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Writings honor Korean women

By [Catherine E. Toth](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

In 1994, Jackie J. Kim was in desperate need of Korean food.

She was living in Niigata, Japan, teaching English as part of the Japan Exchange and Teaching program.

It was the first time Kim, a recent graduate of the University of Hawai'i-Manoa, had lived away from home. Loneliness was starting to set in.

"I thought if only I could get some kim chee," said Kim, who was born in Seoul, raised in Florida and has lived in Hawai'i since high school. "I told myself, 'There has to be a Korean restaurant here.' "

Kim took to the streets of the coastal town. Soon she found what she had been looking for: a sign outside a restaurant that read "yakiniku."

At first Kim was nervous. Though she had been in Japan for three months, she couldn't speak the language at all.

Then she noticed an older woman in the kitchen, mixing meat with her hands. Kim looked at her face. It was distinctly Korean.

So she took a chance. She addressed the woman in Korean.

"She started laughing," said Kim, now 37 and married. "She asked me (in Korean), 'What do you want to eat?' "

The woman was Kimiko Tanaka, a 76-year-old Korean immigrant. Like many immigrants from Korea, she had adopted a Japanese name to fit in; her Korean name was Chung Ki-sun.

Fascinated by Tanaka and the entire immigrant experience of these Korean women, Kim thought this would make a great master's thesis.

But as she collected more information and talked to more women, she realized, instead, that she had enough for a book.

"Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan" (Rowman & Littlefield, \$29.95), her first book, was released last year.

March is National Women's History Month, and this book commemorates the history of these immigrant women, something Kim feels is important regardless of ethnicity.

"I think learning about your history is important for women because without that, we would be rootless," said Kim, who will be giving talks on her book at the state Library and Borders in the next two weeks (see box). "When we see our faces in the mirror, we don't just see our own image but the images of all the women who have played an important role in our lives."

Part of her motivation to honor these Korean women was her grandmother, who died in 1992 at age 75.

"She was a very strong woman, and it really hurt me that most of her life passed without any recognition," said Kim, who is currently writing a memoir. "She went through so much to raise her family. ... All the trials and tribulations, I want to show the success of that. My mother, me, my children. We will be the products of her accomplishments."



Author Jackie J. Kim's family, from left, aunt Myung-hee Kang, mother Bok-sun Kang and aunt Sun-hee Kang, in 1941 in Seoul, Korea. Kim is writing a memoir to honor her family, particularly the women.

Courtesy Jackie J. Kim

BOOK TALK

With Jackie J. Kim, author of "Hidden Treasures: Lives of First-Generation Korean Women in Japan"

11:30 a.m. Saturday at the state Library

Noon March 25 at Borders, Ward Centre

Free

591-8995



Jackie J. Kim, right, looks through old letters belonging to Hiroko Tokumoto of Niigata, Japan, in 2001. Tokumoto is one of 10 Korean immigrant women Kim interviewed for her book, "Hidden Treasures."

Courtesy Jackie J. Kim

"Hidden Treasures" is a compilation of the personal journeys of 10 immigrant women, from their hardships as newcomers in Japan to their poignant stories of survival.

These women talk candidly about discrimination, violence, disappointment and emotional suffering, their stories hauntingly similar to the tales of immigrant workers in Hawai'i.

"One woman said that in her most difficult moments, she would go to the coast and look at the water," Kim said. "She thought that if her life ended, so would her hardships and sufferings. When I read stories like that, I think about how we, as women, with all of our daily complexities, how there are times we feel like this, too."

Through writing this book, Kim realized the importance of knowing the past, of taking to heart the lessons others have learned, of appreciating the struggles and sufferings of those who came before.

"The stories I heard from my mother and grandmother are really the core of who I am," Kim said. "Their stories of suffering keep me company in my most difficult times. I know they survived it and I can, too, with that kind of patience and strength."

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