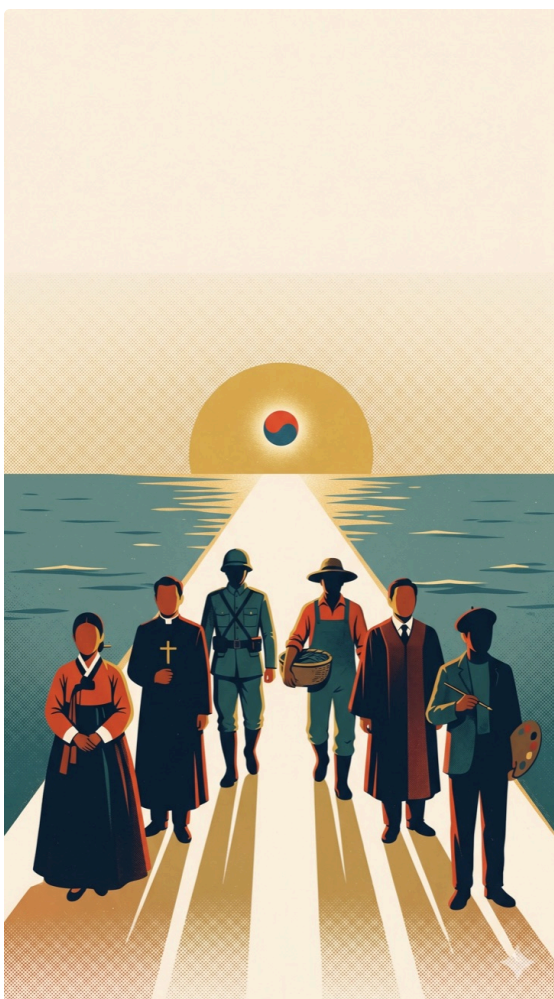


Trailblazers



Trailblazers — Twenty-Four Korean
Americans Who Paved the Way

Trailblazers

Twenty-Four Korean Americans Who Paved the Way

Stories of courage, identity, and community — for middle-grade and young-adult readers.



A small paper boat on a calm sea at dawn

Foreword

The people in this book were not born famous, and most of them never became household names. They were farmers, soldiers, teachers, ministers, artists, doctors, judges, and reporters. What they shared was a moment — sometimes many moments — when they had to choose between the safe path and the harder, more honest one. This book is about those choices.

Their lives unfold against a difficult history. For most of the early twentieth century, Korea was not free: Japan occupied the peninsula from 1910 to 1945, and many of these pioneers left home as exiles, refugees, or laborers. In the United States they often met racism and laws designed to keep them out. And yet they built — businesses, schools, newspapers, churches, organizations, and a community that did not exist before them. They also worked, from thousands of miles away, to free the homeland they had left behind.

These stories don't hide the hard parts, because the hard parts are where the courage lives. As you read, notice the choices each person made — and ask yourself what you would have done. The chapters are arranged by the year each person was born, so the book moves through time, from the first immigrant generation to the artists of today.

A short timeline

- **1882** — The United States and Korea sign a treaty of friendship, promising mutual “good offices.”
 - **1903–1905** — The first major wave of Korean immigrants arrives in Hawai‘i to work on sugar plantations.
 - **1905** — Japan makes Korea a protectorate; the secret Taft–Katsura agreement signals U.S. acceptance of Japanese control.
 - **1910–1945** — Japan formally annexes and colonizes Korea: thirty-five years of occupation.
 - **1919** — The March First Movement: Koreans rise up nonviolently for independence; a government-in-exile forms.
 - **1941–1945** — World War II; Korean Americans serve in the U.S. military and intelligence services.
 - **1945** — Korea is liberated, then divided into North and South.
 - **1950–1953** — The Korean War.
 - **1965** — The Immigration and Nationality Act reopens large-scale immigration from Korea.
 - **1992** — *Sa-I-Gu*, the Los Angeles civil unrest, hits Korean American communities hard and spurs a new generation of organizing.
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Contents

1. **Maria Hwang** — The Woman Who Chose to Be Something

2. **Pyeng Koo Yoon** — The Petition That Failed on Purpose
3. **Park Yong-man** — The Army He Built on the Prairie
4. **Charles Ho Kim** — The Orchard King Who Bought Back a Country
5. **Helen Ahn** — The Woman Who Held the Home Front
6. **Kim Chong Lim** — The Rice King Who Bought an Air Force
7. **Harry S. Kim** — The Quiet Half of a Million-Dollar Partnership
8. **Ha Soo Whang** — The Woman Who Kept the Dance Alive Without Dancing
9. **Chung Song Lee Ahn** — The Woman Who Built Korea in Honolulu
10. **Ilhan New** — The Man Who Refused to Choose
11. **Nodie Sohn** — The Principal at Nineteen
12. **Mary Paik Lee** — The Girl Who Remembered an Entire Century
13. **Philip Ahn** — The Actor Who Played His Enemy
14. **Susan Ahn Cuddy** — The Woman Who Applied Again
15. **Herbert Choy** — The Man Who Wore a Robe No One Had Worn Before
16. **David Hyun** — The Architect of Someone Else's Heart
17. **Fred Ohr** — The Boy Who Talked His Way Into the Sky
18. **Young Oak Kim** — The Officer Who Refused to Leave

19. **Dora Yum Kim** — The Woman Who Gave 3,000 Strangers Their First Job
 20. **K. W. Lee** — The Reporter Who Wouldn't Let Go
 21. **Luke Ik Chang Kim** — The Doctor Who Listened for the Whole Person
 22. **Dae-Sook Suh** — The Refugee Who Studied the Country He Fled
 23. **Hi Duk Lee** — The Man Who Built a Neighborhood and Walked Away
 24. **Yong Soon Min** — The Artist Who Built the Room
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Maria Hwang

The Woman Who Chose to Be Something

1865–1937 · Educator and women's organizer



The Woman Who Chose to Be Something

In 1905, a forty-year-old woman named Maria Hwang stood on the deck of a ship leaving Korea, her three children beside her, watching her old life disappear behind the waves. She was leaving behind wealth, a large household, and a husband. By the standards of her time and place, this was almost unthinkable. A respectable married woman in Korea was expected to

endure whatever her marriage handed her. But Maria Hwang had decided that enduring was no longer enough.

She had been born in 1865 in Pyongan Province, in the north of Korea — a region that was becoming a center of Korean Methodism, a Christian faith brought by missionaries. Many of the families who would later sail to Hawaii came from exactly this part of the country. Maria had married into money, but her husband kept several mistresses, and the marriage brought her little dignity. Years later she would explain her decision to her son Ok Kang in plain terms: in Korea, she said, she had “not been allowed to be anything.”

So she became a Methodist, and the church became her doorway out. Korean Methodist congregations were helping families immigrate to Hawaii to work, and Maria used that pipeline. She gathered her daughter and two sons and boarded a ship for Honolulu — a widow in spirit, if not on paper, starting over in a country where she could not yet speak the language.

What waited in Hawaii was hard. Thousands of Koreans had come to labor on the sugar plantations, cutting cane under a punishing sun for low pay. Their children — the first Korean kids born into the cane fields — were growing up far from the homeland their parents remembered. Many other immigrant women took up work as merchants or household servants, the steadier and easier paths. Maria Hwang chose something harder and more lasting: she became a

teacher. The plantation families needed someone literate in Korean to teach their children who they were, where they came from, and what their language and history meant. Maria gave them that.

But teaching was only the beginning. In 1913, she founded and led the Taehan Puinhoe — the Korean Women's Association of the Territory of Hawaii. It was the first organization of its kind in the islands, and, importantly, it was not a side group attached to a men's organization. It was its own creation, built and run by women. The association did many jobs at once: it was a mutual aid society where families helped one another through hard times, a school that kept Korean culture alive, and a fundraising engine for the movement to free Korea from Japanese rule. (Japan had taken control of Korea in 1910, and Koreans overseas worked tirelessly to win back their country's independence.)

Then came 1919, the year of the March First Movement, when Koreans across the homeland rose up in mass protests demanding independence. That same year, Maria made another quiet but telling decision. She folded her own organization into a larger group, the Korean Ladies Relief Society. She could have insisted on keeping her name on the thing she had built. Instead, she chose to strengthen the larger cause. The Relief Society became a steady pipeline of money and morale that supported the independence movement for the next twenty-five years.

Maria Hwang died in Honolulu in 1937. She was raising funds for a free Korea until the end — but she did not live to see it. Korea would not win its independence until 1945, eight years after her death.

Why Maria Hwang matters

We often imagine the first Korean immigrant families as men leading the way, with wives following behind. Maria Hwang's life flips that picture. Many of the first Korean women in America were not following their husbands — some, like her, were leaving them, and once in Hawaii they built the schools, relief societies, and church groups that held entire communities together. The founding generation of Korean America had founding mothers, plural. Maria refused a life where she was “not allowed to be anything,” and in doing so, she became a great deal.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Maria Hwang standing before a one-room plantation schoolhouse, a Korean primer in hand, with cane fields stretching behind her and a small group of immigrant children gathered to learn.

Pyeng Koo Yoon

The Petition That Failed on Purpose

1880–1949 · Methodist minister and Korean independence diplomat



The Petition That Failed on Purpose

Pyeng Koo Yoon was born in 1880 in Yangju, a town in the Gyeonggi countryside north of Seoul. As a teenager he was baptized by Homer Hulbert, an American missionary who had come to teach in Korea, and he went on to study at Pai Chai School in Seoul — one of the first Western-style schools in the country. By his early twenties Yoon was working as an interpreter and a Methodist missionary in Kaesong, a respected job

with a steady future. Then, in October 1903, he gave it up. He sailed across the Pacific to Hawaii to become a chaplain to the very first wave of Korean immigrants — men who had signed on to cut sugarcane on the islands' plantations under a punishing tropical sun.

He was twenty-two years old, and the work was pastoral. He performed weddings and funerals, taught English, and stepped in to settle arguments between laborers and the overseers who controlled their wages. It was a quiet, useful life serving people far from home. But history was about to pull him into something much larger.

