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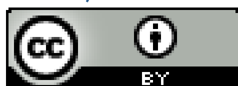

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# Korean Ethnic Identity in the United States 1900-1945

**Thomas P. Dolan and Kyle Christensen**

Although Koreans and Korean Americans are ubiquitous in contemporary American society, the migration of Koreans to the United States did not begin until long after other East Asians (Japanese and Chinese) were brought to Hawaii and the West Coast. In 1900 only 31 Koreans were in the entire United States, but by 1910 over 4,000 had come. These first Koreans coming to America differed from Chinese and Japanese immigrant workers primarily in that they were Christians, and many of the early Koreans also came as families instead of single men. As their numbers increased, the Koreans set up communities in Hawaii and eventually California, which replicated many aspects of Korean society. When Korea was annexed by Japan in 1910 emigration slowed, and Korean nationalist organizations were established in Hawaii and the mainland United States. The leaders of some of these organizations would eventually convince the U.S. government to restore ethnic recognition to Koreans.

We all know who Korean Americans are; they are that immigrant couple who opens a mom-and-pop grocery in a run-down part of town, and works 20 hours a day to make it successful so that all their children can go to college. Or they're that seven-year old kid who wins the school science fair. Stereotypes make life easy, but the actual story of Koreans in America is relatively short, and much more complex.

This study developed from an interest which first began while the lead author was researching State Department documents on the events leading up to the Korean War at the National Archives in Washington some years ago. He was surprised to learn that correspondence dealing with Korea dated back to the early 1900s, and that Korean American diplomatic relations had actually been formalized before that.

The sources for this project began with correspondence received and sent from the State Department. Much of this initial material was from primary sources, such as the Secretary of State and even notes from President Franklin Roosevelt. As this research continued, it uncovered other correspondence to and from the Department of War, and eventually found that this topic had been the subject of some academic research, but like most work like this, it was not widely read. Most of the authors appear to be Korean Americans, and much of the

research was done in Hawaii, for reasons that will become evident. The first group of studies, such as those collected by Kim Hyung-chan (1977), Wayne Patterson (1988), and Kim and Patterson (1974) are primarily documentation of living conditions for Koreans in Hawaii in the early decades of the 20th century. The next period of study is the 1970s, about one generation after World War II and the freeing of Korea from Japanese rule, and about a decade after U.S. immigration law made immigration by Asians easier (Yu & Choe, 2003).

The quantitative data for this study comes from using U.S. census records from 1900-1930, tabulated by Ancestry.com, but reviewed individually because of inaccuracies in the data there. For example, searching for people born in Korea resulted in the inclusion of non-Koreans born there (children of American missionaries, etc.). In searching for Koreans, one must also use the alternate spelling (Corea), but these results include people from the town of Corea in the state of Maine.

While Census Bureau records are very useful, the data collected on censuses changes from decade to decade, and political decisions, such as that of recognizing Japan's claim to Korea, influences how people are categorized. Census records categorized people born in Korea variously as Korean, Chinese, White, Octoroon, and even Spanish.

While at least some Americans have head of Japan's annexation of the Korean peninsula and parts of China in the early 20th century, fewer know that Koreans in the occupied regions could no longer consider themselves Koreans; they were subjects of Japan, not fully citizens, but no longer Koreans. Some people have heard the story of Sohn Kee-Chung, who was born in Korea in 1912 and won the Marathon in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, but who was forced to compete on the Japanese team with a Japanese name.

Very few Americans know that the same thing happened to those Koreans who were in the United States. The United States had entered in to a treaty of mutual support (The Korean-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce) in 1882, which stated in its first Article that,"[i]f other powers deal unjustly or oppressively with either Government, the other will exert their good offices, on being informed of the case, to bring about an amicable arrangement, this showing their friendly feelings."[1] This treaty is sometimes called the Treaty of Chemulp'o, named for the location where it was signed (Chemulp'o is now called Inch'ŏn). This original treaty between the United States and Korea was supported by the

Chinese government, specifically by its Foreign Office (the *Tsungli Yamen*), which sought to undermine Japanese influence on the Korean peninsula.

