. I walked behind him, holding my camera firmly to keep it from blowing away. The wheat field in front of us

was snarling in the wind. On the creaking and rattling signboard was the concise history of the *nikkei* in Raymond.

Settlement of the nikkei people

In 1904, a group of over one hundred Japanese people moved here from Vancouver, B.C., to work as labourers in the beet fields of Knight's Sugar Factory. When the company closed down in 1914, half of those workers became farmers/homesteaders to raise wheat and/or vegetables and settled down. During the 1920s, nikkei immigrants worked as coal miners in Lethbridge, Hardieville, Coalhurst, and Staffordville. Some of them had families. In 1942, soon after the start of the Second World War, all Japanese Canadians were ordered out of the Pacific coast. Many moved into this area and worked in beet production. Since then, Japanese Canadians have made significant contributions in all areas of Canadian society.

To sum up, there were three distinct groups of Japanese immigrants in Raymond. The first wave happened in the 37th year of Meiji (1904); these were the labourers working in beet production. There is a theory that the father of S.Y. Hayakawa, who once served as a senator in the U.S., brought the labourers with the assistance of the Japan-Canada Employment Agency. The second group was comprised of coal miners, who arrived around the ninth year of Taisho (1920). Around this time, some Japanese, like Mr. Matsuki, were also brought in to work on the farm. The third wave was the group who moved in at the beginning of WWII (that is, some of the Japanese Canadians who were forcibly removed from the Pacific coast). Today, the first wave of immigrants has all passed away.

“This town, you know,” Mr. Matsuki continued, “was originally founded by *hakujin* from the state of Utah, but only about three years later, Japanese immigrants started to move in. So, in fact,

one-third of the present beat field in town was broken in by Japanese. Both groups were farmers after all, and they got along fine. When I arrived here, the stores had electric lights, but the ordinary houses had only oil lamps. Things stayed that way for a long time.”

Women of the “Brothel of Canada”

While I was recording Mr. Matsuda’s memoirs, something was bugging me, tugging at my subconscious from the depths of my memory. It took me a while, but it finally came back. Even before the first wave of Japanese immigrants came into this area in the 36th year of Meiji (1903), there must have been a number of Japanese living in nearby Lethbridge. And most of them were women.

The name of the place, Lethbridge, appeared in *Brothels of Canada*. This book was published in March of the 43rd year of Meiji (1910) by Tairiku Nippô, a publishing company in Vancouver. It was a compilation of reports on Japanese-operated brothels that were scattered around Canada. Lethbridge was one location among some 30 places where brothels were in operation.

The 20th year of Meiji (1887), when the ocean route between Yokohama and Vancouver was established, marked the beginning of the “export” of a large number of Japanese women to Canada. Those women were sent to places like coal mining towns around the Interior of Canada to engage in their business, rather than being put to work in the Vancouver area where many Japanese men lived. A reporter for the *Tairiku Nippô* travelled around these towns to write a report in the 41st year of Meiji (1908). Shôhei Nagata reported meeting a woman who had been working for as long as 20 years.

In the 26th year of Meiji (1893), the Foreign Ministry issued an order forbidding overseas travel by prostitutes. Despite this decree, however, the trafficking of women continued by exploiting legal loopholes. *The Daily Colonist* (an English-language paper published in Victoria) dated April 20 in the 33rd year of Meiji (1900) carried a personal note by a reporter who happened to meet 17 “Geisha girls from Mikado land” on board a ship from Yokohama. It was quite likely that those young Japanese women were prostitutes, since this was before the rise of the practice of picture brides.

Brothel of Canada told a story of a woman called O-Hana. A certain Tajima, O-Hana’s husband, was not able to re-enter Canada because he could not obtain a visa from Japan due to his past misdeeds of trafficking prostitutes to America and Canada.

O-Hana was a woman originally from Kyoto and was known to have been working as a prostitute in San Francisco. She was an incredibly tough woman; she wasn’t the least bit daunted by the fact that her husband Tajima could not re-enter Canada to rejoin her. She had a pet dog, and its name was quite outrageous; she named her dog “Tôgô.” What an insult to Admiral Tôgô!

My faint memory of this story and other episodes about prostitutes in Lethbridge were hidden inside me, and that’s why the name Lethbridge rang a bell.

Mr. Matsuki, the oldest Japanese Canadian in Raymond, crossed the ocean from Japan in the sixth year of Taisho (1917), which was during WWI. Although he lived in a more recent era, I thought he might know something about the prostitutes. While I knew the topic might make him uncomfortable, I plied him with a few questions.

“Well, that’s right, there were still some remnants of that kind of woman when I arrived here. A man from the same region as I came from was pimping here after having gambled away his fortune. I guess he was desperate. He was planting potatoes; that

was his work, supposedly. I've been to his place a few times. Mind you, not to buy service, but just to see him for a visit."

Pimping behind the curtain while ostensibly producing potatoes—such a fitting story for the era. Mr. Matsuki, being a gentleman, never spoke ill of other people. He only said, "They always got along fine with each other," when he talked about people who had lived before him. All residents in the Raymond area must have lived much like family members with each other. It was the one and only Japanese community east of the Rockies, after all. Even when he talked about a pimp, who must have been regarded as a disgrace to their community, his tone was warm and forgiving. It seemed overly forgiving when Mr. Matsuki described the pimp like this:

"When you run a business, you know, it's inevitable to see some thug come by and try to extort money. I guess the pimp felt sorry for women, and maybe that's why he tried to protect them.

"O-Chika-san must have been past 50; she was close to retirement age. *Hakujin* (white guys) couldn't tell because of her makeup; she looked younger than her age. She only took white, lower-class workers, and never Japanese men. Even while I was there, she would just say, 'Excuse me for a moment,' and go upstairs to take care of her customer.

"She would often serve me nice cold watermelon or treat me at the restaurant. She enjoyed being generous. She actually wasn't one of those women who were imported to be a prostitute. Things somehow turned out that she became one after she had come here."

Mr. Matsuki hesitated and stopped talking, as if there was something he wasn't comfortable discussing. I barely managed to refrain from asking, "Did she come as a picture bride?"

The end of an "Absurd Picture Marriage"

There is a chapter called “Absurd Picture Marriage” in *Brothel of Canada*. You can roughly divide prostitutes into three types. One is women who were sold and sent following negotiations, knowing full well they would become prostitutes; second is those who came for education or other reasons, but were forced to become prostitutes through deception; and third is women who came originally as picture brides.

The main character in “Absurd Picture Marriage” is a woman named Kaneno, a native of Saga prefecture. Her husband, whom she had totally depended on, abandoned her and returned to Japan. At this time, she was approached by a man who managed the brothel in Alberta. According to the words of the author, Shôhei Nagata, “She felt despondent in a foreign land with no one to rely on, and thus was susceptible to any offer that came her way. That is why she allowed the devil to take advantage of her vulnerability, who eventually sent her into a brothel.”

Later she gave birth to a stillborn baby. Rumour has it that it was likely a pimp’s baby. In his writings, Shôhei Nagata was never sympathetic to prostitutes. He declared that people who “make easy money soaked with cheap perfume scent” were a disgrace to the rest of us. Nagata, however, made one exception to this; he was not very critical of Kaneno. In particular, the closing sentence of the chapter demonstrates his sympathetic tendency:

“Kaneno is 25 years old now. She has lost control of much of her body due to rheumatism, but she must continue to engage in this ill-fated profession to make her living.”

There is nothing more tragic than to see a woman in poor health having to sell her body for a living. It is even more tragic and heart-wrenching that it happened to a respectable woman who first came as a picture bride. I must point out that it would constitute a grave insult to respectable picture brides if you think that many picture brides ended up as prostitutes like this.

I hesitated to ask any further questions about the woman called O-Chika-san. I did not want to ask Mr. Matsuki any questions that could appear insensitive; I was about to interview three picture brides with his introduction.

“In olden days, you know, it sometimes got as cold as 40 degrees Celsius below zero in winter, so we could hardly go outside. And in summer, on the other hand, the heat of the sun was so strong, it pierced through a thin blouse. There was no way you could work in a field without a hat. It was that kind of harsh climate that picture brides from Japan had to survive in, you know.

“After nearly half a century, though, it’s gotten quite a bit warmer, and the winter isn’t as cold. Kind of strange, but it’s much easier these days.”

I suspect it wasn’t just the climate that was getting easier to cope with; their everyday life must have also become much easier. As I listened to Mr. Matsuki’s story, my thoughts could not help but return to the prostitutes from Japan who had lived out their lonely, tragic lives in this foreign land. Although the picture brides had to endure terrible hardships in clearing and cultivating the land with their husbands, and in fighting the brutally harsh climate, they were rewarded later if they stayed with their husband. That was not the case for the prostitutes, whose sacrifices never brought any reward. The voice of the old woman singing “As a young girl I depended on my parents ...” returned to me, and I pitied the prostitutes who perished all alone in the vast prairies of Canada without anyone to depend on. There must have been no such light-hearted phrase for them to sing.