In 1904 and 1905, Russia and Japan fought a brutal war, and the prize they were really fighting over was Korea. When Japan won, it began tightening its grip on the peninsula. The Korean community in Hawaii, watching from thousands of miles away, decided to act. They drafted a petition asking the United States to keep a promise: back in 1882, America had signed a treaty with Korea pledging “good offices” — friendly help — if either nation were threatened. Yoon was chosen to carry that plea to Washington.

In July 1905 he traveled from Honolulu, and along the way he secured a letter of introduction from William H. Taft, the U.S. Secretary of War, who happened to be passing through Hawaii. Armed with that letter and joined by a fiery young activist named Syngman Rhee — who would one day become Korea's first president — Yoon went to the very top. On August 4, 1905, the two

men sat down with President Theodore Roosevelt himself, at his summer home, Sagamore Hill, in Oyster Bay on New York's Long Island.

It was an astonishing moment. Two Korean men, with no official government title between them, asking the President of the United States to defend their homeland. Roosevelt listened politely. Then he explained that he could only accept such a petition through "formal diplomatic channels" — meaning it had to be passed along by Korea's official legation, its embassy, in Washington. There was a cruel catch, and Roosevelt almost certainly knew it. The Korean legation had already been quietly taken over by officials loyal to Tokyo. They refused to forward the petition. It died on a desk, unread by anyone who mattered.

What Yoon could not have known was that the game was already rigged. Just days earlier, Taft — the same man who had handed Yoon his friendly letter — had met secretly with Japan's prime minister, Katsura. In what became known as the Taft-Katsura agreement, the United States quietly agreed not to interfere with Japan's control of Korea, in exchange for Japan leaving the American-held Philippines alone. The polite meeting at Oyster Bay had never had a chance. Within five years, Japan would formally annex Korea, beginning thirty-five years of harsh colonial rule.

Yoon did not give up. He enrolled at Harvard as a special student in 1906, betting that education and the long game mattered. Then he spent the next four

decades as a minister and an organizer for Korean independence, working alongside Rhee and the reformer Philip Jaisohn. In 1919 he was chosen to represent the Korean National Association at the Paris Peace Conference, where world leaders were redrawing the map after World War I. Once again, the Koreans were turned away and denied a seat at the table. Another public defeat.

But Yoon lived long enough to see Korea freed in 1945. In 1949, in his late sixties, he returned home to help build the new Republic of Korea, and he died in Seoul that June. In 1977, his country honored him with the Order of Merit for National Foundation.

Why Pyeng Koo Yoon matters

By every measure, August 4, 1905, was a failure. The petition was rejected, the legation betrayed it, and a secret deal had already sold out Korea's future. Yet it was the first time Korean Americans walked into the highest office in the United States and asked it to act for their homeland — on the record, in their own names. Yoon spent forty-four more years doing that same uncertain work, knowing each effort might fail too. His life teaches that advocacy doesn't always win, but doing it openly and honestly changes what becomes possible for those who come next.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener scene of Pyeng Koo Yoon and Syngman Rhee, dressed in formal suits and holding a folded petition, standing

at the doorway of Roosevelt's seaside Sagamore Hill home — composed and determined, the wide Long Island sky behind them.

Park Yong-man

The Army He Built on the Prairie

1881–1928 · Independence activist, military strategist, and educator



The Army He Built on the Prairie

In 1905, a young Korean named Park Yong-man stepped off a ship into a country that could not have looked less like home. He had just served time in a Korean prison for pushing reforms his government did not want, and now he was starting over in the United

States. He made his way to Denver, then to Nebraska — a flat, wide state of corn and cattle, thousands of miles from the homeland he was determined to free.

Korea, in those years, was being swallowed. Japan was tightening its grip on the country, and by 1910 it would formally take it over completely, beginning decades of harsh occupation. Most people who wanted to help from abroad gave speeches, wrote letters, and raised money. Park made a different bet — a bold and difficult one. He believed that if Korea was ever going to win its freedom, Koreans living overseas could not just be sympathizers cheering from a distance. They would have to be soldiers, ready to fight when the moment came.

To lead, he first studied. Park enrolled at Hastings College, then transferred to the University of Nebraska, where he studied political and military science, graduating in 1911. But he did not wait until graduation to act. In 1909, while still a college student, he founded the Youth Military Academy in Hastings, Nebraska. Picture it: young Korean American students drilling in formation across open prairie ground — land that had nothing to do with Korea except for the determined people standing on it. They were training, in a small town in the middle of America, for a war to free a country across an ocean.

It was an extraordinary idea, and Park did not stop there. He traveled to Hawaii, home to a large Korean immigrant community, and organized the Korean National Brigade, an actual military unit of Korean

fighters in training. He also edited Korean-language newspapers that openly called for armed resistance against Japanese rule. Park had chosen what people called the “militant” path — the belief that freedom would have to be taken by force, not granted through polite negotiation.

That choice put him at odds with other famous Korean leaders. Park clashed publicly with Syngman Rhee, who would one day become South Korea’s first president, and with Ahn Chang-ho, a beloved organizer and educator. Both men favored diplomacy — winning Korea’s freedom through persuasion, alliances, and international pressure. Park respected the goal but not the method. Diplomacy, he argued, was too slow. While the world debated, Korea suffered. Soldiers, he believed, would be ready when words ran out.

History did not hand Park a clean victory. The independence movement was full of brilliant, stubborn people who disagreed fiercely about how to win, and over the years it splintered into rival groups. Park kept organizing anyway, eventually moving his work to China to stay close to the fight. But the movement was changing around him, pulled in new directions by new ideas. In 1928, in Beijing, Park Yong-man was killed by a fellow Korean — someone from a rival political faction within the movement he had given his life to. He was 47 years old.

He did not live to see Korea free; that would not come until 1945, seventeen years after his death. But the seeds he planted did not vanish. Today, at Hastings

College in Nebraska, a Korean memorial honors his memory — one of the very few monuments in the entire United States to a Korean independence figure. On that quiet prairie where he once drilled his young recruits, his name endures.

Why Park Yong-man matters

Park Yong-man proved that you can build the future of a place you cannot enter. The fight for Korea's freedom did not happen only in Korea — it happened in Hawaii, in Shanghai, in San Francisco, and in a tiny college town in Nebraska. Park never got to walk through a free Korea, yet he poured his life into making one possible. His story asks a question that still matters today: how do you serve a community across an ocean, and how do you build something lasting for a place that may never fully be your own?



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener scene of Park Yong-man standing on the open Nebraska prairie at dawn, watching a small group of young Korean American students drilling in formation — hopeful, resolute, and far from home.

Charles Ho Kim

The Orchard King Who Bought Back a Country

1884–1968 · Farmer, businessman, and independence movement leader



The Orchard King Who Bought Back a Country

In 1912, Charles Ho Kim made a choice that would shape the rest of his life: he ran. He had been a teacher at the Pai Chai and Ewha schools in Korea — good, respectable work. But Korea in 1912 was not free. Two years earlier, in 1910, Japan had formally annexed the country and begun a harsh colonial rule that would last until 1945, censoring Korean newspapers, banning Korean political activity, and punishing anyone who resisted. Rather than live under that occupation, Kim slipped into exile in China. Two years later, in 1914, he crossed the Pacific and stepped off a ship in San Francisco — a man without a country, starting over.

He made his way to California's Central Valley, a sun-baked land of farms and orchards. In 1920, in the town of Reedley, he did something that should not have worked. He partnered with a fellow Korean immigrant named Harry S. Kim — no relation — to launch a fruit company called Kim Brothers, Inc. Neither man had trained as a farmer. There was almost no Korean community in Reedley to lean on. They simply divided the work and got to it: Charles ran the inside of the business — the orchards, the growing, the quality of the fruit — while Harry handled the selling.

Then came their great gamble. A local plant breeder named Fred W. Anderson had developed a strange new fruit: a peach with no fuzz, smooth-skinned and sweet. Today we call it the nectarine. Kim Brothers locked up the exclusive license to grow it for sixteen years — betting the company's entire future on one patented variety almost nobody had heard of. The bet paid off spectacularly. By the 1950s, their Le Grand and Sun

Grand nectarines dominated the market. The company reached \$1.5 million in annual sales. They built six farms across 500 acres, a \$100,000 nursery, and a \$400,000 packing house, and at the height of each season they employed more than 300 workers. Charles Ho Kim and Harry Kim are generally remembered as the first Korean American millionaires.

For most people, that would have been the whole story — the immigrant who struck it rich. For Charles Ho Kim, the money was never the point. It was fuel.

Starting in 1936, he became a reform leader in the Korean National Association of North America, the main organization for Koreans in the United States, serving three terms as its top executive (in 1937, 1945, and 1949). When the association needed a permanent home in Los Angeles, Kim personally gave \$20,000 — more than half the entire cost — to build it. At the headquarters' dedication on Jefferson Street in 1938, he said: "This building is a home for us displaced Koreans. Here, we will foster progress for our people, we will support the Provisional Government in liberating our homeland, and we will educate our future generations."

He meant every word. When the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 sent the United States into World War II, the government forced many Japanese Americans into prison camps. Kim helped organize the "Tiger Brigades" — Korean American units within the California National Guard — that kept Korean Americans out of internment and put them in uniform

instead. He raised \$840,000 in U.S. war bonds for the war effort. And in 1941, when Korea's independence movement was split into bitter, feuding factions, Kim helped unite them into the United Korean Committee — working side by side with people he disagreed with, including supporters of Syngman Rhee, because freedom mattered more than being right.

Korea was finally liberated in 1945. Kim traveled there to serve on a commission helping build a new government, then returned to America in 1948 to keep doing what he did best: building lasting institutions. In 1957 he founded the Korean Foundation, Inc., whose scholarships sent more than 600 students to school between 1958 and 1974. In 1959 he helped publish *50 Years of Korean American History*. And in 1963, in his late seventies — an age when most people rest — he championed a brand-new Korean Community Center in Los Angeles. He died in 1968 at 84.