The establishment of diplomatic relations with Korea in 1882 is interesting in itself, because Asians were generally not well liked in America. Although American merchant ships began trading with China as early as 1784, Congress and the states took action to limit Asian emigration to the United States (Van Alstyne, p. 20). California passed an "Act to Protect Free White Labor against Competition with Chinese Coolie Labor, and to Discourage the Immigration of the Chinese into the State of California" in 1862 (Kim, Y.) In 1875 the U.S. Congress amended immigration law with the Page Law, to guarantee that "immigration of any subject of China, Japan, or any Oriental country, to the United States" would be free and voluntary (43rd Congress, Session II, Ch. 141, 1875). This was to end the practice of indentured servitude, and to preclude the importation of prostitutes. In 1882, the year before the Treaty of Chemulp'o was ratified, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, preventing the importation of Chinese laborers.[2] The first Koreans to come to the mainland United States actually came a few years later, and in 1886 Congress approved Korean immigration. Nevertheless, by 1900 only 31 Koreans had come to America.

On the other hand, many Americans, especially Methodist and Presbyterian missionaries, went to Korea under the protection of the Treaty of Chemulp'o. Their efforts would affect the next major group of Koreans coming east (Kim, Y. p. 2).

In the late 19th century, after the defeat of China in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, China renounced its claim on Korea. This allowed Japan to once more exert its claim on Korea.

A crop failure in Korea in 1901 led to the next major emigration from Korea to American territory. In Hawaii, the importation of Chinese and Japanese workers had been unsuccessful, because as soon as these workers were able, they left the plantations and moved into cities there. In Korea, the shortage of food, availability of surplus labor, and the need for this labor in Hawaii led to a recruiting effort, which failed because most Koreans did not want to leave. A second effort was made through the American missionaries, and in early 1903 the first group of Korean workers (56 men, 21 women, and 25 children) arrived on Oahu (Kim & Patterson, p. 2). These early arrivals worked well, and by 1905 over 7,500 more had been brought to Hawaii. However, this would end soon.

One of these late arrivals was five-year-old Han Kil-soo (later spelled as Kilsoo Haan). He had been born near Munsan in central Korea, and he came to Hawaii with his parents. He would eventually serve in the Hawaii National Guard and move to San Francisco in the 1920s, returning to Hawaii in 1926 where he joined a nationalist group, the Sino-Korean Peoples' League. In the 1930s he moved to Washington, D.C. as its representative.[3]

The first Korean American was born in San Francisco in 1903. The same ship which had brought the first Koreans to Hawaii, the *S.S. Gaelic*, brought Chang Hong-bong and his pregnant wife to California, where Peter Chang was born. Peter eventually joined the U.S. Navy in 1922, but was denied entry to the U.S. Naval Academy because of his race (Park, p. 1).

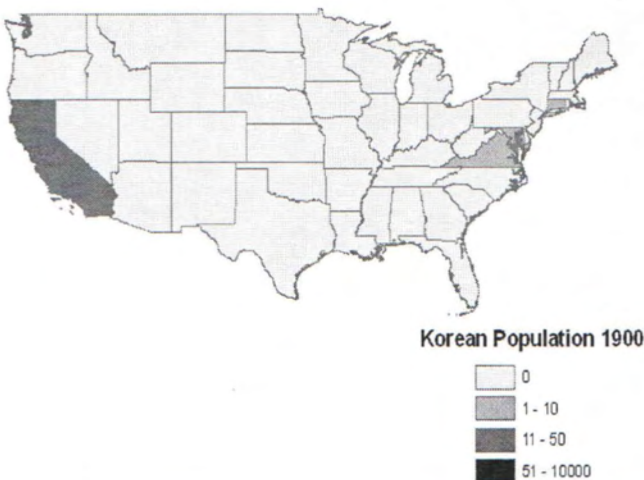
In 1905, California amended its Civil Code, Section 60, to forbid marriages between "white persons with Negroes, Mongolians, members of the Malay race, or mulattoes" (Deering, p. 25). Prior to this only marriages between whites and Negroes or mulattoes had been banned, but California had to change with the times.