My mother went to the shrine every morning in her bare feet

The first interviewee that Mr. Matsuki introduced to me was Mrs. Kôno (pseudonym), which was not her real name. She did not want her real name to be used, she explained, because of an unpleasant

experience she had had a few years earlier when a reporter from a Japanese newspaper barged into her home and treated her rudely. I was amazed that a Japanese newspaper could send a reporter to the remote Interior of Canada.

Mrs. Kôno crossed the ocean from Japan in the 13th year of Taisho (1924). It was in the third year of Showa (1928) when the total ban on picture brides was enacted. In reality, however, the number of picture brides allowed had been drastically reduced for several years preceding that. So, Mrs. Kôno's group could very well have been the last.

"I'm old now and so is my brain, you know, so I'm not sure how well I can answer any questions. My aunt had come here two or three years before me. She sent me a photo. When I saw it, well, I wasn't particularly excited about coming here.

"I wasn't planning to remarry; well, I was married before. I started the procedure because people told me I couldn't live alone because I was still too young. I was 26, and my husband was 40 or 41. Thinking back now, I don't think my aunt told me his exact age. Actually, I came here without knowing his age."

Mr. Matsuki, who agreed to stay with me for this interview, added that there were a fair number of picture brides who came for their second marriage or for a late marriage due to family circumstances. Indeed, the late Mrs. Matsuki had been taking care of her younger brother(s) and sister(s), and before she knew it, she was already 25 or 26 years old, so she decided to marry as a picture bride. After her first husband passed away, she married Mr. Matsuki, who was still a bachelor then.

By the time Mrs. Kôno came across the ocean, all the myths about picture marriage had been smashed. There were no young women, even in villages in remote corners of Japan, who believed in the myth of money growing on trees in America. On the contrary, many tragic stories related to picture brides had been spreading across Japan.

"My parents were really worried. No one from my village had gone abroad, you know. Someone even accused my father, 'Are you

going to sell your only daughter?’ Oh, I’m telling you.

“On the day of my departure, my father knelt in front of a little roadside shrine in the village, right in the dirt, and prayed to God for my safe arrival on the far shore. As for my mother, she walked in her bare feet one and half *ri* (about six km) every morning for one hundred days to that little village shrine to pray for my health and safety. But both my father and mother are gone now.”

Before she travelled to Canada, Mrs. Kôno visited the parents of her husband-to-be. When asked how much money their son had sent to her, she told them. The parents were shocked that it was such a small amount, so they offered her extra money. But Mrs. Kôno firmly declined. “I came here with the only money my husband sent for me”; her words clearly demonstrated the fierce determination of a woman destined to be a pioneer’s wife.

“My husband used to be employed as a cook for cowboys on a big farm. The *hakujin* boss there said to my husband, ‘You told me that you’re going back to Japan to get a wife when you make \$1,500, didn’t you? You’ll never make \$1,500 working here.’ I guess that’s why he started farming for himself. I arrived just after he became independent; poorest of poor, really.”

When she left Japan, Mrs. Kôno knew that she was moving into the remote Interior on the other side of the Rockies, past Vancouver. Even so, her new life in Raymond was severe beyond her imagination. Before she began describing her hardships as a newlywed, I asked her to tell me a few stories about her first meeting with her husband in Victoria. One of her stories caused even Mr. Matsuki, who must have heard many picture bride stories, to gasp with astonishment and exclaim, “Wow, really?”

There was no divorce

“Around that time, there were many picture brides and many visitors coming from Japan, so just telling each other to look for a Japanese person wouldn’t work. We decided that we would both wear some kind of marker; I put a white ribbon on my chest, and so did he. We recognized each other right away.”

“Well, well. What a romantic meeting it was! Hmm ... white ribbons, eh?” Apparently, Mr. Matsuki was impressed.

“Romantic? Oh, no, it wasn’t like that at all,” Mrs. Kôno continued.

“What did we say to each other when we met for the first time, you ask? Well, we couldn’t say ‘hello’ in English, you know; that would be kind of strange. So, we had to say, ‘*Hajime mashite*’ (equivalent of: Nice to meet you). Well, what else? Then we said, ‘*Yoroshiku onegai shimasu*’ (equivalent of: Pleased to meet you, but literally: Let’s be nice to each other.) At that point, I really had no idea what to expect in my new life.

“You see, he had to bring Western-style clothes for me to wear when he met me in Victoria. But he was too poor to buy any. So, the wife of his former boss gave him a bunch of her used clothes. That’s what he brought for me. In Vancouver on the way to Raymond, he bought me an overcoat made of cotton, kind of coarse and heavy. I don’t know how much he had to pay for it. By the time we arrived in Raymond after the long train ride, he had only \$15 left, he told me. That’s how it was.

“He told me that he hadn’t been able to send me a letter because he couldn’t afford to buy a five-cent stamp. Well, I couldn’t believe it at the time; that can’t be, it’s only five cents! But then, some time later, I actually found myself faced with that situation too. I really couldn’t afford to buy a five-cent stamp!”

Everything was so different from how her aunt had described it. It turned out that her aunt was lonely, so she wanted to have someone to talk to. By the time Mrs. Kôno realized that, it was too late. Before long, she had several children one after another, so now she had no choice but to keep working feverishly in the fields under the scorching sun with a newborn baby on her back.

“We all built our own houses, you know; just a little shack with a single-pitched roof, more like a storage shed for grain than a house. We put up some posts, then set up boards as walls; used newspaper or something to seal the cracks to keep the cold wind out; just a kitchen and a bedroom, you know. In wintertime when I woke up, I would find snow piled up on my pillow.

“Our bathtub was made of steel, big and round, just like taking a bath in an outside bathtub to cool off in Japan, only big enough for one person. Much later, we built a wooden bathtub like an ordinary bath other townspeople might have.”

As time went by, the farm work became easier with the help of the eight children she raised, and their life got better little by little. For most picture brides, WWII wreaked havoc just as things were improving and becoming stable. All of the hard-earned fortunes they had built were suddenly taken away; they lost everything. Albertan picture brides, however, went through a different experience.

“You see, we didn’t have to move anywhere, even during the war. And that’s not all. In that year, we had a very poor wheat harvest: only 200 bushels per half section, due to drought. The manager of a store called Mercantile, he was a *hakujin*, you know, said to me kindly, ‘Don’t worry. Just pay for the coal and flour. I’ll let you take the other stuff you need. Don’t let your kids go hungry.’ He allowed me to take groceries on credit, even though he knew that I couldn’t possibly pay him back by the end of the year.”

In stark contrast to the *nikkei* population in B.C., who were subjected to constant discrimination and fear, the *nikkei* in Raymond managed to survive a few years of disastrous crop failures thanks to the generous help they received from white people in town. This was when they fully appreciated their good fortune of having come to Alberta as picture brides.

“But remember, we all believed that Japan would win the war, didn’t we?” Mr. Matsuki interjected in thoughtful reminiscence.

Nikkei men eagerly gathered around a radio to get the most recent news, convinced that Japan would emerge victorious. They danced with joy at the news of the passing of (Franklin D.)

Roosevelt. They exchanged comments like “Now that he’s gone, Japan is sure to win,” or “The Americans are in trouble now.” It was said that some of them even plotted to deliver a can of gasoline to Japanese fighter planes if and when they made an emergency landing in the area en route to attacking Canada. ‘Naïve’ is the only adjective that fits their simple patriotism. That was all the more reason for their disappointment at the news of Japan’s defeat.

After the war, Mrs. Kôno made several trips back to Japan. Like the other picture brides, however, she preferred to stay in Canada.

“I don’t want to go back to live in Japan anymore. My legs are getting weak, and my hearing is poor. I feel quite comfortable living here. I have nothing to worry about. The government (pension) is looking after me all right. My children are good to me, too. In Raymond there were no divorces at all. Even if you got divorced, well, it would have been impossible to go back to Japan anyway.”

Her last sentence hit me very hard. For these women, separation or divorce was a luxury they could not afford. Her words evoked both the inner strength and the sad reality of the people who ventured out of the ordinary to live in this isolated outpost.

Soon to be 84 years old, with her husband already gone, and all her children living independently on their own, Mrs. Kôno lives quietly by herself in a large house.

I had my babies at home, of course

Mrs. Isa Koyata, who lived near Mrs. Kôno, was 86 years old, born in the 29th year of Meiji (1896). She came to Canada in the sixth year of Taishô (1917).

“I was a picture bride. Like many others, my relatives helped me to find my husband. He was from Tokyo, but I was from Shiga

prefecture, from Hikone machi, present-day Hikone city, you know. Back in those days, the ship from Japan would arrive in Victoria. It was a nice boat. It didn't sway or roll too badly. It was a nice voyage.

“My husband [she called her husband ‘Papa-san’] and I were about 10 years apart in age; he was about 36 then. He was waiting for me in Victoria. Yes, I recognized him right away. I had no problem on the ship. I was in Japanese clothes, and changed into a skirt and a hat when I arrived in Victoria. My husband apparently had them made for me and brought to Victoria. They fitted me just fine.

“There was a kind of wedding ceremony, sort of. Yes, we did sign a form, I guess at the consulate office. We had to sign, and they took our fingerprints, too. Nothing to it, though. No big deal. And then right away we boarded a train and came here. So, I've been here for a long time.”