Why Charles Ho Kim matters

Most success stories stop at the fortune. Charles Ho Kim's started there. He treated his wealth as movement capital — money meant to be spent on a free Korea and a strong Korean American community — and he stayed faithful to that idea for forty years, through occupation, a world war, liberation, and his homeland's painful division. The easy thing to do with a nectarine fortune was to enjoy it. He used it to build a people's future instead. In 2006, Charles Ho Kim Elementary School became the first American public school named after a Korean American.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Charles Ho Kim standing in a sunlit Reedley orchard, a smooth nectarine in one hand, rows of fruit trees stretching behind him toward the California hills.

Helen Ahn

The Woman Who Held the Home Front

1884–1969 · Independence-movement organizer and matriarch of the first Korean American family



The Woman Who Held the Home Front

On October 14, 1902, a young woman named Yi Hye-ryon walked down the gangway of a steamship in San Francisco, her whole life packed into whatever she could carry. She and her husband, Ahn Chang-ho, held Korean passports numbered 51 and 52 — among the very first ever issued for travel to America. They had been married for exactly one month and eleven days. In English, she would become Helen Ahn. She was

eighteen years old, she spoke no English, and she was stepping into a country that had almost no Koreans in it at all. She and her husband were the first Korean married couple to immigrate to the United States.

What makes Helen's story remarkable is not just that she came. It is what she built once she stayed — and how long she stayed. For the next sixty-seven years, Helen never left California.

Her husband, on the other hand, was almost never home. Ahn Chang-ho became famous under the name Dosan, one of the towering leaders of the Korean independence movement — the decades-long struggle to free Korea from Japanese colonial rule. Being a leader meant being everywhere except Los Angeles. Dosan was in Korea, in Shanghai, in Manchuria, in prison. He crossed oceans and continents to organize, to give speeches, to keep a captive nation's hope alive. And while he did, Helen did something just as hard and far less celebrated: she kept everything else from falling apart.

She raised five children — Philip, Philson, Susan, Soorah, and Ralph, born between 1905 and 1926 — largely on her own. She took in laundry. She worked domestic jobs, cleaning other families' homes. She kept rice and kimchi on the table not only for her own children but for the steady stream of independence activists who passed through the family home, treating it like a base of operations. And somehow, out of a budget stretched thin, she still wired money across the

Pacific to support her absent husband's work. Dosan's letters home sometimes asked her to forgive him for being gone so much. She forgave, and she kept going.

Helen did not see herself as merely the wife who waited. She organized. Through the Korean Women's Patriotic Society in Los Angeles, she helped turn kitchens and living rooms into a fundraising engine, gathering independence-movement donations a dollar at a time from a community that did not have many dollars to spare. The men gave the speeches that history remembers. Women like Helen built the quiet machinery — the meals, the money, the meetings — that made those speeches possible in the first place.

Then came the hardest blow. In 1932, Japanese authorities arrested Dosan. In 1938, he died from injuries he had suffered in prison. Helen was fifty-four years old, still raising children at home, and she had spent nearly her entire marriage as a single parent. Now she would finish the job alone for good.

She could have gone back to Korea. She did not. She stayed in Los Angeles, near the family's longtime home on Bunker Hill at 106 N. Figueroa Street — a house that had been the beating heart of the early Korean American community. For thirty-one more years she remained there, the living memory of how it had all begun. She died on April 21, 1969, on her eighty-fifth birthday, in the city she had refused to leave.

In 2008, the Republic of Korea posthumously awarded Helen Ahn the Order of Merit for National Foundation — one of the nation's highest honors for those who

fought for independence. It was a long-overdue admission that the struggle had always been a two-person job, and that one of those two people had done her half in a Los Angeles kitchen.

Why Helen Ahn matters

History tends to remember the people who stood at the podium and forget the people who made it possible for them to get there. Helen Ahn is the answer to that forgetting. She did not write the speeches; she made the speeches deliverable — through laundry, rent, raised children, and dollars wired east. Her family is also proof that “Korean American” is not a new idea: it is more than 120 years old, older than most of the categories we use today. She was here first, and she stayed. Her great-grandchildren are American adults now.



Illustration: A warm chapter-opener portrait of a young Helen Ahn at the rail of a steamship arriving in San Francisco harbor in 1902, a small bundle of belongings in her arms and the new city rising behind her — hopeful, steady, and quietly resolute.

Kim Chong Lim

The Rice King Who Bought an Air Force

*1884–1973 · Rice farmer, independence funder, and
founder of the first Korean aviation school*



The Rice King Who Bought an Air Force

In 1906, a twenty-two-year-old named Kim Chong Lim stepped off a steamship called the *Alameda* in San Francisco. He had left behind a Korea that was sliding under Japanese control, and he arrived with nothing. His first American job was brutal and ordinary: laying railroad track in Salt Lake City, swinging tools in the heat and cold for low pay. It was the kind of work most

Korean immigrants of his generation did, moving from camp to camp, field to field, with little hope of getting ahead.

But Kim was already thinking beyond his own paycheck. In 1907, while still a laborer, he mailed ten dollars to the Gongnip Association, a Korean nationalist newspaper fighting to free his homeland. The next year he sent thirty dollars to help buy printing equipment. He was giving money to the independence movement before he had any real money to give — a habit that would define his entire life.

By the mid-1910s, Kim had found his calling in the wide, flat farmland of the Sacramento Valley. In the town of Willows, California, he began growing rice. In 1915 he farmed 100 acres. Just four years later, in 1919, he was farming more than 3,300 acres. His annual income climbed into the hundreds of thousands of dollars — an astonishing fortune at a time when most Korean immigrants earned a few dollars a day bent over in someone else's fields. The Korean American community gave him a nickname that stuck: the Rice King. He is often remembered as the first Korean American millionaire.

Then, in early 1920, a visitor changed everything. General Noh Baek-rin arrived in Willows on behalf of the Korean Provisional Government — the exiled government, based in Shanghai, that was trying to reclaim Korea's independence. Noh said something that lodged in Kim's mind: *"The victor of the next war*

will be the one who rules the sky.” Airplanes were still a brand-new technology, barely sixteen years old. But Kim was convinced.

He did not hesitate, and he did not hold back. Kim donated forty acres of his own land for an airfield. He put up \$20,000 in startup money and pledged \$30,000 every year to keep it running. He hired American flight instructors, bought three real aircraft, and paid every cadet’s room, food, and tuition out of his own pocket. On February 20, 1920, the Willows Korean Aviation School opened its doors with fifteen students. By June there were thirty, and Kim served as the school’s president. Today, the Republic of Korea Air Force — South Korea’s modern military air force — traces its origins directly back to this little flight school in a California rice town.

Then came the flood. In October 1920, just before harvest, a catastrophe swept through the Sacramento Valley. Kim’s rice fields — all 3,300 acres — were destroyed. The fortune that had taken years to build was gone in a single week. Without its underwriter, the aviation school struggled through one more season and was shut down in April 1921. The empire was never rebuilt.

Kim could have grown bitter. Instead, he kept giving what little he now had, just at a smaller scale, and he kept serving. During World War II, in his late fifties, he enlisted in the California State Guard. His two sons joined the United States Navy. He lived quietly in Los Angeles for the rest of his life and died there in 1973.

Recognition came slowly and late: in 2005, South Korea awarded him the Order of Merit for National Foundation, and in 2009 his remains were moved to the National Cemetery in Daejeon, where the nation honors its founders.

Why Kim Chong Lim matters

There is a difference between holding wealth and spending it on something that may never pay you back. Kim Chong Lim made a decision in February 1920 that ended badly for him — his school closed within fifteen months, his fortune within eight. Yet that risky, undiversified bet is now woven into the founding story of an entire nation's air force. He gave nearly everything he had to a thirty-cadet flight school because someone convinced him that airplanes would shape the future. Conviction like that is rare. When it appears, it tends to outlast the person who had it.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener scene of Kim Chong Lim standing at the edge of his vast Willows rice fields, watching a small biplane lift off from the airfield he funded, the Sacramento Valley stretching wide behind him.

Harry S. Kim

The Quiet Half of a Million-Dollar Partnership

1885–1977 · Horticulturist, businessman, and patron of Korean independence



The Quiet Half of a Million-Dollar
Partnership

Harry S. Kim — born Kim Hyung-soon in Korea in 1885 — came of age at a moment when his country was being squeezed by foreign powers and would soon be swallowed entirely. Japan would formally annex Korea in 1910, erasing it from the map for thirty-five years. But before that, a generation of young Koreans found a new kind of education at mission schools run by Western Christians. Harry attended Pai Chai School in Seoul, the first modern Western-style school in Korea, where he learned English well enough to pass the official government interpreter's examination — a serious credential that few could earn.

That examination became his door out. Rather than stay in Korea as a mission-school worker, Harry used his interpreter's papers to sail for the United States. He made one important trip home first: to marry Hahn Duk-sae, a graduate of Ewha School, Korea's pioneering school for women. Then, in 1913, the newlyweds crossed the Pacific and settled in Reedley, a hot farming town in California's San Joaquin Valley. Early Korean Christian immigrants had scouted the area and decided its orchards were good ground for people willing to work hard. Harry was.

In 1920 he started a nursery business, raising saplings, seedlings, and young stone-fruit trees — peaches, plums, and their relatives. That same year he made the decision that would define his life. He partnered with a man named Charles Ho Kim, who years earlier had tutored Harry's own wife in mathematics. Together they founded Kim Brothers, Inc. Neither man had been trained for the fruit business, but they divided the

work cleanly and trusted each other completely: Charles ran the orchards and daily operations, while Harry handled sales, customers, and the public face of the company. It was a partnership that would last thirty years and never break — something rare in any business, in any era.

The two made a daring bet. A local plant breeder named Fred W. Anderson had developed a “fuzzless peach” — what we now call the nectarine. Kim Brothers secured the exclusive right to grow it. Their Le Grand and Sun Grand nectarines dominated the market for nearly two decades. The company swelled to 500 acres spread across six farms, employed more than 300 seasonal workers at peak season, and reached \$1.5 million in sales. In doing so, Harry S. Kim and Charles Ho Kim became the first Korean American millionaires — an extraordinary achievement for immigrants who had arrived with little more than skill, nerve, and each other.