In 1905, the United States government abrogated the 1882 Treaty of Chemulp'o, and began a series of steps that would eventually deny Koreans their nationality in the United States. In 1905, the American Secretary of War, William Howard Taft (later President Taft) entered into a secret agreement with the Prime Minister of Japan, Katsura Taro. This "Taft-Katsura Memorandum" recognized Japanese control over Korea, in exchange for Japanese acceptance of America's control over the Philippine Islands. In essence, the United States accepted Japan's colonization of Korea, which would include the categorization of the Korean people as Japanese subjects; they were not even citizens under Japanese law. Some academic research in the late 1950s questioned whether the Taft-Katsura Memorandum was real, based on the matter of why an American Secretary of War would be involved with State Department business, but the principles laid out in the discussions were in fact carried out.

But Koreans were already in Hawaii and they were ethnically and culturally distinct from the tens of thousands of Chinese and Japanese there. The Koreans had a unique problem, though; although the first Koreans who had come to Hawaii had been good workers, the later arrivals were dissatisfied. While many of the first group had come with wives and even families, the later arrivals were mainly single men who did not want Chinese or Japanese wives. Recognizing the problem, the U.S. Immigration Service made an exception to other restrictions on

Asian immigration and allowed the importation of mail-order brides from Korea (Kim, Y. S., p. 3). The first of these arrived in late 1910, and eventually about a thousand women would leave Korea to become what were called "picture brides" in Hawaii. Bernice Bong Hee Kim noted in her 1934 essay on "The Koreans in Hawaii" that these marriages were fundamentally different from other arranged marriages among Koreans; most of the single men who had come to Hawaii had been recruited in the north, while most of the women who were brought over were from the southern part of Korea. This difference in origin stems from the recruiting patters used; most of the original workers were men who had come from cities such as Chemulp'o (modern Inch'ŏn) and Wŏnsan, while the "picture brides" were drawn from rural areas in the south, which was overpopulated and poorer. The result of these different places of origin was a reduction in the sectionalism that had existed in Korea (Kim, B. in Kim & Patterson, pp. 109-113).

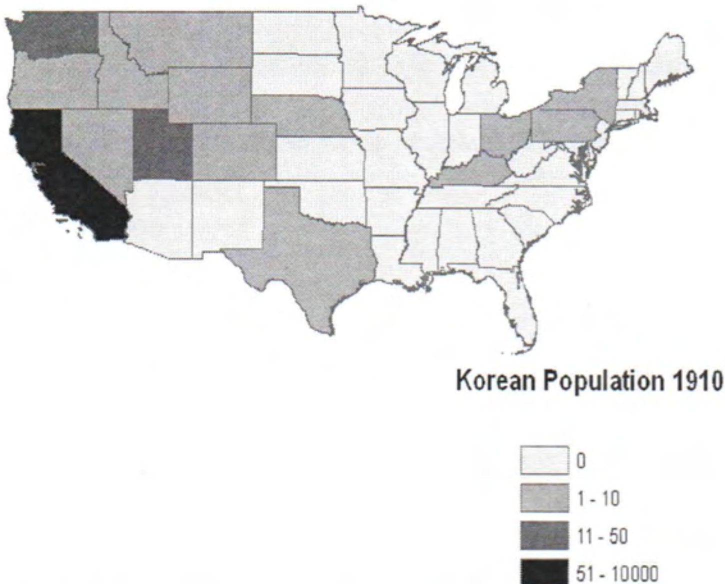
The immigration of Koreans to Hawaii is impressive. Although in 1900 only two Koreans were included in the national census as being residents of Hawaii, by 1910 3,979 were documented there. As noted above, Koreans had been brought to Hawaii as laborers, and only a few had gone on to the mainland U.S. Of just over 4,200 ethnic Koreans in the U.S. and its territories in 1910, 95% were in Hawaii. Three per cent, or 135, were in California. No other state or territory had more than 21 Koreans in that year.




Map 1: Distribution of Koreans in the Continental United States, 1900

On the American mainland things were difficult for Asians. In San Francisco in 1906, the school board ordered that all Asian students be segregated from other students, and Chinese, Japanese, and Korean students were placed in the Oriental Public School (Van Alstyne, pp. 90-91). Asian students were to be kept away from white students based on a belief that "our children should not be placed in any position where their youthful impressions may be affected with pupils of the Mongolian race" (Fradkin, p. 300). Of the 120 students affected in San Francisco, only three were Korean. In all of the United States and its territories, there were just over 4,200 ethnic Koreans in 1910, when Japan ended emigration from Korea (Kim, Y. S., p. 4). One of the reasons that Japan gave for ending emigration was the poor treatment given to Koreans who had been taken to Mexico, where they were essentially worked as slave labor in the Yucatan (Yun, pp. 40-44).