Mrs. Koyata was very matter of fact. She made it sound as if everything was quite easy, quite ordinary. Behind her casual manner of talking, however, was a story full of hardships as tough as the pioneers of the Wild West.

“Oh yes, I had my babies at home, of course. It's easy, nothing to it, really. I washed everything I needed first and had some boiled water ready, then I had the baby. My husband was always working in the field, so sometimes the baby was already born before he came home.

“Those days nobody was talking about anyone particularly being hardy and tough or anything like that. Everybody was in a similar situation. Well, sure, I can't say it was easy to raise nine children. I certainly went through a lot of hardships. Sometimes I had to work in the field with one baby on my back and another one beside me.”

- [Photo: Isa Koyata and Raymond Nokai, Raymond ca. 1916](#)

This story reminded me of my previous interviewee, Mrs. Kôno. She had told me, “When I had a baby at home, I read a supplement

to the magazine *Shufu no Tomo* (Homemaker magazine), and that served like a real doctor.”

Even in its heyday, Raymond’s *Nikkei* population was only about 150, so it was not practical to have a midwife in residence.

“I grew all kinds of things in the field. In those days we were growing wheat like many other farmers did. We did have some machines, but they were old! We pulled it by hand, like this. And we also had cows, so it was a lot of work.

“Back then we couldn’t find pants for women, so I worked in the field in my husband’s pants that were too big and really baggy.

“The standard size of a farm was one-half section; that’s 320 acres, you know. That’s too much to handle for just two of us, so we had a helper, a boy from Japan.

“Our cash income came only from wheat, but the harvest varied from year to year. Sometimes strong winds blew all the crops away.”

Nikkei settlers around Vancouver were able to obtain any Japanese food they wanted by going to Little Tokyo. People’s eating habits changed very little, no matter how long they lived in a foreign country. Even after many years of wearing Western clothes, speaking English, and bathing in a Western-style bathtub, Japanese people never went without a bowl of rice and a cup of miso soup in their regular diet. A large portion of *nikkei* immigrants enjoyed the traditional cuisine of their home country. In Raymond, however, that was a luxury beyond their means.

“We used to eat bread a lot. We served slices of toast to our nine children with pork or beef from animals we raised ourselves. That’s the only way to feed ourselves. Well, this is a story of bygone days, but I guess that’s what you want to hear, right? Things are much better nowadays. Thank goodness.

“I used to make pickled pork. I cured uncooked pork with salt. It’s a good way to preserve pork. I would take it out as needed, and would broil or cook it with vegetables, with soy sauce and things. Even that, I couldn’t do it until soy sauce, miso, and rice became available many years later. Once a year Furuya Trading Company would come to us to take orders; things got better little by little.

“We raised chickens, too. We simply let them run around while we farmed. They got fat on their own. They also naturally laid eggs and multiplied if you left them alone. Same thing with cows and pigs; they would surprise us by coming out of their barn or pen with a newborn calf or piglets. It was fun that way. We once had a horse, but it was afraid of bridges. Horses were frightened by bridges, you know. I felt uneasy pulling a horse over a bridge anyway. I didn’t like that. So, we didn’t use horses much.”

My husband liked Mt. Fuji

Incidentally, shortly after this interview, I stumbled upon a photo of Mrs. Koyata taken during this time of her life. It was one of the photos included in the collection on the history of *nikkei* people housed at the Galt Museum in Lethbridge. I could not believe it was the same person as the young maiden and new bride I had seen pictures of; she looked so grim and severe. So incongruous also with her current ample figure. Since the photos of her maidenhood showed such a gentle, innocent-looking face, this transformation was all the more striking. I felt that I caught a glimpse of the severe struggles that Mrs. Koyata had to endure—struggles so severe that she was not able to fully express them in words.

“I returned to Japan many times. The first time I went back with my husband was 40 years after I came to Canada. It was supposed to have happened after only three years; that was what I was told when I left Japan.

“You ask me if I liked Japan? Well, my husband liked Mt. Fuji a lot and he was quite happy. For me, actually this side [Canada] was better already.

“Even if I had wanted to return to Japan to live there, it was virtually impossible. We didn’t have money. It would have been

terribly difficult to go back with our children. We couldn't possibly manage to make ends meet in Japan."

Her husband, who was thrilled at the sight of Mt. Fuji, had passed away. Mrs. Koyata now lives quietly with her youngest daughter.

"I don't mean to brag, but my husband was a good man. He came here [to Canada] all by himself when he was a young man, so he went through a lot of hardship. But he was a kind-hearted man. I was very happy. He never scolded me. He always said, 'Yeah, yeah, that's right, that's right.' So I still talk to him often, even these days. And then when he doesn't answer me and I look around for him, I soon realize, 'Oh yeah, my husband is already gone.'"

It is a fact that the picture brides of Raymond lived very lonely lives, being east of the Rockies, isolated even from Vancouver, not to mention from Japan. Mrs. Koyata's stories, however, taught me another important truth. No matter how isolated her home may be, a woman is happy if she lives with the person she loves.

Two doctors in our family

The last person I visited in Lethbridge was Mrs. Ito Iwaasa, a resident of a nursing home. According to Mr. Matsuki, her husband was part of the earliest group of farm labourers from Japan in Raymond. The first group of Japanese labourers immigrated to Canada in the 37th year of Meiji (1904). Mrs. Iwaasa's husband was already well settled in Raymond by the 42nd year of Meiji (1909). At first, he worked at the sugar company run by Oscar Raymond Knight, the founder of Raymond. The monthly pay at the time for *nikkei* labourers was \$50 and meals. (from *The History of Raymond Buddhist Church*)

The sugar company closed in the third year of Taisho (1914). Some labourers returned to B.C., but about 40 of them purchased undeveloped land in the area to start up their own homestead. The husbands of Mrs. Isa Koyata and Mrs. Ito Iwaasa were among them. The arrival of their brides happened three or four years after that.

“When I first met my husband, I was disappointed actually, because he was so clumsy,” Mrs. Iwaasa said. “He was in fact my cousin, but of course I had never met him before. Our marriage was arranged by photos.

“When I arrived in Raymond, I was disappointed for the second time, at the sight of our house. It was in the May of the fourth year of Taisho (1915); that’s when I arrived here.

“I’m 94 years old now. People made some adjustments so I could meet the requirements for my passport and things a long time ago, so I’m 92 on my [retirement] pension record. My hometown is Hiroshima. My family there was very religious; they pray at every occasion from morning to bedtime.”

The first shock to hit the newly arrived picture brides to Raymond was the shabby, crude houses. Even in the countryside of rural Japan, everybody had electric lights in their homes at that time. But here they still used oil lamps. There were no carpenters around, so the exterior of the houses was crude and ugly.

I had noticed already that there were two conspicuous buildings in Raymond that stood out from the rest. One was a neat white house at the entrance of the former sugar company grounds. Mr. Matsuki told me that the house belonged to successive managers of the company. The fancy, grandiose appearance of the house would be a perfect fit for an expensive residential area of Vancouver. I could not help but compare, in my imagination, this luxurious mansion with the poor shacks that barely protected *nikkei* labourers against the elements.

The other was the Buddhist building. When the Buddhist association of Raymond was founded in the fourth year of Showa (1929), they purchased an old church that had become unnecessary because of the construction of a brand-new Mormon church. They chopped off the pointed steeple of the old church and redesigned it

to make it a Japanese-style Buddhist church. The final price was \$5,000, which was a substantial amount at the time. When you consider the *nikkei* population in Raymond in the early Showa era—a mere 60 adults and 20 children approximately—it is easy to surmise the heavy burden on each of the individual members.

The driving force behind the founding of the Buddhist association was Mrs. Iwaasa's husband.

“My husband is the kind of person who says ‘Okay, okay,’ and does anything he is asked to do. Most people around that time, you know, could hardly speak English. My husband came to Canada to make money so he could study Buddhism; that was his original goal. He loved to study and learn since he was young, you know. He was able to communicate in English fairly well.”

Her husband was something of a leader among the *nikkei* community, and Mrs. Iwaasa also enjoyed a reputation as a good wife and mother. On the occasion of the first visit of a Japanese consul to inspect the status of *nikkei* in the area, it was Mr. and Mrs. Iwaasa who welcomed him.

“You [the author] came to hear my story. What I would like you to know particularly is that all of our nine children are healthy and doing very well; none of them have been in trouble with the law. Not quite all nine, but actually eight of them have been to Japan as Mormon missionaries. And then, there are two doctors in our family. Right now, my eldest son's children live in Ottawa. All of them are pretty smart and have done well at school. There are more, and one of them is a lawyer. A couple of them became doctors, and they take turns visiting us here to check on us.”

- [Photo: Kojun & Ito Iwaasa with Kinichi and Tadao Iwaasa and baby Sahie, Raymond 1916](#)

When Mrs. Iwaasa mentioned that her children served as Mormon missionaries, I was caught by surprise. I was aware that there were many Mormons in Raymond. This is a town that was built by Mormons when they emigrated en masse from Utah. The Iwaasas, however, were supposed to be devout Buddhists. When I

tried to ask her about it, she just went on with her story without answering my question. Mr. Matsuki, being an attentive listener, sensed my lingering question, and gave the following explanation after our interview. At first Mr. Iwaasa was a devout Buddhist himself, and was very active within the Buddhist association. But one day, he went through a religious conversion, and became an enthusiastic Mormon. His conversion could have happened partly because of an inner, spiritual reason, and partly because of an external reason - human relations within the Buddhist association, perhaps. Whatever it was, we will never know the exact reason for his conversion. A huge jump from Buddhism to Mormonism, it somehow seemed to me, is sort of interesting and not out-of-character for a Japanese person living in Canada.