But Harry never treated his fortune as something to keep. His heart stayed with the homeland that Japan still occupied, and his giving ran through the Korean National Association (KNA), the largest organization of Koreans in America fighting for their country’s independence. In the early years he had personally supported the activist Syngman Rhee, who would later become South Korea’s first president. Harry broke with him — not over money or strategy, but over values. When Rhee married an Austrian woman named Franziska Donner, Harry disapproved and never resumed his personal support. Instead, he

poured his giving into the KNA as an institution, becoming a major donor to its 1938 headquarters building on Jefferson Street in Los Angeles.

What stands out most is *how* he gave. Between 1914 and 1945, Harry documented \$5,337 in donations to the independence movement — a substantial sum for the time. He did not write one heroic check. He gave steadily, year after year, for three decades, the patient way a person tends an orchard. After World War II ended and Korea was finally freed, he and Charles put \$100,000 into a scholarship fund for Korean students. Harry S. Kim died in Los Angeles in 1977 at the age of 92. In 2011, South Korea posthumously awarded him the Order of Merit for National Foundation, honoring the quiet decades of support that helped keep a stateless people's hopes alive.

Why Harry S. Kim matters

Harry S. Kim is the quieter half of the Kim Brothers story — the sales-and-operations half, the steady-giving half, the name fewer people remember. That asymmetry is exactly the lesson. Great things get built by two kinds of people: the visible partners and the steady ones working beside them. A liberation movement, like a thriving orchard, needs both. Harry proved that being the second name on the partnership is not a smaller life. Patient, faithful work — given year after year without applause — can build a fortune and help free a nation.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Harry S. Kim standing among rows of nectarine trees in the California sun, holding a young sapling, with the orchard stretching to the horizon behind him.

Ha Soo Whang

The Woman Who Kept the Dance Alive Without Dancing

1892–1984 · Social worker and cultural organizer



The Woman Who Kept the Dance Alive
Without Dancing

Ha Soo Whang left Korea in 1911 as a student, crossing the ocean to study in a country she barely knew. She had grown up in missionary schools in Korea, then traveled all the way to Athens College for Young Women in Alabama. By 1922 she was finally heading home to Korea. Her ship stopped in Hawaii along the way — and that stop changed the rest of her life. The

YWCA International Institute in Honolulu offered her a job. She took it, and she stayed for the next twenty years.

The job made her the first Korean social worker in the territory of Hawaii. A social worker is someone who helps families deal with the systems that run everyday life — schools, doctors, courts, landlords, government offices. For Korean immigrants in Honolulu, those systems were written in a language many of them could not read, run by people who did not know their customs. When a Korean family needed to argue with a landlord, register a child for school, see a doctor, or appear in court, Ha Soo Whang was the person who showed up. And she did not just translate the words. She translated the whole system — explaining American rules to Korean families, and explaining Korean families to Americans who did not understand them.

At the International Institute she ran two clubs that were mirror images of each other. The HyungJay Club was for young Korean American women born or raised in Hawaii. It taught them the traditional culture their parents had carried from Korea — the language, songs, and customs that might otherwise fade in a new country. The Mother's Club was for their grandmothers, women born in Korea who often could not read English. It taught them how to live in America. One club passed the old country down to the young; the other helped the old generation step into the new world. Whang was running a translation service in both directions at the same time.

Her most lasting work, though, was something she could not do herself. Ha Soo Whang believed that Korean dance — a centuries-old art form, full of meaning and memory — had to survive in Hawaii. But she could not dance. So instead of being a performer, she became something just as important: an organizer, an agent, the person who made it happen. She searched out the people who *could* dance. She found Susan Chun Lee and Chai Yong Ha, recruited them, and arranged performances. She used her position at the Institute to set up public showings so that audiences in Honolulu could see Korean dance with their own eyes. As long as the Institute existed, she kept that art form visible.

Then came war. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, life in Hawaii changed overnight, and wartime pressure forced the International Institute to shut down in 1942. The ground beneath Whang's work had been pulled away. She kept going as long as the Institute stood, then left Hawaii in 1943 after twenty years of service.

But the dance did not die with the Institute. The lineage Ha Soo Whang had protected was picked up after the war by another dancer, Halla Pai Huhm, whose studio became — and remains — the oldest Korean dance studio in the United States. The thread Whang refused to let break is still being danced today. She was never the star on the stage. She was the reason there was a stage at all.

Why Ha Soo Whang matters

Some of the most important work in any community is connective, not authored. Ha Soo Whang did not choreograph the dances, write the books, or perform for the crowds. She was the one who knew everyone, spoke both languages, kept the calendar, and made sure the right people found each other. That is a real and difficult career, and it is often the quiet thing that holds a whole community together. Anyone who has translated a letter for a parent, answered everyone's phone calls, or made sure a tradition got passed on has a predecessor in Ha Soo Whang. Bridge work is its own kind of greatness.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener scene of Ha Soo Whang standing at the edge of a Honolulu stage, clipboard in hand, watching with quiet pride as two Korean dancers in flowing hanbok perform under warm lights — the organizer in the shadows who made the moment possible.

Chung Song Lee Ahn

The Woman Who Built Korea in Honolulu

1895–1989 · Educator and women's independence organizer



The Woman Who Built Korea in Honolulu

In January 1919, a young woman named Chung Song Lee stepped off a ship in Honolulu. She was twenty-three, far from everything she knew, and Korea was slipping further behind her with every passing day. She could not have guessed that she would never live in her homeland again — or that the islands she had just reached would become the place where she spent the next seventy years building a Korean world from scratch.

She had been born in 1895 in Pyongyang, in what is now North Korea. As a girl she won a place at Ewha Hakdang, the pioneering school for Korean women, and graduated in 1913 at a time when an educated Korean woman was a rare and powerful thing. She did not stop there. She traveled to Japan and completed the Japan Women's Seminary in Yokohama in 1918, then returned home to teach at the Pyongyang Women's Seminary. Teaching was one of the few doors open to women like her, and she walked through it. Then, in early 1919, she sailed for Hawaii.

Her timing was extraordinary. Just two months after she arrived, on March 1, 1919, the streets of Seoul filled with people. Crowds read aloud a declaration of Korean independence and marched against Japanese occupation, which had crushed the country since 1910. The Japanese authorities answered with mass arrests and violence. This was the March First Movement, and it changed Korean history. Chung Song Lee was already an ocean away — safe, but unable to join the fight at home. From that moment, her whole life

turned around a single question: what did a Korean woman in Hawaii owe to a Korea she could not return to?

Her answer was to make herself the connective tissue of an entire community. Over the following decades, she led nearly every Korean women's organization in the territory of Hawaii — not one after another, but often all at once. She chaired the Korean YWCA, joining an interracial Christian women's network rather than building a separate Korean-only group, a choice that gave her standing across Hawaii's wider society. She served as president of the Korean Women's Relief Society, the women's wing of the independence movement, which raised money on the islands and sent it across the Pacific to support the cause back home. She presided over the women's branch of the Korean National Association, the largest Korean political organization in the United States. And she led the Ewha alumnae association of Hawaii, keeping her old school's spirit alive thousands of miles from its gates.

Holding all of this together took real skill, because Korean Hawaii was not united. The community was split between followers of two rival independence leaders, Syngman Rhee and Park Yong-man, and the feud ran deep. Many people had to pick a side. Chung Song Lee did not. She worked across the whole spectrum of organizations, refusing to lock herself into one faction. By staying useful to everyone, she stayed useful to the cause — and kept the women's institutions running while the men argued. She even

represented the Korean community on Honolulu's United Welfare Fund Drive, carrying her people's name into the city's broader civic life.

She never made her work a young person's game and then quit. She carried it into her old age, still leading the Ewha alumnae well into the decades after World War II. She lived to ninety-four and died in Honolulu in 1989. The recognition came late — very late. In 2021, more than thirty years after her death, the South Korean government posthumously honored her as a “woman patriot” in a ceremony at the University of Hawaii's Center for Korean Studies, finally naming what she had been all along.

Why Chung Song Lee Ahn matters

Chung Song Lee Ahn never got to go home, and she refused to treat her life as a long wait for a homecoming that never came. Instead she built a whole Korean world where she actually stood — its schools, its women's clubs, its relief funds, its place in a divided community — and made that the contribution. Her life teaches a quiet, stubborn lesson: home is not only a place you return to. Sometimes it is the thing you build, day after day, exactly where you are.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of a young Chung Song Lee arriving at Honolulu harbor in 1919, a small suitcase in hand, looking out toward the island with the determination of someone about to begin a lifetime of work.

Ilhan New

The Man Who Refused to Choose

*1895–1971 · Entrepreneur, pharmaceutical pioneer,
and OSS officer*



The Man Who Refused to Choose

In 1904, a nine-year-old boy stood on the deck of a ship leaving Korea — alone. His parents had decided that the safest place for their son was on the other side of the world, in a country he had never seen and whose language he did not speak. The boy's name was Ilhan New, and when the ship docked in San Francisco, no family member was waiting. He was placed with strangers in Kearney, Nebraska, a small prairie town far from any ocean.

Most children would have been swallowed by that loneliness. New made a life. He lived in Nebraska for seven years, then moved to Hastings for high school, where he sold Eastern herbal medicine to Chinese students and played football well enough to earn a sports scholarship. He studied commerce — business — at the University of Michigan and landed a steady, respectable job at General Electric, one of the biggest companies in America.

Then, in 1922, he quit. Together with a classmate named Wallace Smith, New bet everything on an unlikely product: mung bean sprouts, a staple of Asian cooking that most Americans had never tasted. Their company, La Choy Food Products, introduced canned Asian vegetables to American grocery shelves. The gamble worked spectacularly. By 1926, New had hundreds of thousands of dollars in the bank — a self-made fortune, built from a food his adopted country didn't yet know it wanted.

That same year, New traveled to China and saw something that changed the direction of his entire life. Korea was under harsh Japanese colonial rule, and he witnessed what that occupation was doing to the health of ordinary Korean people — poverty, disease, and almost no access to modern medicine. So he made a decision that would define him. He sold his thriving American business at its peak, returned to Seoul with \$500,000, and in December 1926 founded Yuhan Corporation.

