PART

1 *Chinatown, San Francisco*

I GREW up with discrimination. Discrimination affected every aspect of my life. You're not born with it. It's a learned thing. But when you grow up with it, it's just part of life. When I was growing up, I just took it for granted and did what I could.

Someone recently asked me, "How come you lived in Chinatown, in the ghetto?"

And I replied, "I never thought of Chinatown as a ghetto. We just couldn't live anywhere else."

Growing up, we really didn't go out of Chinatown. Since we couldn't even rent a place outside Chinatown, why would we want to go beyond it? And it never bothered us. There was injustice and discrimination, and we just took it for granted. Chinatown had its distinct boundaries. Broadway marked one edge of Chinatown, and it seemed like there was an iron curtain dividing the Chinese on one side and the Italians on the other. North Beach was on the other side of Broadway. Although it was just across the street, it seemed far away because we didn't cross over. After all, we couldn't even rent a place there, even in North Beach. When the fellas, the Asian boys, would cross Broadway, they were beaten up by the Italian boys. Kearny and Bush marked the downtown borders of Chinatown. Powell marked the incline up to the exclusive Nob Hill neighborhoods.

We grew up in Chinatown, quite literally. When we were growing

up, I thought we had a pretty good life. I still think it was pretty good. We never knew about the hardships because my parents never talked about it. We lived through the depression and we did okay. We were lucky because we were never hungry. Maybe that's because we had a restaurant.

Others were not so lucky. I remember in our restaurant we always had Chinese cooks. One Chinese cook had a son. I guess he was about six years old. Have you seen those round-tiered Chinese lunch boxes? Well, this child used to go around to all the restaurants picking up the leftovers for dinner. Now that's hardship.

Most of my earliest memories are about living in Chinatown. We weren't exactly immersed in the Korean community because there were so few Koreans around us. Korean activities were limited to the Independence Movement and other church-related activities once a week or so. So growing up, our parents had to drill into us that we were Korean.

But living in Chinatown—my memory of things Korean are kind of dim. I can remember the seasonal celebrations like Chinese New Year and All Soul's Day in Chinatown much more vividly. I remember how much we looked forward to it every year.

I actually have more memories of what happened in Chinatown rather than in the Korean community. I suppose it's because most of the things that the second-generation Koreans, like me, did were with second-generation Chinese. We joined in all the Chinese activities because there weren't enough Koreans to do anything just Korean. We knew we were Korean, and knew all the Koreans around. Yet when we [she and her brothers] were growing up, we compared ourselves to other people in our world—other Orientals. I don't know that my parents did, but we [the children] did. We didn't think about the world beyond Chinatown because it just wasn't accessible to us.

What I didn't understand was that it would be my Korean heritage that really shaped both my personal and professional life.

Part 1 is constructed from seven interviews: two conducted during the summer of 1987 and five during the summer of 1992. It chronicles the first thirty-seven years of Dora Yum Kim's life in San Francisco's Chinatown. While Dora and her brothers were integrated into non-Korean activities in Chinatown, this did not blur the ethnic boundaries that existed between her and her Chinese peers. While she acknowledges the importance of Chinatown, her larger social setting, Dora presents a selective shading of the past, focusing on the formation and maintenance of a Korean sensibility. The impact of minority status on Dora's self-construction is evident in her narrative, which focuses on her position as a Korean in Chinatown and as an Oriental of Korean descent in the broader social context.

Dora was born at a time when racial segregation was socially acceptable and legally supported. Most outsiders attributed similar characteristics to all Asians, and the social construction of Asians was of a homogeneous racial group of mongoloids, or Orientals.[1] Often restricted to ethnic enclaves, Asian immigrants did not think of themselves as Oriental or as nationally identified when they first arrived in the United States. As with other immigrant groups, Koreans' initial reference group consisted of their compatriots, especially people from their particular province or city.[2] Although Asian immigrants were also forced to engage with the Oriental construct in interactions with members of the dominant society and flatten their construction of themselves to fit this social category, they also were mindful of the differences among the groups who lived next to each other in Chinatown. Despite the commerce across ethnic lines and the sense of a shared situation as Orientals in America, language differences as well as ignorance of one another's cultural practices unquestionably promoted the maintenance of separate social spheres.

Faced with a new land of strange history, different cultural practices, and a hostile society, Koreans—perhaps more emphatically than other Asian immigrant groups—evoked a strong love for their homeland and its people. Perhaps the hostile social climate reminded immigrants of Korea's embattled history and her struggle to keep a Korean heritage alive in the face of alien

elements. Nationalist consciousness was certainly fueled by Japanese aggression toward, and eventual occupation of, Korea. In 1905 the American government changed Korean immigrants' status to Japanese subjects when Japan took control of Korean foreign affairs. Korean immigrants objected to this policy, which would subject them to the same treaties and legislation as Japanese immigrants. Korean immigrants also protested against U.S. recognition of Korea's annexation by Japan in 1910, but again without success.