- [Photo: Iwaasa family Raymond Alberta ca. 1920.](#)

I'll soon have *gosei* (fifth generation)* children

“When I came here to get married, I didn't get a diamond ring as they do these days. I had a new Western-style suit, a complete set, tailor-made at Inoue Dress Shop in Kôbe; that was the engagement gift for me. Well, actually, my treasurers are my seven children. All of my family members are still living; even ones who served in the war survived and returned home. I have so many grandchildren (and great-grandchildren) now; I lost track of how many I have. They are *yonseï* (fourth generation) children, but I'll soon have *goseï* (fifth generation) children, I'm sure. They are all doing well and healthy.”

Mrs. Iwaasa's interview was filled with stories of her children and her offspring from start to finish. The *issei* generation's high level of dedication to children's education is quite well known. Discrimination against Japanese people before the war even affected their choice of work. The *issei* immigrants were limited to only certain types of employment.

There were as many as 22 discriminatory laws (at the time) in total. Simply stated, Orientals were not entitled to the following: to become employees of provinces or any municipalities; to run for offices of the same; to become jurors; to run for the board of education; to be employed for a public work project; to engage in any forestry work on Crown land; to handle any chemicals or medicines; to become lawyers; to enroll in the faculties of Pharmacy or Law at the University of British Columbia. (from *Chased away with hurling rocks* 「石をもて追われるごとく」 by Mitsuru Shimpo)

In addition to these legislated discriminations, there were traditional discriminations, deep-rooted in social customs, that further limited the types of available jobs for Japanese workers to basic physical labour only. That was all the more reason why the *issei* placed their hopes for the future on their children. *Nisei* [second generation] responded well to their parents' expectations; many of them became doctors, lawyers, architects, professors, and the like.

Although the career success of one's children may not be the sole measure of one's life achievements, it is undeniably a notable attainment for anyone to have raised a doctor or lawyer in their family. The *isseis'* strong resolve to succeed, or, should I say, their almost demonic tenacity, must have come from the spirit characteristic of people who abandoned their hometown for a new, unknown world.

In Alberta, a limitless expanse of vast prairie stretches into horizon. Born on this prairie, the children of the picture brides

grew up and now live their successful lives, well integrated into Canadian society. They cleared the hurdles that their parents tried to but could not. It is a heartwarming ending.

On the return flight to Vancouver after the interviews in Raymond, I somehow had a feeling that I would revisit this town someday in the future. It did not take me long to figure out the reason for that feeling. It was the superimposition of two images in my mind—one was of those women of *Brothel of Canada* who quietly perished without salvation in their lifetime in the vast land of Canada, and the other was of those happy women who were picture brides.



Isa Koyata front row left, and Raymond Nokai, Raymond ca. 1916.
P1980016003 Courtesy Galt Museum & Archives

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Kojun and Ito Iwaasa with Kinichi and Tadao Iwaasa and baby Sahie,
Raymond 1916. Iwaasa 3-001 courtesy of the Iwaasa family.

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Iwaasa family Raymond Alberta ca. 1920. P1980016002 Courtesy Galt
Museum & Archives

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Chapter 7

Picture Brides Living in Japan



Fishing Village in Wakayama Japan 1925. NNM 2010.23.2.4.655

America-mura in Wakayama

Due to their youth or their adventurous spirit, whatever had driven these young women, picture brides crossed the ocean relying on nothing but a single photo. Now, they are in their 80s or 90s, and are spending the final stage of their lives in Canada. There is a refrain that many of the women utter with a tinge of sadness: “Even if I had wanted to go back home (to Japan), I couldn’t have anyway.”

What lies between their new country and the old is the Pacific Ocean; it would take several weeks by boat to cross its vast expanse. Women could not hope to save enough money out of their meagre allowances to pay for boat fare. As for husbands, they always refused to go home until such time they felt their original goals had been accomplished and their dreams fulfilled. When they left Japan, they had made a resolve to return home with something to show for it.

Whatever reality picture brides faced in a foreign country, even if it turned out to be far from what they had imagined, they had to deal with it, and they lived it. Time flew, and the picture brides grew old. Japanese women traditionally accepted whatever befell them as their fate that had been decided for them by heaven.

But I wondered if there were some women who couldn’t bear the harsh reality, refused to accept it as their fate, and returned home despite all the forces that tied them down.

In July of last year [1982], I visited Mio-mura (village) in Wakayama prefecture in search of picture brides who returned to live in Japan.

Having spent a comfortable summer in Vancouver where I enjoyed the nice cool climate, the heat of the glaring sun in Mio-mura was almost unbearable and gave me headaches. I stood at the tip of Hino point and opened a map. It is a point jutting out from the westernmost shore of Kii peninsula and the area where Mio-mura is located. Mio-mura is also known as America-mura because it sent off a large number of immigrants to Canada during the Meiji and Taishô eras (approx. 1888 to 1920s).

One of the peculiar geographic features of Mio-mura is that it is surrounded by mountains on three sides—east, west, and north.

The south faces the Kishu-strait, part of the north Pacific Ocean. The village is a long, narrow strip of land, like a piece of bacon, with a small flat area in the western portion. Viewing this tiny village from above, with mountains on three sides and the land terminating abruptly at the ocean, it certainly is understandable that many people in this village felt the only way out was by sea.

Although popularly called America-mura, the bulk of the villagers immigrated to Canada, and many worked in the salmon fishery in Steveston, B.C.

“The villagers used to call immigration to Canada *karayuki* (literally, *going to China*, which is the same as going abroad), and when they left, they would say to each other ‘Let’s travel together’.”

This was the description given by a local historian, Mr. Shigeharu Koyama, who resides in Mio-mura. He told me that the villagers did not think it was a big deal to cross the ocean, and treated it as if they were going out to visit their neighbours. In most cases, on the other side of the ocean there were brothers, relatives and old neighbours - those who had made the move before them. Mr. Koyama himself had lived in Canada for five years, beginning in the ninth year of Showa (1934). Even today, one-third of the village population has experienced life as immigrants in North America. I suspected that it shouldn’t be too hard to find a former picture bride or two.

Mr. Koyama gave me details of village history, demography, or geography with the speed and accuracy of a computer. For instance, Mihama-chô (Mio-mura was amalgamated into Mihama-chô, the town of Mihama, in the 29th year of Showa, 1954) had 365 families, with a population of 892; more than 100 of them were over 75 years of age, 19 were over 85, and nine people were over 90; the oldest villager was an amazing 102 years old! As these statistics flowed out of the mouth of the 70-year old Mr. Koyama, I couldn’t help but admire his incredible memory.

When I asked about picture brides, however, even this living computer was not able to clearly recall if any picture brides were still living in the town; so much time had passed since then. We

came to the conclusion that the best way to find out was to visit all the old women who had returned from Canada.

I had thought that the tip of Hino point was hot, but America-mura was even hotter. As soon as we stepped into the village, we were completely enveloped by a stuffy heat wave. “This isn’t normal,” I felt. It was different from the air you would feel when you walked through ordinary Japanese villages, and I wondered where this difference came from. Then, suddenly it dawned on me that it came from the difference of the surface we were walking on. The streets were all paved, not bare soil. Whitish-looking, hard-surfaced streets snaked between the houses. It was not asphalt; it was concrete. The off-white surface reflected the heat of the sun and attacked us mercilessly. No wonder it was so hot.

Mr. Koyama explained that the paving was a symbol of the riches of this village. Mio-mura was the first in this area to pave its streets. Also, it was the first in Japan to equip its crematorium with a gas-fired incinerator. These things were possible thanks to the money that immigrants brought back to their hometown.

“If the number of people visiting home from Canada for New Year’s Day is high, then we know that they had a good catch last year. Those who returned after a successful year spent money extravagantly. Even in years when Japan’s economy was terribly poor, the sounds of hammers building new houses echoed in the village continuously. And that was the pride of Mio-mura, the immigrant village.”

I felt a twinge of guilt at Mr. Koyama’s story. I knew that Japanese immigrants in Canada in the pre-war era toiled and struggled hard, always being discriminated against, marginalized and humiliated. The longer my journey continued, collecting stories of their hardships, the heavier its weight grew in my heart. Was it because I had mindlessly listened to those stories without truly appreciating the heavy burden of discrimination and indignity they had to bear?

The stark contrast between the two extremes—the humiliation they experienced on the other side of the ocean and the sense of pride they enjoyed here at home—suddenly emerged so powerfully.

I flinched at my own thoughtlessness; how had I missed this until now?