Yuhan was the first Korean pharmaceutical company. It was the first to bring modern medicines — like prontosil, an early bacteria-fighting drug — into East Asia, and eventually the first Korean firm listed on the Korea Stock Exchange. But New cared about more than products. At a time when Korean factory owners almost universally squeezed their workers, he built dormitories, childcare facilities, and even swimming pools for Yuhan employees. He treated the people who worked for him as people.

New never stayed still. He crossed the Pacific again and again, even earning an MBA at the University of Southern California. Then came his most surprising chapter. In January 1945, at the age of 50 — far older than any ordinary soldier — he was recruited into Project NAPKO, a secret plan by the OSS (the Office of Strategic Services, America's wartime spy agency and the forerunner of the CIA). The mission: to drop Korean American agents behind enemy lines into Japanese-occupied Korea. New was inducted into the U.S. Army and trained in parachuting, sabotage, radio

operation, and hand-to-hand combat at Fort Meade and on California's Catalina Island. He was preparing to lead agents into the country of his birth when the war ended in August 1945. The first parachute drops had been scheduled for August 26 — just days away.

Even then, New wasn't finished learning. He returned to Korea in 1946, and in 1948, at age 53, he enrolled at Stanford Law School, graduating in 1953. Most remarkably, he gave his fortune away. He funded schools, founded a technical high school in 1953, and poured his wealth into the Yuhan Foundation. When he chose a successor to run his company, he picked not a son or relative but a capable outsider — a decision still cited in Korea as the great counter-example to the family-dynasty style of business that dominated the country. Years later, his daughter Jae-Ra gave away her own inheritance to the same foundation.

Why Ilhan New matters

Ilhan New is the Korean American who refused to choose — American by upbringing, Korean by mission, businessman, soldier, and philanthropist all at once. The thread running through his entire life was a single question: what does this country, in this moment, actually need from someone like me? In 1922 the answer was bean sprouts; in 1926, modern medicine; in 1945, a parachute; in 1953, a school. He treated his own life as a resource to be spent wherever it was needed most — and believed that what you owe your family is best paid forward, into the future, rather than simply handed down.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Ilhan New in mid-life, standing between two worlds — a Yuhan medicine bottle and a Pacific horizon behind him — calm, purposeful, and forward-looking.

Nodie Sohn

The Principal at Nineteen

1898–1972 · Educator and independence-movement organizer



The Principal at Nineteen

When Nodie Kim stepped off a ship in Hawaii in 1905, she was six years old. Born Kim Hyesuk in Hwanghae Province in the north of Korea, she was part of the very first wave of Korean immigration to the islands — families who came to work the sugar plantations of a faraway American territory. For a small Korean girl in that world, the path forward was narrow. Almost nobody expected a plantation child, least of all a girl, to end up running anything at all.

Nodie grew up inside Honolulu's tight-knit Korean Christian community, where church, school, and politics were all tangled together. That community believed in education fiercely, and they saw something in her. As a teenager she was sent thousands of miles across the ocean and the continent to Oberlin College in Ohio — one of the few American colleges that had long admitted both women and students of color. In 1918, at just nineteen, she graduated.

Here is where her story takes its surprising turn. Many Korean American graduates of that era, having made it to the mainland, stayed there. Nodie went straight back to Hawaii. And almost immediately she was handed an enormous job: the principalship of the Korean Christian Institute, or KCI. At nineteen, she became the first Korean woman ever to serve as a school principal in the territory of Hawaii. She would hold that post, on and off, until 1945 — nearly a quarter of a century.

But the KCI was no ordinary school, and understanding it means understanding the man behind it. It had been founded by Syngman Rhee, the fierce, controversial leader who would later become the first president of South Korea. Rhee had broken the school away from the Methodist church to make it his own, and the KCI became the headquarters of his wing of the Korean independence movement — the decades-long struggle to free Korea from Japanese colonial rule, which lasted from 1910 to 1945. The school was the educational arm of the Dongji Hoi, the “Comrade Society,” Rhee’s political organization in Hawaii.

Nodie Kim was at the center of all of it. She ran the school. She served as president of the Korean Ladies Relief Society, which raised money and support for the independence cause. And she worked as a “manager and liaison officer” for the Dongji Hoi itself. For an entire generation, she was the steady hand that kept Rhee’s institutions in Hawaii actually running — the organizer who made the meetings happen, the budgets balance, and the school stay open while the politics swirled around her.

That loyalty eventually carried her across the Pacific. When Rhee returned to a newly independent Korea and became its president, Nodie’s closeness to him paid off. In 1952 she traveled to Seoul, where she was appointed director of the Republic of Korea’s Office of Procurement and became vice-president of the Korean Red Cross. A woman who had arrived in Hawaii as a

six-year-old plantation child was now a high-ranking official in the country she had left. Later in life she returned to Hawaii, and she died there in 1972.

Her story did not end with her death. In 2021, the South Korean government posthumously honored her as a “woman patriot” — a recognition of her decades of independence-movement work. The ceremony took place on the steps of the University of Hawaii’s Center for Korean Studies, with South Korea’s president, Moon Jae-in, in attendance. Nodie Sohn had taken her place among the honored figures of the independence movement.

Yet historians keep the fuller picture in view. Syngman Rhee’s later years as president, from 1948 to 1960, are among the most painful and disputed chapters in modern Korean history, marked by harsh rule and eventually his removal from power. Nodie’s work for the independence cause came earlier and was something separate from those events — but her 1952 appointment came under his government. Her life, in other words, is honored and complicated at the same time, and both of those things are true.

Why Nodie Sohn matters

Nodie Sohn shows what it meant to be “first” again and again — first woman principal, college graduate at nineteen, postwar official — while reminding us that no remarkable life is simple. She was extraordinarily capable, the person who kept an entire movement’s institutions running for twenty-five years. But she built her life inside one leader’s organization, and that

choice shaped everything that followed. Her story teaches a grown-up truth worth carrying into the world: the institutions we devote ourselves to also hand us the histories, and the hard questions, that come with them.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of a young Nodie Kim standing before the Korean Christian Institute schoolhouse in Honolulu, books in hand, palm trees and her students behind her — calm, purposeful, and quietly commanding.

Mary Paik Lee

The Girl Who Remembered an Entire Century

1900–1995 · Memoirist and witness to the first Korean American century



The Girl Who Remembered an Entire Century

In 1905, when Mary Paik Lee was five years old, Japanese soldiers marched into her family's home in Pyongyang and ordered everyone out. They wanted the house for a barracks — a building to quarter their troops. Korea was being swallowed by an invading empire, and a five-year-old girl was suddenly homeless in her own country.

Her father had no plan and spoke no English. On the run, he met a recruiter signing up workers for the sugar plantations of Hawaii and put his name to a labor contract. Within weeks the family was on a ship crossing the Pacific to the island of Oahu, where they cut sugarcane in the heat. It was brutal work, but the Paiks treated it not as a defeat but as a chance to start over — a way of seeing the world that Mary would carry for the next ninety years.

In 1906 they borrowed money and crossed again, this time to California, joining a settlement founded by the Korean independence leader Dosan Ahn Chang-ho. The place was called Pachappa Camp, in Riverside — a cluster of one-room shacks built decades earlier for Chinese railroad workers and now repurposed by Korean families. Historians today call it the first Koreatown in the United States.

Mary grew up moving across California — Riverside, Claremont, Roberts Island, Willows — wherever there was fruit to pick and crews to feed. She often went to school as the only Asian student in town. On her very first day at Washington Irving School in Riverside, her classmates circled her and chanted “Ching chong

Chinaman.” It was cruel, and she never forgot it. On Saturdays the family scavenged scraps from the butcher; when Mary complained, her father told her to be grateful — the butchers could have simply thrown the meat away and let everyone go hungry. That steady, clear-eyed way of facing hard things — observing it plainly, never bitter, never pretending it didn’t hurt — became the voice of the book she would write much later.

On New Year’s Day in 1919, at eighteen, she married Hung Man Lee. She could have left the hard life of farm labor for easier work, but she stayed inside the Korean community she knew. The couple farmed as tenants, meaning they worked land they did not own, and they raised three sons before settling in Los Angeles. Mary lived an ordinary working life — the kind nobody asks you to write down. Into her eighties she kept giving back, volunteering for nearly a decade as an interpreter at a Korean senior center in San Francisco, helping older immigrants who, like her once, could not speak the language around them.

Then, at age 86, she sat down and wrote her life by hand — 65 pages of it. A historian named Sucheng Chan saw immediately what those pages held. They were the only full-life autobiography by a Korean American woman covering the era from the great immigration wave of 1903 to 1905 onward. A memoir is the true story of a real person’s life, written by that person. Almost nobody from that first generation had written one. Chan helped Mary expand her manuscript, and in 1990 the University of Washington

Press published *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America*. Mary Paik Lee died in San Francisco in 1995, at 94 — having turned a quiet life into a record that will outlast everyone who lived it.

Why Mary Paik Lee matters

History is what gets written down. The 1903–1905 Korean immigration to Hawaii and California produced thousands of lives, and almost none of those people recorded their own. Mary Paik Lee is the exception. Without her, Pachappa Camp, the citrus-grove labor camps, the small-town schoolyards where a Korean girl stood alone — all of it would survive only as footnotes in other people's books. Her life teaches something small and enormous at once: the lives that look unremarkable while they are happening are often the ones the next century will most need. Write it down. Even at 86. Especially at 86.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of an elderly Mary Paik Lee at a simple table, pen in hand over a stack of handwritten pages, while behind her — like a memory rising from the paper — a young girl in early-1900s clothes stands at the edge of a California citrus grove. Warm, quiet, and resolute.

Philip Ahn

The Actor Who Played His Enemy

1905–1978 · Hollywood film and television actor



The Actor Who Played His Enemy

When Philip Ahn was born in the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles on March 29, 1905, he made history before he could walk: he was the first

American citizen born to two Korean parents in the United States. His mother and father, Helen Lee and Dosan Ahn Chang-ho, had sailed to California in 1902 to study. Instead, they became leaders of the Korean independence movement in America, working to free their homeland from Japanese occupation. Philip's father was often gone — in Shanghai organizing, or locked in a Japanese prison — while his mother held the family together in Los Angeles.