While Korean migrants faced the same social discrimination as other Asians, they viewed the Japanese, not Americans, as their oppressors. Hence, while many Chinese and Japanese immigrants bristled at anti-Asian sentiments directed toward them, Koreans endured because they considered the American government a potentially powerful ally in their struggle against Japanese occupation. Some Koreans compared their situation in United States to those of American Christian missionaries in Korea who had overcome the initial hostility they encountered in Korea; perhaps Korean migrants could overcome American hostility if they demonstrated their worth through good work.[3]

Dora, like other American-born children of Korean immigrants, understood that her immigrant parents' sole focus was on homeland politics and the perpetuation of Korean heritage, but her own attention was grounded both materially and ideologically in America. The economic and social marginalization that Orientals faced sharply contradicted the ideology of equality that she learned at school. So while Dora uses Koreanness to frame her life story, she recalls a childhood in Chinatown where Asians of diverse backgrounds, particularly the American-born generation of her age, forged an enclave community in response to the larger anti-Asian legal and social climate.[4]

Dora begins her life story with her American origins, in which she collapses the story of her parents' voyage to America with her own "myth of creation."[5] *Not herself an immigrant, Dora sees immigration as the essential formative experience that defines Americanness, an identity that is critical to her life narrative. This reconstruction is difficult since Dora knows little about her parents' lives in Korea or the circumstances of their immigration;*

she composes an origins tale from bits and pieces of information, creating possible scenarios about her parents' circumstances and motivations. The narrative takes on the quality of a quest, a journey of discovery in which some elements will never be known. For this reason, the first chapter is a speculative tale, replete with conjecture, misinterpretation, and contradiction.[6]

What we do know is that her father, Man Suk Yum, arrived in 1904, which places him in the first wave of Korean immigrants—a small number of diplomats, students, and merchants (e.g., ginseng salesmen)[7] *who came to the continental United States from the late 1800s to the turn of the century. Most Koreans who came to the continent came via Hawaii, after their contracts on Hawaiian sugar plantations had expired, but Dora asserts that her father migrated directly to the Pacific coast.*

Beginning with the missionary involvement in recruiting workers to Hawaii, the church played an instrumental role in establishing Korean American communities, and over time, community churches became centers for social and political activity. In 1898 Horace N. Allen, the medical missionary turned American minister to Korea, began working with the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA) to recruit Korean workers to relocate to Hawaii to fill the gap in labor on the plantations when Chinese and Japanese labor became problematic. Relying on Allen's missionary networks to recruit laborers, the HSPA brought the first group of Korean laborers over in December 1902. However, the total number of Korean immigrants to Hawaii in this initial influx numbered just over seven thousand.[8] *Most of these persons were male laborers, although there were a few with business backgrounds, and approximately six hundred were women. Korean migration to Hawaii halted in May 1905, when Japan took over Korea's foreign affairs and restricted migration to Hawaii and the United States.*[9]

Missionary involvement in this migration and the church's role in political and social resistance in Korea helped to make the church the most important institution in Korean communities established in the United States. Forty percent of immigrants were Christian before they immigrated, and many worked hard to convert their compatriots. In the first two decades of the

century over a dozen churches were established in the United States, in large measure as a platform from which to speak out against the Japanese occupation of Korea,[10] *and their Korean ministers who were often the political leaders of the community. In Northern California the first church was established in San Francisco in 1905.*

Between 1904 and 1907 about a thousand Koreans entered the mainland from Hawaii through San Francisco. At the turn of the century, when the first Koreans arrived in San Francisco's Chinatown, Ahn Ch'ang Ho, an expatriate intellectual and anti-Japanese patriot who arrived in San Francisco in 1899, based himself in Chinatown and established the Chinmok Hoe *[Friendship Society] in 1903. The* Kongnip Hyop Hoe *[Mutual Assistance Society], the first Korean language newspaper, established in 1905, was also located in San Francisco's Chinatown. While San Francisco served as the port of entry, many Koreans left the city, scattering along the Pacific Coast, primarily doing farm work, although there were also dozens of Koreans who worked as wage laborers in mining companies and as section hands on the railroad in Oregon, Washington, Montana, and Utah.*[11] *The variety of crops grown along the Pacific Coast allowed for something to be harvested year-round, so farm workers were mobile, following the crops from region to region. Because their numbers were small, Korean workers saved and pooled wages and resources to lease land.*

Most of the Korean tenant farmers in Northern California worked in the Sacramento–San Joaquin Valley around the towns of Reedley and Dinuba, as Man Suk Yum had. In the two decades after migration was halted, the practice of sending for picture brides became common for Korean men.[12] *About a thousand picture brides arrived in Hawaii before 1924, and about a hundred arrived on the Pacific coast.*[13] *Dora's mother, Hang Shin Kim, was a picture bride from northern Korea who arrived in San Francisco in 1920.*

After the Japanese occupation of Korea in 1910, Korean immigrants in America regarded themselves as exiles—a passion that united Koreans in a single cause. Even those who were not political refugees had relatives who suffered under the Japanese occupation of Korea, and still others had to abandon plans to return home. Japanese occupation riveted immigrant Koreans'