I went without even exchanging pictures

Mr. Koyama took me around to visit the homes of every old woman who had returned from Canada. Here and there stood Western-style houses with horizontal siding painted in bright colours; they stood out among the ordinary Japanese houses. America-mura was a unique and strange place indeed. On the whitish pavement of the street, you could even spot the occasional black snake laying in a coil. The unbearable heat of this tropical-looking place must have been a key factor in driving the villagers over the ocean. Fishing villages of this region boasted a notable history of having sent hordes of men hundreds of kilometres away to Kujûkuri-hama (east of Tokyo) as seasonal workers, as far back as three hundred years ago.

We had a hard time finding a picture bride among the 140 returnees from Canada in the village. Finally, when the sun was about to set, Mr. Koyama found an old woman watering plants in a tiny garden beside her house, and he asked her if she had been a picture bride. The answer she gave him made an unforgettable impression on me.

“I went to Canada without even exchanging pictures, without seeing the picture of my future husband.”

It is bold enough for a young woman to dive into a new and unknown life, trusting a single picture. It is beyond my comprehension that she would be willing to take a chance on marrying a man without taking a single look at his picture. I stood there dumbfounded and speechless. But Mr. Koyama was unfazed and explained:

“In those days, there was no photo studio in Mio-mura. I doubt that there were any even in Gobô city. Quite a few people of Mrs. Nakatsu’s generation, as a matter of fact, went to Canada without pictures, totally trusting their matchmakers’ words.”

This was one form of matchmaking, I suppose; one notch more primitive than matchmaking with a picture. Of course, there is no sense in judging past styles of marriage arrangement with current values. After all, what is the actual difference between arranged marriages with or without pictures? When you get married to a man overseas, it does not make much difference whether you see a picture of him. You never know if the picture is genuine or fake anyway. This is the only way to interpret women’s thinking here. It was the same thing for the men, who accepted women as their brides without seeing their pictures. Necessity took priority over feelings in finding mates for these cases.

Thanks to Mr. Koyama’s introduction, the old woman graciously welcomed me into her home, despite the fact that I was a total stranger to her.

“I was born in the 23rd year of Meiji (1890). They say the world is full of never-ending hardships and struggles. Look at me; I prolonged my tough life as much as 93 years.

“In those days, we often left home to get married without even seeing a picture or exchanging letters or anything. But it wouldn’t be kind to our parents if I didn’t go. So, I decided to give it a try anyway.

“My husband’s name was Yasutarô Nakatsu. When I met him in Victoria, he said he didn’t even know I was coming. What an easygoing, carefree attitude! He insisted that his neighbours take care of all of the arrangements, so he didn’t know anything at all. ‘That’s ridiculous,’ the helper at the harbour scolded him, ‘It’s impossible.’ Well, it’s a good old story.”

The engagement between Mrs. Nakatsu and her fiancé was finalized when she was 20 years old. She did not get called to travel to Canada for a long time, however; she had to wait until she was 26. She joked about her husband’s happy-go-lucky personality. The

fact of the matter, though, was that Mrs. Nakatsu herself took everything in stride. She waited many years for her wedding day, trusting her friends who had arranged the marriage. Nonchalant attitude indeed. She didn't know anything about the formalities and procedures of travel, costs for the wedding, or any such things, because she left them entirely to her friends. A sort of fatalistic air surrounded her stories. She seemed to think that everything in her life had been decided even before she was born, and she readily accepted it, for better or worse. This attitude must have been a coping mechanism for the people who lived in that era, who didn't have much choice but to accept what befell them.

It's my fate to be born without good fortune

“It was a pity how my husband died. He drowned in the ocean. He seldom went to sea by himself. But on that evening, he meant to go out just for a little bit, and never came back. The boat was found drifting the next morning with the engine still running. Nobody saw what had happened to him. Local people said that a drowned body would float to the surface only once, and you had to pick it up then. If the body sank for a second time, it would never come back up, because there were lots of huge starfish in this area. Many, many people came out to search for him, but couldn't find him. We took our eldest son, Kan-ichi, in the hope that it might help, but it didn't work. One person even said that a chicken on board might do the trick, but that was just a superstition and it didn't work. No matter what we did, we never found his body, even to this day. So, I said to my husband's spirit that I would be with him sooner or later. Other people might say, 'Are you crazy, what are you talking about? Don't think about dying.' Well, I have been living like that ever since.”

This incident happened when Mrs. Nakatsu was 34 years old. Her husband had not even reached 40. Her relatives in Canada, concerned about the new widow, got together to discuss her future. The conclusion they reached was: “We are all hard-pressed with our own lives to make ends meet. You have to choose your own future path as you wish.” To this, Mrs. Nakatsu commented in exasperation, “But there was no path whatsoever that I could possibly take with any security.”

“Well, look. My husband died after only eight years. I became a widow with three children to take care of. Just thinking about those children made me cry so many times in the middle of the night. I worried so much I couldn’t raise my children to become fine adults that I went to bed with the Buddhist scripture beside my pillow every night. I really did.

“I finally decided to send my children to Japan, while I stayed and worked in Chemainus [B.C.] all by myself. I had to accept that it was my fate to be born without good fortune. So, I told myself that I had to deal with everything, no matter what. What else could I do?”

There have been many cases in which Japanese immigrants sent their children to Japan while they themselves remained in Canada. There were two reasons for that. One was education: almost all Japanese immigrants wanted to raise their children as Japanese, and therefore they tried to send their children to Japan to receive a Japanese education, even at great personal cost. In Mrs. Nakatsu’s case, however, the other reason, financial necessity, must have been the more important factor. As was the case with the majority of Japanese immigrants, the income she earned in Canada was far greater than what she could earn in Japan. No matter how severe the persecution and discrimination, she had no choice but to stay in Canada and work hard, so that she could send the money back to Japan to raise her children. That was the only path left to her as a young widow.

“It used to be twenty-five cents an hour, then. You made twenty-five cents for one hour’s work. If you worked half a day, you

got paid one dollar. But that was worth three yen if you sent it to Japan.

“I was asked at the first house where I went to look for work, ‘You speak English?’ I answered, ‘No, no, just very little.’ The woman said, ‘I show you everything,’ and she showed me what she wanted me to do. (Mrs. Nakatsu used a lot of broken English sprinkled into Japanese to describe their conversations.)

“I worked at the home of the village mayor and the home of the hospital’s head doctor. You see, I was left alone inside their homes, and a lot of money and gold jewelry and things were left on top of the vanity or chest of drawers. They were just left scattered, instead of kept in locked drawers as in Japan. I knew and they knew that it had to be me if anything went missing. That actually made me feel more responsible to do a good job, so I worked extra hard, very hard. It wasn’t a matter of money anymore.

“One day, the woman of the house came to me and said, ‘You get married twice, all right?’ She asked me if I wanted to marry again. ‘I no like it. One husband, that’s enough,’ I responded. She told me, ‘Stay home, all time no work.’ If you get married, then you could stay home and you wouldn’t have to work, she said. But to that, I said, ‘I no like.’”

It was funny to hear strings of broken English popping out of the mouth of a 93-year-old woman. Mrs. Nakatsu described herself as a woman with a Samurai spirit. Hats off, I say, to the extraordinarily strong willpower that enabled her to overcome all the hardships of her life as a widow in a strange land.

“My prayers sustained my life all the way through. In Chemainus, I was asked many times to recite a Buddhist chant for other people. I don’t mean to brag, but when I left there to return to Japan, many Chemainus people cried, even children. They said it was like saying goodbye to their mother.

“I returned to Japan when the Manchurian incident happened. My second son—I had sent him to Japan to go to school—was conscripted; he had to go to war. He said, ‘I want nothing in this world but my mother’s love.’ You know, he had no father. I was the

only parent he had. That's why I went back to Japan. I was 50 then."

The Emigrant Send-off Song

Mrs. Nakatsu did not want to talk about what her life was like after she returned to Japan, but it must have been tough. That was clearly reflected in her often-repeated words, "There was nobody more miserable than I was in this Kakiuchi-buraku (hamlet)."

When she was 77, she returned to Canada and stayed there for two years in order to qualify for a Canadian pension. Now she lives on \$150 a month, her pension from the Canadian government.

"In recent years, the Japanese yen had become stronger, so the value of my Canadian pension went down. A certain high-ranking officer at the Wakayama prefectural government asked me out of kindness: 'The pension money from America [meaning Canada] does not amount to very much at all these days. How can you make ends meet? Are you all right?' Well, I'm one tough woman. I said to him, 'I'm a Japanese woman. Whether the pension money I get is a lot or very little doesn't matter. I will get along fine with whatever I get. Thank you very much.' He just said, 'Oh, okay.' It's not easy to be a woman who became a widow at a young age. I have to convince everyone that I'm doing fine."

That is why she said, 'No thank you,' when her eldest son offered to bring her to live with him in Canada. Naturally, she had no intention of living with her second son either, who lived in Osaka. Most of her days were spent praying for the souls of her daughter, who had died young, and her late husband. In the centre of a small two-room house sat a Buddhist altar that occupied almost half the room. She would recite the Buddhist scriptures for hours on end, saying, 'When I die, there will be no one to pay

respect to the souls of the dead.' Staring straight into my eyes, she said, "The only people you can really count on in this world are parents, children and your spouse." Her statement sounded strangely profound.