In Seattle, Washington, the 1910 census listed only one Korean resident. Ten years later, that number had shot up to 37 (Giudici, p. 6). By 1930 the number had dropped to 15, for reasons that will be addressed.




Map 2: Distribution of Koreans in the Continental United States, 1910

In East Asia, in the view of Japan and other countries which accepted its actions, Korea ceased to exist. This was not quietly accepted by the Koreans. Although the remaining members of the Korean royal family were controlled by Japanese authorities, some groups established themselves as governments-in-exile in China, and some would even claim this status in the United States. Eventual American recognition of an appropriate representative had more to do with Western cultural identity than Korean legitimacy.

By 1916, the U.S. Senate was informed by the Secretary of State that the government of Japan had established a protectorate over Korea "during, or as an incident of, the Russian-Japanese War of 1904-1905" (Lansing). The policy of the United States, as accepted by the Department of State, was that the name of Korea was to be *"Chosen,"* the Japanese word for that region.[4]

While in Korea a strong nationalist movement was organized against the Japanese occupation, Koreans in the United States were organized as well. Kim Hyung-chan separates Korean organizations in America into three periods: the independence movement (1903-1945), a dormant period from 1946-1965, and a resurgent period which began after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (the Hart-Celler Act).[5] In 1913 the Corps for the Advancement of Individuals (*Hŭngsadan*; also known in English as the Young Korean Academy) was established in San Francisco (Kim & Patterson, p. 115). This organization still exists today.

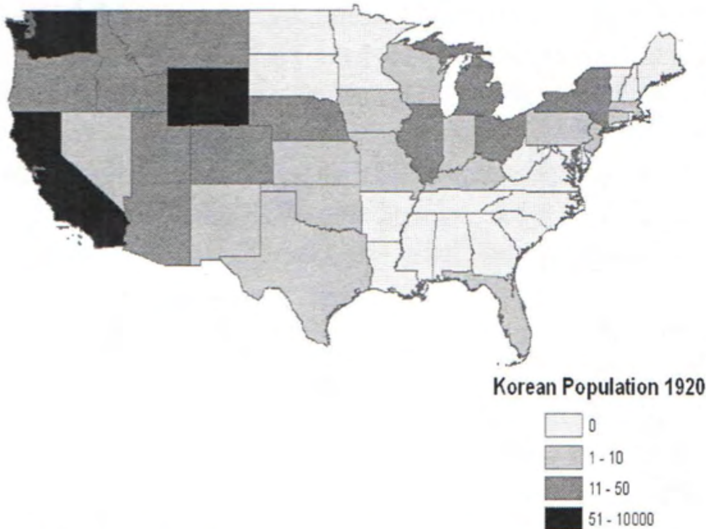
Because Hawaii had by far the largest concentration of ethnic Koreans in the early decades of the 20th century, it is important to address the kinds of organizations established there. These would eventually come to the American mainland, and would characterize the Korean population centers there.

Kim Hyung-chan notes four types of Korean community groups: (1) organized around the Christian churches the Koreans established in Hawaii; (2) a village council, or *tonghoe*, which replicated the structure found in Korea; (3) underground groups called "sworn brotherhoods" formed for protection against non-Koreans; and (4) *Shinminhoe* (New People's Society) formed to respond to concerns over Japanese domination of Korea. Some of these were formed in Hawaii even before Japan's formal annexation of Korea (Kim, H., pp. 65-83). Eventually similar groups were established in Korean communities as they formed in California.

At the national political level, in early 1919 the U.S. State Department received a detailed letter from a group calling itself the Korean Revolutionary Party in Shanghai, China. Its leader, Chung Chan Wen, traveled with a Chinese passport, since no Korean issuing authority existed. Subsequent State Department correspondence recognized that a strong nationalist and anti-Japanese sentiment remained in Korea. At this same time Japanese press reporting became very anti-American, and Americans were accused of undermining Japanese control of its sphere of influence. Much of this was related to the March 1, 1919, uprising of Koreans against of the Japanese, which resulted in about 7,000 Koreans being killed. While American reports of this uprising and massacre were essentially factual, they were perceived by the Japanese as meddling in a purely internal affair.