Movies were everywhere in that city, and as a teenager Philip wandered onto the set of *The Thief of Bagdad*. The film's famous star, Douglas Fairbanks, took one look at him and offered him a screen test. His mother was horrified. "No son of mine is going to get mixed up with those awful people," she said. But his father, surprisingly, gave the opposite advice. If you are going to act, do it seriously, he told Philip. Be the best actor you can be. Go to USC.

Philip went to USC. By 1935 he was working steadily in Hollywood, and over the next forty-three years he would pile up more than 180 film and television credits. In 1937 he co-starred with the great Anna May Wong in *Daughter of Shanghai*, and again in *King of Chinatown* in 1939. Those films were quietly groundbreaking: they featured the first sound-era on-screen Asian American romantic couple cast as themselves — as Asian actors playing Asian characters — rather than as a white studio's idea of "the Orient." For decades, Hollywood had practiced "yellowface," painting white actors to look Asian while giving real

Asian performers only small, stereotyped parts. Philip and Anna May refused that ceiling, at least for a moment.

Then came World War II, and everything twisted. Hollywood suddenly needed actors to play Japanese villains in its war movies — and studios cast Philip, a Korean American, in those roles again and again. The cruelty of it was hard to overstate. Japan had occupied Korea for decades; Philip's own father was dying in a Japanese prison. Yet on screen he became the face of the enemy. Audiences who did not understand the difference between Korean and Japanese sent him hate mail and even death threats. The situation grew serious enough that in 1943 the U.S. War Department stepped in publicly to clear up his family's loyalties, releasing photographs of his siblings serving in American military uniform.

Philip could have quit. He didn't. He understood something difficult: sometimes the only roles on offer are the ones that wound you, and the real question is what you build with the rest of your life. So he kept working, and he kept building. In 1954 he opened Phil Ahn's Moongate Restaurant in Panorama City and ran it for more than thirty years — a gathering place where the Korean American community could feel at home. In the 1970s he found one of his most beloved roles, playing the wise Master Kan across 39 episodes of the television series *Kung Fu*. As Master Kan, he passed down Taoist philosophy to a young student; Philip, a lifelong Presbyterian, said he found that ancient wisdom surprisingly compatible with his own faith.

He never married. And across the years he carried out one long, patient labor that no studio ever asked of him and no camera ever filmed: bringing his father's remains home to Korea. Dosan Ahn Chang-ho had died a hero of the independence movement, and Philip spent decades campaigning to return him to Seoul — work he eventually accomplished. He also stayed openly, visibly Korean in his public life during the McCarthy era and the Cold War, years when ties to a foreign political movement could invite suspicion and surveillance.

Philip Ahn died in Los Angeles on February 28, 1978. Six years later, in 1984, he became the first Asian American actor to receive a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame — a permanent mark on the very ground that had so often miscast him.

Why Philip Ahn matters

Philip Ahn's life answers a hard question: what do you do when the world will only let you play your enemy? He took the roles and the death threats that came with them, but he refused to let those parts be the whole story. Beside the screen career he built a restaurant, a community, and a decades-long mission to bring his father home. The work on camera and the life around it were one project. He understood, earlier than most, that being first means turning even an insult into a doorway others can walk through.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Philip Ahn in his calm, elder role as Master Kan, framed beside a small inset of a 1930s

Hollywood film set — bridging the wisdom of his later years and the young actor who first stepped before the camera.

Susan Ahn Cuddy

The Woman Who Applied Again

1915–2015 · U.S. Navy gunnery officer and code-breaker



The Woman Who Applied Again

Susan Ahn Cuddy was born in Los Angeles in 1915, into a family that already carried a heavy and famous name. Her father was Ahn Chang-ho — known to Koreans everywhere as Dosan — one of the towering figures of the movement to free Korea from Japanese rule. Her parents had been the first married Korean couple to

immigrate to the United States, arriving in 1902. That date matters: it means there were Korean American families putting down roots in California more than sixty years before the large wave of Korean immigration most people picture today. Susan was one of those early American-born children, and she grew up as American as anyone on her block. She played baseball at Belmont High School and became the first Asian American to play baseball at Los Angeles City College — a girl swinging a bat in a sport, and a country, that did not always make room for her.

Then the world cracked open. When the United States entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Susan wanted to serve. She applied to join the WAVES — the Navy’s women’s reserve, short for “Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service.” The Navy turned her down. Not because she lacked the skill or the drive, but because of her race. She was Asian American, and that was reason enough for them to say no.

Here is the part of the story worth slowing down for. Being rejected told Susan something about the Navy’s prejudice — but she decided it told her nothing about her own worth. So she applied again. And the second time, they accepted her.

What she did next was extraordinary. The Navy assigned her to the Link Trainer program, where pilots learned air-combat tactics in flight simulators on the ground. Susan became a *gunnery* officer — gunnery is the science of aiming and firing the weapons used to

shoot down enemy aircraft. She was the Navy's first woman gunnery officer: an Asian American woman in 1943, standing in front of rooms full of male pilots, teaching them how to fire on enemy planes and survive a dogfight. A few years earlier the Navy had decided she was unfit to even enlist. Now she was training the men who would fly into battle.

Her talents soon carried her somewhere even more secret. She transferred to the Office of Naval Intelligence, where her ability to speak Korean suddenly became a military asset. Intelligence work meant gathering and making sense of information the enemy wanted to keep hidden. In 1947 she joined the organization that would become the National Security Agency, the NSA, and went to work as a *code-breaker* — someone who unscrambles secret enemy messages so her own country can read them. Her projects were classified; much of what she did, the public will never know.

That same year, 1947, Susan married Francis X. Cuddy, an Irish American Navy chief. Their love ran straight into the ugliness of the era's laws. Many states, including Virginia, enforced "anti-miscegenation" laws — rules that made it illegal for people of different races to marry. To wed legally, Susan and Frank held their ceremony on a Navy base in Washington, D.C., where federal ground let them do what their country's state laws tried to forbid. They stayed married for decades.

Susan retired from intelligence work in 1959 and moved back to Los Angeles. She could have rested on the title of “first.” Instead she ran her family’s restaurant in the San Fernando Valley until 1990, refusing to be remembered for only one chapter of her life. And in her later decades she became something like the living memory of Asian American military service — interviewed, consulted, and honored well into her nineties. She was inducted into halls of fame that, for most of her career, she had been considered ineligible to join. She lived to be 100 years old, dying in 2015.

Why Susan Ahn Cuddy matters

Susan Ahn Cuddy teaches a lesson worth keeping: when a door slams, that “no” is information about the door, not about you. Almost every “first” in history happened because someone applied again after being rejected — and then made the role bigger than the one they were grudgingly allowed into. She also reminds us that Korean American history runs deep. There were Koreans here in 1902. They raised children who broke enemy codes, trained fighter pilots, ran restaurants, and lived a full American century.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Susan Ahn Cuddy in her Navy uniform, standing confidently before a Link Trainer flight simulator as she instructs a room of pilots — calm, sharp-eyed, and entirely in command.

Herbert Choy

The Man Who Wore a Robe No One Had Worn Before

1916–2004 · Federal judge and lawyer



The Man Who Wore a Robe No One Had Worn Before

On a sugar plantation on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, in a town called Makaweli, a boy named Herbert Choy was born in 1916 to Korean immigrant parents who cut sugarcane for a living. Their world was one of long days in the fields under a hot sun, for low pay, far from the Korea they had left behind. Between 1903 and 1905, about 7,000 Koreans had sailed to Hawaii to

work the cane — one of the very first waves of Korean migration to America. Their children, born on the islands, were the first generation of Korean Americans, and they carried a heavy hope on their shoulders: to climb out of plantation life and into something larger.

Herbert Choy climbed. He studied his way to the University of Hawaii, and then all the way to Harvard Law School, one of the most respected law schools in the country. When he graduated in 1941 and passed the exam to become a lawyer, he made history without anyone planning it: he became the first person of Korean ancestry ever admitted to the “bar” anywhere in the United States. The bar is the official license that allows a person to practice law — to represent clients in court, argue cases, and call themselves an attorney. No Korean American had ever held it before. There was no community of Korean American lawyers to guide him, no one who had walked the path first. He simply walked it.

Just months later, Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States entered World War II. Choy served in the Hawaii Territorial Guard, then the U.S. Army, and finally the Judge Advocate General’s Corps — the part of the military made up of lawyers. When the war ended, he returned to Honolulu and opened a law practice with a partner named Hiram Fong. That partnership mattered more than either man could have guessed. Fifteen years later, Fong would become the first Asian American elected to the U.S. Senate — and one day he would be the reason Choy’s name reached the White House.

From 1957 to 1958, Choy took a job that was about to disappear: he became the last Attorney General of the Territory of Hawaii, the islands' top lawyer, in the final months before Hawaii became the fiftieth state in 1959. Statehood would erase the office almost as soon as he held it. He took it anyway.

Then, in 1971, came the moment that placed him in the history books for good. On Senator Fong's recommendation, President Richard Nixon nominated Choy to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit — a federal court. A federal judge interprets the nation's laws and decides cases that can shape life across many states; the Ninth Circuit is one of the most powerful courts in the country, ranking just below the Supreme Court. At that time, not a single Asian American sat anywhere on the federal bench. The U.S. Senate confirmed Choy in just two weeks, and with that vote he became the first Asian American federal judge in the nation's history. He could have turned the offer down as too symbolic, too exposed, too political. He accepted.

What he did next is the quietest and most important part of his story. He served as an active judge until 1984, and then on "senior status" — a kind of semi-retirement where judges keep hearing cases — until his death in 2004. That is thirty-three years on the bench. A lawyer who once worked for him told Congress that Choy was known for his "quiet dignity," his "scrupulous honesty," and a special care in immigration cases, where the lives of newcomers like

his own parents often hung in the balance. He did not chase fame or cameras. He sat. He wrote his decisions. He showed up, day after day, year after year.