After finishing her pension story, her mood changed, and she sang for me a traditional song that had been sung in Mio-mura for many years, a song to send off emigrants. The lyrics of this song were said to have been written by the Shinto priest of the Ryûô shrine in the 38th year of Meiji (1905). Mrs. Nakatsu learned this song when she was about 10 years old. Nowadays nobody else in Mio-mura remembers this song.

*Farewell to my beloved hometown Mio-mura
Full of cherry blossoms as far as the eye can see
Steveston, Vancouver is waiting for me
Leaving from Hii harbour at eight in the morn
Tonight in Kôbe, and tomorrow in Yokohama
Now leaving Yokohama harbour at last
A long voyage over the waves of the Pacific
Now out of the Sea of Japan, off the Russian coast
The dark of the night makes me homesick
Tears wet my sleeves; I wonder what fate awaits me*

She seemed to be squeezing out her voice with considerable effort. I felt the emotion behind every phrase. The song sent chills up my spine. As she sang, sitting on her heels on a tiny cushion with her back straight, I could not help but see the images of many, many picture brides joining her in chorus. In their chorus, I heard the wailing voices of so many women who had lived in a strange land across the Pacific Ocean. Deep inside me, I felt the weight of their immense suffering.

Ban on picture marriage at last, third year of Showa

Shortly after wrapping up my research trip in Mio-mura, I visited Mrs. Ogawa (pseudonym) at her home in Kobe, who was referred to me by my acquaintance. Strictly speaking, she did not fit the definition of a picture bride, but she called herself one. She was said to be a woman who did not accept her fate as a picture bride and returned to Japan. That was the kind of woman I had been searching for; that is why I decided to meet her without hesitation.

I was doubly surprised when I found out the year she had gone to Canada to marry. It was the third year of Showa (1928), when the total ban on picture marriage was enacted. The so-called Lemieux Agreement, that was established in the 41st year of Meiji (1908), was revised to reset the upper limit of Japanese immigrants into Canada to 150. The change of policy not only made it impossible for picture brides, but also extremely difficult for any Japanese to emigrate to Canada.

It was the Lemieux Agreement that had made picture marriages popular, and that also ended the practice. Picture brides and the Lemieux Agreement had a close relationship throughout their history. Before I tell you the story of the marriage of Mrs. Ogawa, who could be called the last of the picture brides, I would like to discuss the history leading to the total banning of picture marriage.

The Lemieux Agreement was established in the 41st year of Meiji (1908) in response to a flood of Japanese immigrants entering Canada in the previous year. As many as 7,601 Japanese immigrants in that year alone immigrated to Canada from Japan and from Hawaii. This was caused by a travel ban that prevented travel from Hawaii into mainland U.S. *Hakujin* must have felt seriously threatened to see hundreds, even thousands, of Japanese immigrants landing on their shores day after day. Anti-Japanese

sentiment grew rapidly, and in September 1907, it erupted into a riot when a *hakujin* mob attacked Little Tokyo in Vancouver and destroyed it. This led to the establishment of the Lemieux Agreement on January 20 in the following year.

The Agreement created restrictions on the types of immigrants in the following categories: 1. returning immigrants and their families, 2. house maids, 3. farmers and farm labourers (non-migratory farmers), and 4. contract immigrants. The annual maximum of #2 and #3 combined was set at 400. At the same time, indirect immigration via a second country was banned. (from *Historic Development of Japan-Britain Relationship*)

Sponsoring women as picture brides was a clever way to circumvent the ban on unlimited immigration. Since there still was no restriction on bringing in one's spouse and children, it was the surest and most convenient way to bring in additional labour. And, what is more, picture brides tended to bear many children. Boys, in particular, would be a welcome addition to the workforce. From the last part of Meiji through the beginning of Taisho, the number of picture brides increased sharply.

The sudden surge of picture brides backfired, however, as hostility from *hakujin* also increased. America saw the practice of picture brides attacked even more fiercely than in Canada.

On October 30 in the eighth year of Taisho (1919), the Japanese Association in America voluntarily issued a proclamation to abolish picture marriage. This proclamation caused a huge controversy among Japanese people in America and Canada. A large number of Japanese in America opposed the ban on picture marriage. Many public meetings held, and the debate even escalated into personal attacks.

The Japanese Association in Canada issued a proclamation against the ban on picture marriage: "Such practice of (picture) marriage is admittedly something to be reduced of our own accord. However, in consideration of the current reality of our people living in Canada, we must express our opposition to the resolution passed by our American counterpart to abolish picture marriage."

Certainly, there were some progressive thinkers such as Toshiko Tamura and Etsu Suzuki who supported the abolition of picture marriage. For many Japanese immigrants, though, the practice was something they could not do away with.

While heated debates continued in Japanese immigrant communities in both America and Canada, the Foreign Ministry of Japan abruptly decided to ban picture marriage. The Consulate General of Japan in Seattle issued a proclamation on December 17 of the eighth year of Taisho (1919) as follows:

Proclamation

The application for immigration visa for a woman to enter America by means of picture marriage shall not be accepted after February 25 next year (the 9th year of Taisho, 1920). Any Japanese nationals residing in America who wish to sponsor a picture bride are advised to request application forms immediately and submit all required application documents without delay to ensure they reach the Japanese government office before the aforementioned deadline. This application shall be exempt from the existing rule that states only the brides who had been married for minimum of six months are accepted.

This proclamation effectively ended the picture marriage debate in America. But in Canada, due to the existing Japan-Canada agreement, nothing was changed, and the status quo was maintained.

In January of the ninth year of Taisho (1920), the Foreign Ministry of Japan issued a proclamation allowing visas to be issued to picture brides even past the February deadline, but limiting their destinations only to Hawaii. The number of picture brides entering Hawaii climbed to as high as 650 in a single year. This figure was far greater than that of mainland America or Canada. Another reason the picture brides continued to be allowed into Hawaii was that the

wage level of Hawaiian labourers was much lower than that on the mainland, and few of them could afford to return to Japan to find a bride.

Finally, though, in the 13th year of Taisho (1924), an anti-Japanese Immigration Law put an end to visa issuance for Hawaiian picture brides. It was clear at this point that Japanese immigrants in America could no longer hope to have picture brides.

Even with all of these new laws and regulations, people continued to find loopholes to circumvent them. The *Tairiku Nippô* (Continental Journal) ran a story with the headline, “Young wife spends a transitory year with husband by entering America under the pretext of sightseeing.” The story reported that women spent six months to one year with their husbands on what would be nothing more than a present-day visitor visa.

Nine women belonging to a sightseeing tour group were spotted boarding the Arabia-maru of Osaka Merchant Ship Co., departing from Yokohama harbour on October 9th. These women are fully prepared to leave their husbands when the allowable time ends, and return to Japan. They are hoping to eventually go back to America to reunite with their husbands. These sort of return trips by women will be sure to become commonplace in the near future.

The Anti-Japanese Immigration Law was written expressly to stop Japanese immigration. Needless to say, it was met with a fierce backlash in Japan. A number of young immigrants committed suicide by *seppuku* (Japanese ritualistic suicide, or *hara-kiri*) in protest. Boycotts of American imports and American movies, and many other similar incidents occurred. Some even believed that the law played a small role in leading the two countries to war 17 years later.

When they realized that any hope of bringing a bride from Japan had been dashed, some bachelors concocted a scheme to find brides within America.

Hawaiian-born bride wanted by a young man in California

The Nuuanu International Youth Association apparently receives numerous requests from young men in search of brides. Recently, a letter from San Mateo, California, reached the Association, requesting assistance in finding a Hawaiian-born woman for a bride. -- *partially omitted* -- His requirements were: “Although her age is not my primary concern, my preference would be a woman in her twenties who is proficient in both Japanese and English. I work as a butler, so it would be perfect if she could work alongside myself.” He did not seem to care much about her looks. (from *Tairiku Nippô*, January 10, of the 13th year of Taisho, 1924)

It was interesting to know that a case as above, somewhat similar to picture marriage, did take place between California and Hawaii.

Negotiation between the governments of Japan and Canada to revise the Lemieux Agreement was begun in the 14th year of Taisho (1925). Detailed records are preserved at the Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. According to the records, the Japanese government intended to terminate the practice of picture marriage from the beginning.

In Canada, picture marriage was finally banned for good on June 1 of the third year of Showa (1928). The revised Lemieux Agreement set the upper limit of Japanese immigrants at 150, including spouses and children of immigrants already residing in Canada, both of which had been outside this limit in the past.

When reporting the conclusion of the Lemieux Agreement negotiations, however, many Canadian newspapers focused on the ban on picture brides in their headlines. The real reason why the negotiation of the Agreement took so long was not the issue of picture brides, but actually the total number of immigrants allowed. Despite this fact, headlines such as “Photo Brides Barred”

(*Vancouver Sun*, June 9, 1928) and “Nippon Photo Brides Pass Out of Picture” (*Morning Star*, June 9, 1928) spread the impression among readers that picture marriage was the main contentious issue. This type of reporting could be interpreted as an example of the deep-rooted aversion to the custom of picture marriage that existed among *hakujin*.

As a matter of fact, it was not just *hakujin* who despised picture marriage.