The American response on March 17 of that year was to attempt to defuse any "misunderstanding" by meeting with representatives of the Japanese Foreign Office to "put an end to persistent misrepresentation" in the press.[6] The Japanese press blamed President Woodrow Wilson for the uprising, and by April the State Department issued instructions to the American Consulate in Seoul to be "extremely careful not to encourage any belief that the United States will assist the Korean nationalists in carrying out their plans" (Adee, April 12, 1919). In this, the government of the United States was accepting the Japanese view that the Korean Peninsula belonged to Japan.

Even so, Koreans continued to immigrate to the United States. By 1920, over 5,800 ethnic Koreans had come to America and its territories; of these, 81% (over 4,700) were in Hawaii, while the percentage in California had grown to 12%. This was still only 719 people. In 1920 Koreans were registered in 33 of the states and territories; only 14 states had a dozen or more.




Map 3: Distribution of Koreans in the Continental United States. 1920

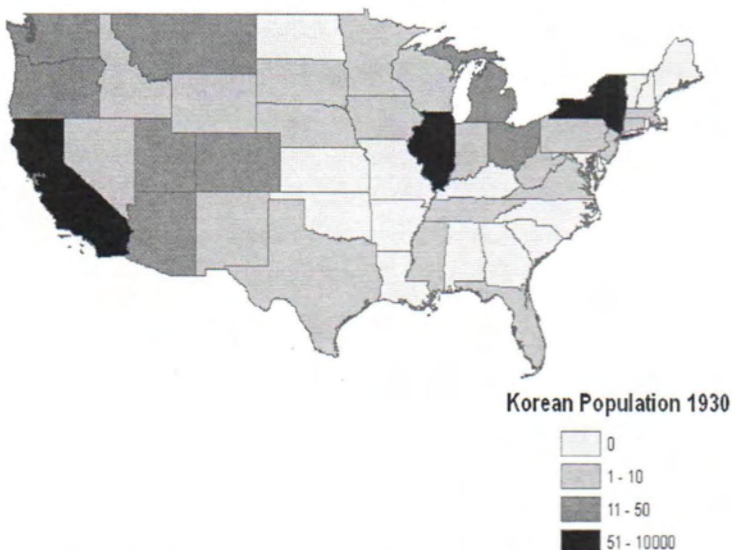
One of the interesting groupings of Korean was in the state of Wyoming. Wyoming's 56 Koreans ranked fourth in Korean residents (behind Hawaii with 4,726, California's 719, and Washington State's 84). A closer look at census records reveals that nearly all the Koreans in Wyoming in 1920 were male (53 of the 56); only one was an adult female. Their location, in the town of Superior in Sweetwater County, is revealing; the town had a strong coal mining industry in the 1920s. This reflects Yun Yŏ-jun's statement that the majority of Korean immigrants were "common laborers, coolies, low-grade government officials, ex-soldiers, students, house servants, mine workers, and political refugees" (pp. 40-44). By the 1930s the mines were spent, and the population fell. By 1930 only eight Koreans were left there among the town's total population of 241 residents.[7]

In Hawaii, the Sino-Korean Peoples' League was active among the ethnic Korean population in the 1920s and '30s, even forming provisional Army units in case they were needed to fight the Japanese. As mentioned before, one of its leaders was Kilsoo Haan, who left Hawaii to become the Washington representative of the organization. While there he became somewhat of a nuisance to the American government, with a steady flow of correspondence claiming to have information about Korean anti-Japanese nationalist movements and stolen plans of Japan's plan to attack the United States. Other such

correspondence included letters from Kim Ku, who identified himself as the President of the Central Committee of the Provisional Government of Korea; Kim's correspondence to President Franklin Roosevelt was referred to the State Department, to be "filed without action" (Currie).

The 1930 U.S. Census complicated the measurement of Koreans in America. While the 1910 and 1920 censuses had allowed "Korean" as a racial identity, the 1930 census did not. Although the earlier censuses were not entirely accurate in their categorization of people born in Korea, searching census records for 1930 requires looking at the location of birth, or location of parents' birth to determine Korean origins. Even using these search techniques, the 1930 U.S. Census indicates that the number of Koreans in the U.S. had dropped to just over 3,000; examining this number shows that the percentage living in Hawaii had dropped to 73%, while the percentage in California had grown to 14%. By 1930 Koreans could be found in 34 of the states and territories, although only 12 of those had a dozen or more.