Why Herbert Choy matters

There are two kinds of trailblazers: the kind who make the most of being first, and the kind who quietly do the job for decades and let the work speak. Choy was the second kind. Korean Americans are sometimes told that simply being seen — being represented — is the goal. Choy is the reminder that representation is the floor, not the ceiling. The real work is the thirty-three years of careful, honest reasoning that come *after* the swearing-in, in a robe no one before you has worn. He proved that showing up, every single day, can be its own form of greatness.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Herbert Choy in his judicial robe, seated at the bench with a thoughtful, steady expression — behind him, faint and warm, the green cane fields of Kauai where his story began.

David Hyun

The Architect of Someone Else's Heart

1917–2012 · Architect, urban planner, and community developer



The Architect of Someone Else's Heart

David Hyun was born in Seoul in 1917, into a family that already carried the weight of a nation's struggle. His father, Reverend Soon Hyun, was a Methodist minister who helped organize the Korean Provisional Government — Korea's government-in-exile — and served as a cabinet minister while Japan occupied the Korean peninsula. To stand against that occupation was dangerous, and in 1920 the family fled Seoul for

Shanghai, then crossed the ocean again to start over in Hawaii. David grew up the youngest son of a man whose whole life was a fight for a free Korea.

He could have followed his father into the ministry, or into independence politics. Instead, in 1947, David Hyun went to Los Angeles to study something that builds with steel and stone rather than sermons: architecture. An architect is someone who designs buildings and the spaces between them — deciding how a place will look, how people will move through it, and how it will make them feel. Hyun studied at the University of Southern California, and in 1950 he earned his license to practice. With that license he became the first registered Korean American architect in the history of Korean immigration to the United States.

Being first came with a strange loneliness. In 1950 there was almost no Korean American community wealthy or established enough to hire an architect. He had earned the right to design for his people before his people could ask him to. In 1953 he founded his own firm, David Hyun Associates, and ran it for nearly sixty years.

His career nearly ended before it truly started. In the 1950s — the Cold War years, when the U.S. government was suspicious of anyone with left-leaning politics — Hyun organized labor unions and spoke out against Syngman Rhee, the U.S.-backed president of South Korea. For this the federal government labeled him a “dangerous alien” and tried, again and again

through 1958, to deport him and his family from the country. He had committed no crime. His “danger” was simply that he had opinions and refused to hide them. Each time the government moved against him, his community organized to fight back and blocked the deportation. Hyun never went quiet to protect himself. He kept practicing, kept speaking, and kept his family in the country they had chosen.

Then came the work that would define him — and the irony that makes his story unforgettable. In the 1970s, Los Angeles launched the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Project to rebuild a Japanese American neighborhood that had been emptied out during World War II, when the U.S. government forced Japanese Americans into incarceration camps. The project asked David Hyun to design its centerpiece: Japanese Village Plaza, an 89,000-square-foot shopping and gathering space. Think about that for a moment. A Korean man, son of a Korean independence leader, was being asked to design the cultural heart of a Japanese American community — only one generation after Japan’s brutal colonization of Korea. Hyun took the job.

The plaza opened in 1978, anchored at its entrance by the 55-foot red Yagura Fire Tower that still rises over the neighborhood today. In 1984 it won an award for excellence in public design — the only project in all of Los Angeles to win that year. The empty neighborhood had a beating heart again, and David Hyun had built it.

After that success, Hyun turned at last toward his own community. He drew up a master plan he called “Korea City,” meant to do for Los Angeles’s Koreatown what Japanese Village Plaza had done for Little Tokyo — a true cultural center designed by and for Korean Americans. He drafted it carefully. He believed in it. But he could never get it financed, and Korea City was never built. The most important Korean American architect of his century left his grandest dream for his own people only on paper. He died in Los Angeles in 2012, at ninety-five.

Why David Hyun matters

The most consequential Korean American architect of the 20th century is best remembered for a Japanese plaza — and that is not a failure of the story, it is the story. Korean American work often shows up in places that carry no Korean name, and the dreams Korean Americans draw for themselves often arrive a generation too early. Korea City still lives in Hyun’s archive rather than in Koreatown’s streets. He drew the blueprint; someone else’s generation has to lay the bricks. That is its own kind of courage — building forward, even when the building isn’t yours.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of David Hyun studying a set of blueprints, with the red Yagura Fire Tower of Japanese Village Plaza rising behind him — warm afternoon light, a builder looking toward a city taking shape.

Fred Ohr

The Boy Who Talked His Way Into the Sky

1919–2015 · WWII fighter pilot, flying ace, and dentist



The Boy Who Talked His Way Into the Sky

When Fred Ohr was six years old, a postal biplane buzzed low over his family's farm in the Boise Basin of Idaho. Most kids would have waved and gone back to their chores. Fred watched it disappear over the hills and decided, right then, that he was going to fly fighter planes someday. His mother did not laugh at him. She told him something he would carry for the rest of his life: if the desire is great enough, it will happen.

The desire would need to be very great, because almost nothing about Fred's childhood pointed toward an airplane cockpit. He had been born in Oregon in 1919, but the family was raised on a hardscrabble Idaho farm where all of them lived in a single eight-by-ten-foot tent. They worked the land by hand, because they couldn't afford machinery. Fred's father had fled Korea after Japan annexed the country in 1910; back home, the family had been marked for execution. America was supposed to be the safe place. It was not always a welcoming one.

When Fred tried to become a pilot, the doors kept closing. An Army Air Corps recruiter wouldn't even speak to him — he just pointed silently toward the exit. A Navy recruiter mocked him to his face. A Korean American kid asking to fly warplanes in the 1930s struck them as a joke. But Fred kept walking back into those offices. He joined the regular Army in 1938, and in 1940 he stumbled into a pilot's exam that finally pointed him toward flight training. The door he'd been pounding on for years had cracked open at last.

In 1942 he shipped out to North Africa — but not as a pilot. His commanding officer, who seemed threatened by him, stuck him in a maintenance role and refused to train him. Fred didn't quit and didn't sulk. He stayed near the planes, kept himself ready, and when an opening finally came, he was prepared to take it. He joined the 52nd Fighter Group in the air. Even then his squadron didn't truly accept him — they decided to wait and see whether he survived his first combat mission. He did. Then he survived 240 more.

Flying first the British-built Spitfire and later the sleek P-51 Mustang, marked with the bright yellow tail of the 52nd, Fred flew 241 combat missions over the Mediterranean. He shot down six enemy aircraft in air-to-air combat. In military terms, a pilot who shoots down five or more enemy planes earns the title “flying ace” — and Fred Ohr became the only American flying ace of Korean descent in all of World War II. War in the sky was deadly and frightening work; pilots he trained and flew beside did not all come home. By the time he rotated back to the United States in November 1944, Fred was commanding his own squadron and wore two Silver Stars, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, a Bronze Star, and eighteen Air Medals.

And then he did something just as remarkable as everything before it: he stopped. In January 1945 he met Esther Kang in Chicago, and they married the following year. Rather than stay in what would likely have been a comfortable peacetime Air Force career, Fred walked away to start a family. He used the GI Bill — a program that paid for veterans' education — to

study at UC Berkeley and then at Northwestern University Dental School. In 1950 he opened a dental practice in Chicago and ran it, in the same neighborhood, for fifty-three years. He retired in 2003 at the age of 86, lived another twelve years, and died in 2015 at 96: Major Fred Ohr, fighter ace and family dentist.

Why Fred Ohr matters

Fred Ohr's story has two halves, and the second is the one worth remembering. The dramatic part is obvious: the boy from an Idaho tent who refused to accept "no" from recruiters who wouldn't even look at him, and became a flying ace. But coming home and quietly drilling teeth for half a century took its own kind of courage — the courage to stop being a hero and simply build a good life. The fight to get into the cockpit and the choice to climb out of it were the same decision: figuring out what your life is actually for, then doing it whether or not anyone is watching.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of young Fred Ohr in his flight jacket beside a yellow-tailed P-51 Mustang, looking upward at a small biplane crossing a wide western sky — the dream and the man who reached it, side by side.

Young Oak Kim

The Officer Who Refused to Leave

1919–2005 · U.S. Army colonel and community builder



The Officer Who Refused to Leave

Young Oak Kim grew up on Bunker Hill in Los Angeles, the son of Korean immigrants who ran a grocery store at Temple and Figueroa. Money was always tight, and the Los Angeles of the 1930s offered a Korean American kid almost no steady work, no matter how well he did in school. When Kim first tried to enlist in the U.S. Army, he was turned away — not for anything he had done, but because of his race. He finally got in only after 1941, when Congress began drafting Asian Americans into the military.

After Officer Candidate School, the Army handed Kim an assignment that was supposed to be a problem. He was sent to the 100th Infantry Battalion, a unit made up entirely of Japanese American soldiers. At that moment Japan occupied Korea and had ruled it harshly for decades. Expecting bad blood between a Korean officer and Japanese American troops, Kim's commander quietly offered him a transfer out.

Kim refused. "There are no Japanese nor Koreans here," he said. "We're all Americans, and we're fighting for the same cause." He stayed — and earned the trust of the men he led.

With the 100th and the legendary 442nd Regimental Combat Team, Kim fought across Italy and France in what became the most decorated unit of its size in American history. Near the Italian town of Cisterna, he and Private Irving Akahoshi crawled into German-held territory in broad daylight to capture prisoners, and the intelligence they brought back helped open the road to Rome. By the end of the war, Kim had earned a

Distinguished Service Cross, two Silver Stars, three Purple Hearts, and France's highest honors — a record of courage that his own country had refused to even let him attempt a few years earlier.

He left the Army and built a profitable business. But when the Korean War broke out in 1950, he walked away from it and re-enlisted, saying he owed a debt as both a Korean and an American. As an intelligence officer in Korea he was nearly killed by friendly fire from his own side's artillery. Soon after, he was given command of an infantry battalion — becoming the first minority officer in U.S. history to lead a combat battalion. His soldiers “adopted” a Seoul orphanage of more than 500 children.