Just wanted to take a chance in returning home

“I didn’t like the idea at all right from the beginning. I didn’t want to marry someone based on a single picture, someone I’ve never met before. I said no; I even refused it four times. I had my own hopes and dreams, you know.”

Her tone of voice was harsh with anger. This was remarkable considering she was now already 75 years of age. Born in the 40th year of Meiji (1907), Mrs. Ogawa was 20 years old when she was coerced to get engaged in the second year of Showa (1927).

“My father always yearned to go abroad. He felt an urge to go (to America), I guess, every time he went to an international port to send someone off. That’s why he kept pushing my marriage plans as if it were himself who was going abroad. He apparently sent my picture without my knowledge. I used to be kind of a saucy girl. I guess I was considered a brash and insolent girl back in those days. I used to say ‘Well, I wouldn’t get married like that, not on a single picture.’”

The man was a naturalized *nisei*, the son of a merchant conducting business in Nihonmachi. Mrs. Ogawa instinctively knew

that two people with totally different backgrounds in upbringing and different levels of education would not get along well. But expressing such an opinion was considered disrespectful in those days. Her will, feelings, and reasoning were totally ignored, and the marriage plan was pushed ahead to the wedding day. Everything went exactly the same as with any other picture marriage, with one exception: the bridegroom came to Japan with his mother for about a month before the wedding day. Shortly after the wedding, the groom returned to Canada, leaving the bride to wait six months for the approval of her visa. She would then travel to Canada by herself to join her new husband.

“I felt like there was nothing I could do any more. I basically gave up. I just had to accept reality. What else could I do?”

“Our wedding ceremony was held at a pretty nice restaurant with lots of relatives and many guests. I wasn’t even thinking about whether marriage was good or bad for me anymore. I had never gone on a date (with a man) or anything before. When I look around at young people these days, I feel really envious of them. For me, it’s done; I can’t do it over again. I got married without a date, not even one. That’s why marriages like that often ended badly. I heard plenty of stories like that. It’s quite natural, because people got married without knowing each other.”

It is true that there were many cases of infidelity by wives of immigrants because they were forced to marry. However, Mrs. Ogawa was the first woman to criticize picture marriage so openly and harshly. At the time of her marriage, picture marriage had practically been banned. Even as it died out, picture marriage managed to ruin her life, a life she could not re-live differently. The resentment she held overwhelmed me.

Mrs. Ogawa’s husband immigrated to Canada when he was 16, summoned by his parents. Presumably for this reason, he never had the chance to mature mentally or socially. At the time of his marriage, he was still immature. Mrs. Ogawa, on the other hand, was born a daughter of a well-established, wealthy family in Kansai (western Honshû), and had a good level of education. She was an

intelligent woman. Before long, friction developed between the couple.

“I guess my mentality was different from his. You could say that I’m kind of a smart aleck. To be honest, I looked down on him. I felt I couldn’t depend on him.

“In fact, my distrust of him cropped up very early in our lives together. Well, there were many reasons for that. For one thing, none of his businesses went well at all. I helped his business as much as I could, but deep inside, I was convinced that it was all his fault. I couldn’t help but think that he could do much better if he tried harder. To make matters worse, there was a gambling club in Nihonmachi where gambling addicts spent all their time. For some single men, gambling was more important than getting married. My husband started to frequent the club. He got addicted. I guess he considered me, his wife, as kind of a tool or something. It was awful for me.”

It was not only her husband’s gambling addiction that plagued Mrs. Ogawa’s life. An issue that never could have become a problem for earlier picture brides emerged. The issue was that, by this time, the *nikkei* community was moving gradually into the *nisei* era. For picture brides in the pioneer days, all of one’s issues and problems, no matter how difficult, were to be dealt with only between the bride and her husband alone. They were no one else’s business. In a way, you could say, things were simpler then. But in Mrs. Ogawa’s case, her husband was *nisei*, and it meant that she married into the Ogawa family in Nihonmachi. Imagine that: the daughter of a well-established, reputable family in Kansai married into a merchant family that an *Issei* immigrant had built up from scratch through hard work and effort. It’s understandable that it must have been awkward and uneasy.

“After my arrival in Canada, my husband’s friend who owned a car would come to pick us up on Saturdays. Because we had Saturday afternoons off, we would spend our afternoon with my sister-in-law and her husband doing grocery shopping for Sunday dinner. I thought that it was kind of nice. “As time went by, my mother-in-law purchased a huge washing machine; well, huge by

the standards of that time. Actually, it made sense for a large family like hers. Particularly now that I had joined as a new bride, she had an extra pair of hands she could make use of. She must have calculated that. If you considered how much it would cost to have it done by a laundry shop, the new washing machine was cheaper. Well, she was a shrewd woman, you know, really good at business. Now the new daughter-in-law in the house could do the washing and cooking, she figured. She no longer needed to keep paying for a cook. She was really shrewd.”

In the immigrant community, brides (or wives) were considered a newly acquired labour force. Mrs. Ogawa’s mother-in-law had no doubt worked hard for many, many years as a labourer in the house. She was an *issei* woman whose life was focused on nothing more than survival. It’s understandable that she wouldn’t get along well with her daughter-in-law who wanted to enjoy her new life, driving around town.

“We never had an argument with her, really. I knew very well that there was no use arguing. I never showed anything on my face, even when I was terribly angry inside. Well, I tried a variety of things to deal with her. This way might work better, or maybe another way ... I tried hard to improve my relationship with her. Nothing worked very well, though. Bringing my husband into the conversation proved to be a total disaster. To be frank with you, this caused some distance between me and my husband.”

While Mrs. Ogawa was struggling and suffering all by herself, one of her friends happened to whisper into her ear:

“You know, Missus, you have to act while you still can. You won’t stay young forever, you know.”

These words pierced her heart like a sword. Time flies like an arrow. “Am I taking too long to make up my mind?”

“It’s true, isn’t it? Come to think of it, having to devote your entire life to your marriage once you enter into one, that’s really an outdated mentality. It’s just an old teaching of the Japanese education system. My life is my life, it dawned on me. That’s why I decided to take the huge risk of returning to Japan with my three children. The oldest was 10, next was eight, and the youngest was

four years old. There's no way I could leave any one of them behind. Without asking for even a penny, we hurriedly boarded the Asian (ocean liner). It was just one year before the war erupted.

"I left home without telling anyone. There was no way my husband would agree to let us go. Someone I knew lent me \$150 for the boat fare. I found out later, though, that my mother-in-law told other people that I stole the money from the store. For her, that was her method of damage control, her way of making the incident appear the least damaging to their public image. I got no money at all from them, not a penny. I didn't even know where the money was stored in the house."

She knew that there was no turning back. It obviously took considerable courage and determination to start a new life as a single mother with three children in Japan. Fortunately, her younger brother offered to help. Her mother had passed away by then, and her new stepmother now lived in the home she returned to. She did not want to leave her children at home while she worked outside.

I couldn't stand the way things were going

"So, I ended up opening a coffee shop. That allowed me to stay home and manage the shop while I looked after my children: feeding them, doing their laundry, and sending them to school. My shop was located in an industrial area in Osaka, close to a munitions factory. I always had plenty of customers.

Considering it was wartime, I didn't have too many issues getting day-to-day supplies. For instance, sugar was issued through a rationing system. We didn't go hungry.

"Sure, I thought once in a while, 'Well, is this the best a woman can do? Isn't there something better I can do to make good use of

my skill or talent?’ But I didn’t have any money to speak of, and my kids were young. I knew also that there were so many people around me who were much worse off. Looking back, I have to say I was doing ... not too badly.”

Mrs. Ogawa grabbed a photo album. She showed me a photo of herself as a young maiden, her portrait shortly after her arrival in Canada (in which she looked a little awkward wearing unfamiliar Western clothes), and many other photos. She provided me with helpful commentary as well. Among these photos, one in particular caught my eye. She was standing alone in a black dress. To me, she looked more beautiful in that picture than she did in any other photo. I wondered why.

“This one was actually the very first photo of me right after I returned to Japan with my kids.”

Mrs. Ogawa’s words instantly answered my question. The inner beauty of a woman who had finally managed to regain her freedom from an unwanted and unexpected life of obedience and submission was radiating from her portrait. She was in the prime of her early thirties. “Why didn’t you remarry?” The question jumped out of my mouth. “Well, I had three children, you know ...” she replied, looking down. In her time, it was difficult for a divorcee to re-marry, and nearly impossible if she had children. Despite all that, her portrait as a charming, mature woman caused me to imagine that she must have lived a reasonably fulfilled life as a woman.

She always intended to allow her children to go to Canada when they grew up, if they wanted to. After the war, her eldest son passed away, and her daughter got married in Japan. Only her second son said that he wanted to see the country where he was born.

“I told him, ‘If you are totally prepared to endure all of the hardships you might face, then you can go.’ I heard that things like homesteading were terribly tough jobs. I told him to be ready for really tough physical labour. Canada is not like Japan; there are not many choices for jobs if the first one doesn’t turn out well. I told him to come back right away if things didn’t work out.”