The state of Illinois in 1930 had an increasing number of Koreans; many of those had been brought in as domestic help and commercial workers, often in restaurant or food service jobs. This underemployment has continued, as documented by more recent studies (Hurh et al., p. 91).




Map 4: Distribution of Koreans in the Continental United States, 1930

As American involvement in the War in the Pacific neared, several groups claiming to be the legitimate government of Korea attempted to establish themselves with the government of the United States. One of these, which called itself The Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, was led by Kim Ku, who came to be recognized as a leading Korean nationalist in the post-war years and who was eventually succeeded by Syngman Rhee as president of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, an organization located in the United States. This report focuses only on the American treatment of Koreans, but in Asia, particularly in China and Korea, a large nationalist movement was active.

In June of 1941, the U.S. arm of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea, the Korean Commission, informed the State Department that it had appointed Dr. Syngman Rhee as its ambassador to the United States.[8]

That same year Kilsoo Haan even attempted to warn the President of Japan's growing naval strength in the Pacific. He recommended diplomatic and economic measures that should be taken against Japan to deter its militarism; his correspondence was "Respectfully Referred to the Department of State." Haan pledged the support of the Korean Volunteer Army in China for what he saw as the inevitable war between Japan and the United States. Once Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, the Honolulu branch of the Sino-Korean Peoples' League pledged its support in the fight against the Axis powers.[9]

One very good outcome of Haan's efforts was that by 1942 the U.S. government had begun to consider recognizing Koreans as Koreans, so that they would not have to carry Japanese identification papers. This was not done out of sympathy for an oppressed people as much as it was done strategically, as a way of opening an additional military front against the Japanese by using those Koreans located in China and Siberia. The most favorable aspect of this was that Koreans in America were allowed to call themselves Koreans beginning in 1942, just as President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 called for the "relocating" of Japanese and Japanese-Americans in areas of the West Coast. These detainees were taken from their homes and businesses, had their bank accounts frozen, and were kept in "Japanese Enemy Alien Detention Centers." About 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were put into these camps, but Koreans were spared this although some were employed as interpreters.[10] In May 1944 the military governor of Hawaii, Lt. Gen. Robert Richardson, issued General Order No. 59,

declaring that the term "'enemy alien' shall not include nor mean any Korean or any person of Korean ancestry or of Korean racial extraction."[11] By this time the Korean population in the United States was still less than 9,000 (Yu & Choe).

So by 1945 Koreans in the United States had received the right to reclaim their nationality and ethnic heritage. By the year 2000 the Korean population in the United States had grown to over a million, with the biggest increase coming after the Korean War. Between 1990 and 2000, the state showing the largest growth percentage was Georgia, with an 88% increase in Korean Americans and Koreans in that ten-year period.

For most Americans who do not have Korean ties this may seem like a minor footnote in American history, but the policy implications for today's world still have significance. The case of Koreans in America in the first half of the 20th century is one of a small, politically weak population seeking recognition for itself and its country in the face of American acceptance of its occupation by a stronger power. This is still going on in places like Tibet, and the grim news is that the small, politically weak population there should not expect to have the same success the Koreans have had in America.

## Notes:

[1] Treaty Between the United States and Corea: Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation. Signed at Chosen, May 22, 1882; Ratified by the U.S. Senate January 9, 1883.

[2] Forty-Seventh Congress. Session I. 1882, Ch. 126.

[3] UC Santa Cruz, "Guide to the Kilsoo Haan Papers, 1933-1973."

[5] The Hart-Celler Act significantly revised American immigration law by removing quotas which had favored immigration from European countries.

[6] U.S. Department of State telegram to U.S. Embassy, March 17, 1919.

[7] "Wyoming Tales and Trails," http://userpages.aug.com/bdobson/superior.html, February 3, 2010.

[8] Letter from Joe So-ang to U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull, June 6, 1941.

[9] *Honolulu Telegram*, "Sino-Korean Group Pledges Aid to Allies," Retrieved January 22. 2011 from http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/assetserver/controller/view/kada-m2062/KADA-shyun17-020

[10] Yuh Ji-Yeon, Northwestern University, e-mail October 21, 2004.

[11] Honolulu Star-Bulletin, May 25, 1944.

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