It was a motherly lesson to her son that she had learned herself through her own life experience. Her second son went to Canada when he was 19. He ended up staying there and married a *hakujin* woman. Mrs. Ogawa has visited them several times. Now, she is seriously considering moving to Canada for retirement.

“It might sound like a typical mother-in-law grumbling, but to be frank with you, I don’t get along very well with my daughter-in-law, who is *hakujin*. Actually, my son acknowledged it as well. But when I visited them during the summer seven years ago, it was nice and cool; I really liked it. So, the next time I go, I’ll try to plan it carefully, so I don’t bother them too much.”

The personal friction between mothers and daughters-in-law has existed throughout time and throughout the world. It will likely continue forever. Mrs. Ogawa’s way of dealing with it, however, is surely different from the one that was prevalent in the time of her mother-in-law. She plans to live in a seniors’ residence, and that’s the way it should be, she says. I didn’t sense any discontentment in her voice.

“I have lived in Japan for more than 30 years since I returned from Canada. I was fortunate enough to spend time with one of my parents (who was still alive then). I had a good job and made enough money to get by. I’m quite happy with how my life turned out. I have no regrets, really. Before I left Canada, I just couldn’t stand the way things were going. No, I couldn’t.”

Mrs. Ogawa’s marriage happened the same year that picture marriage was finally banned, the third year of Showa (1928). Her marriage shone a bright light on the intrinsic problem with picture marriage. Even without waiting for her words, it was obvious that the era of picture marriage was over. Once women realized the possibilities of building their own lives and shaping their own futures, picture marriage seemed too risky, too much of a gamble. Women’s lives must not be treated so lightly as to be determined by a single bet. The voice of Mrs. Ogawa, who successfully won back her own life through her own effort, was quiet, yet rang with conviction and triumph.

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Mitsu & Fuji Nikaido's 50th wedding Anniversary, Vancouver 1968. NNM
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Afterword

One evening, more than 10 years ago, I walked with my boyfriend all the way from Roppongi to my home in Harajuku. It took us almost an hour to cover a distance that would take only 10 minutes by car. Because I grew up in the centre of a big city, I was in the habit of using the bus or subway to reach any destination, even nearby ones. That night was the first time I had walked so far along the city streets.

Although it was a cold and windy night, neither the weather nor the distance bothered us because we were together. As we walked along the street, I thought to myself, As far as the ground continues, a person could get to anywhere they wished on foot. If one very badly wanted to see someone they loved, they could reach that someone by walking or crawling or by rail or whatever, travelling over the surface of the earth. I remember being overwhelmed by an inexplicable joy at the realization of that possibility.

Now, as I am finishing the writing of *Picture Brides*, the memory of that evening keeps coming back to me.

“If not for the Pacific Ocean ...”

“If I could walk over the sea ...”

How many times did these old women repeat the same phrases to me? It was not a question of logic or practicality; for those women, it did not matter how much the boat fare would cost or how many days the voyage would take. For them, a vast ocean stretched out before them, and they knew they could not walk over it.

The unfortunate fact that there was no stretch of earth that one could walk over to return home was precisely the cause of the sorrow and tragedy that picture brides had to experience. It is quite normal for any wife, even one in a happy marriage, to experience a moment or two of sadness and consider returning home in tears. Picture marriage, however, begins with a journey that precludes the possibility of returning home.

A single picture brought together a man and a woman. Considering how easy it was to create a marriage from a single picture, the length of married life together that followed was incredibly long. In the process of determining whether each individual case of marriage was a success or failure, I had to confront the emotional turmoil that these women endured during their lives in a foreign land. That was the most difficult task for me.

Picture marriage was just one system of marriage that existed in one particular era and practiced by one particular group of people. However, I sincerely hope that the valuable testimonies of these old women will be read by young women who anticipate their own marriages in the future. Although it is possible to plunge into a marriage based solely on a single picture, it is only the starting point of the rest of your life. The testimonies from these old women illustrate that truth better than anything else could.

So many *nikkei* Canadians contributed to the writing of this book, most of all the 13 picture brides who agreed to be interviewed. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the people listed below who cooperated with me to collect the necessary materials. I shall refrain, however, from disclosing the names of those who asked me to use a pseudonym.

Ito Iwaasa, Kiroku Ikejiri, Kin Izumi, Yoriki Iwasaki,
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Also, I would like to thank all of the *issei* people at the Lions Manor in Steveston, the Sakura-sô Home in Vancouver, and the Nipponia Home in Beamsville for their cooperation, and I wish them all a long and healthy life.

This non-fiction book first appeared in its original form in the pages of *Asahi Weekly* as a five-part series, entitled “In the Footprints of Canadian Picture Brides—Seventy years ago, brides crossed the ocean with a single picture in their hand,” beginning on April 29 of the 58th year of Showa (1983). It went through some additions and revisions before being published in its present book form. At that time, all quotes in the text were standardised using the modern *kana* system. During its run as a series in *Asahi Weekly*, I received many useful suggestions from Mr. Tadashi Akatsu and Mr. Jirô Kawamura. When the book was being published, I was assisted by Ms. Mitsuyo Kashima and Ms. Takako Ubukata. I would like to express my appreciation to these people.

Finally, with your permission, I would like to delve into my own personal matters. This year marks precisely the 10th anniversary of both my marriage and of my move to Canada. I am at the age where I feel the guilt that all picture brides must have felt of having been one of the “unfilial daughters who go overseas to marry.” In order to make up for many years of neglect, albeit in a small way, I would like to dedicate this book to my dear mother, Hatsue Kudô.

June 16, 1983

Miyoko Kudô

Acknowledgement by the translator

One day an email arrived from David Tanaka of Lethbridge with a PDF file attached to it. It was a photo of the front cover of a Japanese book and a few pages from one of the episodes in the book. David wrote that he found this book while he was cleaning up the basement of his mother's house. His mom had told him that one of the picture brides interviewed in the book was her mother, David's grandmother. He asked me if I would be interested in translating the book into English.

That got me very curious about the story, and I quickly asked my sister-in-law, who lives in Yokohama, Japan, to search for a copy of the book. David was understandably reluctant to lend me his only copy. And the book was already out of print in Japan. Fortunately, my sister-in-law found a copy at a used bookstore in Tokyo, so, a few weeks later it arrived at my door.

The book was truly interesting. The first-person accounts of 13 picture brides tell the varied yet similar stories of lives that they lived in a foreign country where everything was strange and unfamiliar: language, customs, food, and above all hard work they had to endure day after day. In some cases, their incredible hardships were rewarded at the end and they were able to spend the last portion of their lives in relative comfort. But in many cases, they saw no reward for their hard work, some with sad endings. Incidentally, the episode of David's grandmother, Isa Koyata, was the most heartwarming story of them all, definitely my favourite.

I am forever grateful to David for bringing this project to me. I feel deeply honoured and privileged to have translated the remarkable testimonies of these picture brides. They were the

unsung heroes in the early history of Japanese Canadians. Through their hard work and perseverance, they contributed so much to the Japanese Canadian community as well as to Canadian society and its economy in general. Perhaps the most significant contribution they made is the fact that they raised the next generations—*nisei*, *sansei*, and beyond—who collectively formed an integral and important community within the multicultural society of Canada. The contribution that was made by picture brides is much more significant than is generally recognized.

I echo the author's words in her Preface to the English version, and express my pride with humility that this translation “will enable Japanese Canadians, including all of the descendants of picture brides whose native tongue is English, to read and find out the life stories of their ancestors and predecessors as well as the historical background in which they lived their lives.” I feel deep satisfaction in having contributed, albeit in a small way, to preserving the history of picture brides by making this book available to English readers.

Almost from the beginning of our personal communication, the author Miyoko Kudo was fully cooperative. She told me that she expected no payment for copyright for the first printing. Her generosity is very much appreciated.

I would like to acknowledge all of the work done by the NNMCC (Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre) of Burnaby, B.C., in particular the director/curator Sherri Kajiwara, who was instrumental in lining up the professionals to take care of the details necessary for publication. In fact, the grant that enabled this publication was the result of a combined application between the NNMCC and the JCAY (Japanese Canadian Association of Yukon) to the Community Development Fund run by the NAJC (National Association of Japanese Canadians). I extend my sincere thanks to everyone involved and I ask for your continuing support in distributing this book, thereby preserving this almost-forgotten part of the history of Japanese Canadians.

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the not-at-all insignificant amount of assistance my son provided me throughout

my translation work. Tetsuo Torigai was born in Canada and now works in Tokyo as a professional engineer. Every time I translated a few chapters I would send my draft pages to him, and he scrutinized my grammar and style. As he is a native English speaker, he was quite particular and picky about any minor mistakes and my sometimes-clumsy style of writing. We had many interesting and lively discussions on what certain passages of the book exactly mean and how to translate them into English, how best to say them in English to convey the real meaning of the original. It was a lot of work, to be honest, but also enjoyable, exciting, and gratifying. It was a learning experience for both of us, mostly for me. Thank you, my son!

Now that the book is available to English speakers, I sincerely hope that it will be read by as many readers as possible, so that the voices of picture brides are heard by more people, most importantly by their direct descendants.

Fumihiko Torigai 鳥飼文彦, translator
Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada
August 30, 2020

Picture Brides

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