Kim retired in 1972 with an 80 percent disability and could have lived quietly on his medals. Instead, he spent the next thirty years building the institutions of Korean Los Angeles that most people never notice but everyone relies on: a youth and cultural center, a health clinic, a women's shelter, and the Korean American Coalition. Today a public school and a university research center carry his name.

Why Young Oak Kim matters

Kim's life makes a hard point about being “first”: the cost is usually paid long before the recognition arrives. He was rejected for his race, fought in a segregated unit, and was nearly killed by his own army — and only then was he trusted to lead. What he did with that trust is what lasted. He understood that being first means little unless what you build outlives your name on it.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Young Oak Kim in his Army uniform, standing shoulder to shoulder with the soldiers of the 100th/442nd as one united team — warm, resolute, and human.

Dora Yum Kim

The Woman Who Gave 3,000 Strangers Their First Job

1921–2003 · Social worker and community builder



The Woman Who Gave 3,000 Strangers
Their First Job

Dora Yum Kim was born in 1921 in San Francisco's Chinatown, into one of the smallest minorities you can imagine. There were only about 100 Koreans in the entire city — a Korean handful inside a Chinese immigrant neighborhood inside a white America that had little room for any of them. Her father, Yum Man Suk, was no quiet man, though. He was a leader of the Korean Independence Movement in California, part of a generation of exiles fighting from across an ocean to free Korea from Japanese rule. Dora grew up working in her parents' restaurant, watching adults who believed that ordinary people could change history.

But believing it and being allowed to do it were two different things. When Dora went looking for work, she ran into a wall built out of other people's prejudice. Most jobs outside Chinatown were simply closed to her — not because of anything she lacked, but because she was, in the cold language of the time, an “Oriental female.” Two strikes against her before she said a word. The one door that opened was a typist's chair at the California Department of Employment, the state office that helped people find work. She took it. It was the only kind of state job a young Korean American woman could get.

Here is where Dora's particular genius shows itself: she did not treat that typist job as a dead end. She treated it as a doorway. She stayed, she learned the system from the inside, and over the years she worked her way up to become a social worker inside the very department that had once offered her only a typewriter. While she was at it, in the 1950s, she

became the first Asian woman real estate broker in San Francisco — breaking into a profession that had been structurally closed to people who looked like her. She also helped lead the United Nationalities of San Francisco, a coalition of different ethnic communities working together, decades before “AAPI” became a phrase anyone used.

Then history shifted under her feet. In 1965, the United States passed a new Immigration Act that, for the first time in generations, opened the country to large numbers of Korean immigrants. Families began arriving who spoke little English and knew nothing about how American workplaces functioned. And there sat Dora Yum Kim — fluent in Korean, fluent in the maze of the state employment bureaucracy, holding exactly the rare combination of skills these newcomers needed most. Between 1965 and 1977, working from her government desk, she placed more than 3,000 Korean immigrants in their very first American jobs. One woman, one office, turning herself into a resettlement service the government never officially created.

For most people, that would have been a life’s work. For Dora, it was the first job. In 1976 she co-founded the Korean Community Service Center — the first Korean community center in the United States. The next year, in 1977, she gave up her state position and the comfortable pension that came with it, retiring early so she could run the center full time. There she taught English to Korean seniors, prepared them for the citizenship tests that would make them Americans,

and started a meals program so older immigrants would not eat alone. She finally retired as the senior center coordinator in 1986, then kept serving as a medical interpreter, helping people who couldn't explain their pain to an English-speaking doctor.

Dora also understood that stories disappear if no one writes them down. In 1978, when almost no one was collecting the experiences of second-generation Korean Americans — children born in the U.S. to immigrant parents — she sat for a long oral history, now preserved at the San Francisco Public Library. It remains one of the foundational records of what it meant to grow up Korean and American at the same time. Her life later became a book, *Doing What Had to Be Done*, the first published biography of an American-born Korean woman.

Why Dora Yum Kim matters

Some of the most important Korean American institutions were built by people you will never find in a textbook. Dora Yum Kim spent forty years turning ordinary tools — a state employment office, a real estate license, a microphone — into the machinery of an entire community's survival, then built the center that made the work permanent. The title of her biography is really her philosophy: she never called her life ambition or activism. She called it doing what had to be done, because no one else was going to do it. That, too, is a kind of leadership — maybe the most durable kind.

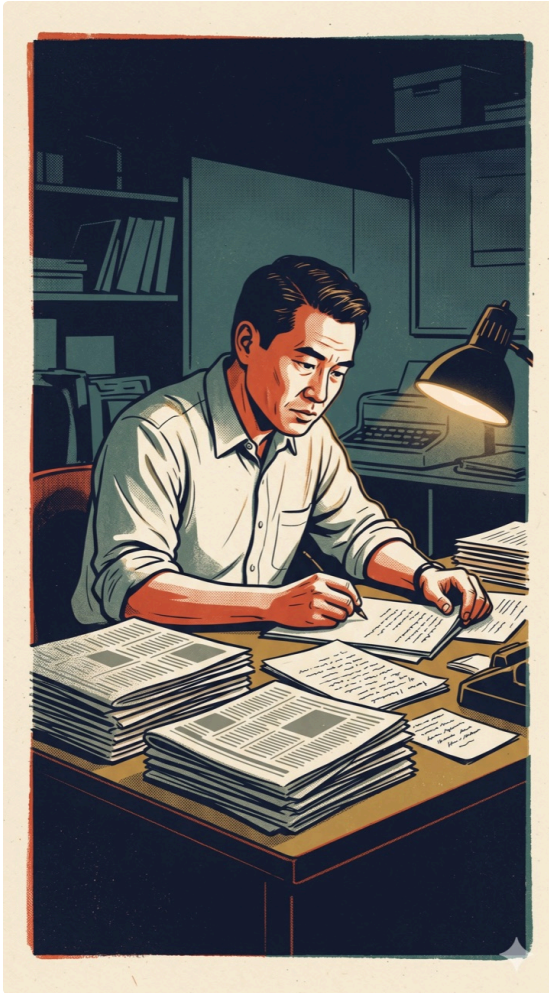


Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Dora Yum Kim at her employment-office desk in mid-century San Francisco, warmly handing a job notice to a newly arrived Korean immigrant family, the city's hills visible through the window behind her.

K. W. Lee

The Reporter Who Wouldn't Let Go

1928–2025 · Investigative journalist



The Reporter Who Wouldn't Let Go

Kyung Won Lee was born in 1928 in Kaesong, a city in what is now North Korea, at a time when Korea was occupied and ruled by Japan. In 1950 — the same year

the Korean War tore the peninsula apart — he left for the United States, alone, at twenty-two. He chose to study journalism, which was a strange and lonely choice. American newsrooms in those years were filled almost entirely with white men, and an Asian immigrant who wanted to be a reporter had almost no role models to follow.

He studied at West Virginia University and earned a master's degree at the University of Illinois. In 1958, the Charleston Gazette in West Virginia hired him — making him the first Korean immigrant on the staff of a mainstream daily newspaper in the continental United States. He could have asked for safe, quiet assignments. Instead he spent his early years covering some of the hardest stories in America: the civil rights struggle in the segregated South, crooked vote-buying schemes in West Virginia, and the dangerous, underpaid lives of coal miners in the Appalachian Mountains. For an Asian American reporter in the early 1960s, it was unusual work. It was also the perfect training ground for what came next.

In 1970, Lee moved to the Sacramento Union newspaper in California as an investigative reporter — a journalist whose job is to dig deep, for as long as it takes, to uncover truths that powerful people would rather keep hidden. In 1978 he came across the case of Chol Soo Lee, a young Korean immigrant who had been convicted of a murder in San Francisco's Chinatown and sentenced to death. Chol Soo Lee insisted he was innocent. K. W. Lee decided to find out whether that was true.

What he found convinced him that a man had been wrongly convicted — sent to death row for a crime he did not commit. So Lee did what investigative reporters do: he kept digging, and he kept writing. Over five years, he published more than 120 articles about the case. That number is worth pausing on. Five years. One story. Most reporters move on after a few weeks.

Something remarkable happened as the articles piled up. Asian American social workers, college students, and grandmothers — Korean, Chinese, and Filipino alike — began photocopying his stories and passing them hand to hand. People who had never thought of themselves as having anything in common discovered a shared cause. A defense committee formed to fight for Chul Soo Lee. Eventually his conviction was overturned, and in 1983 he was acquitted — found not guilty — at a new trial and set free. The movement that grew up around the case is widely remembered as the first sustained pan-Asian American political movement in United States history. Hollywood later made a film inspired by the story, called *True Believer*, in 1989.

For most people, freeing an innocent man and sparking a movement would be a lifetime's achievement. For Lee, it was only the beginning. In 1979 he founded Koreatown Weekly, the first national English-language Korean American newspaper. In 1990, as tensions rose between Black and Korean residents of Los Angeles — tensions that would soon erupt in the 1992 unrest Korean Americans call Sa-I-Gu — he launched and edited the English edition of the

Korea Times in Los Angeles. He built an internship program inside it for one clear purpose: to train Asian American and other minority reporters and send them into mainstream newsrooms across the country.

Lee became the founding president of the Korean American Journalists Association and the first person ever to receive the Asian American Journalists Association's Lifetime Achievement Award. He survived liver and stomach cancer and a liver transplant in 1992. And he kept teaching and mentoring young journalists into his nineties. People called him the “godfather of Asian American journalism” — not as a polite honor, but because he truly raised generations of reporters. He died in Sacramento in March 2025, at the age of 96.

Why K. W. Lee matters

K. W. Lee's life proves that one reporter, with one story, can change history — but only by refusing to let go. He spent five years on a single case because he understood what justice actually costs: patience, stubbornness, and obsessive attention to one human being's truth. In doing so, he helped free an innocent man and helped build a shared Asian American identity that millions now take for granted. That identity was not inherited. It was reported into existence, one article at a time.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of K. W. Lee at his desk, sleeves rolled up, surrounded by stacks of newspapers and notes, a

single lamp lighting his focused face as he works late
into the night.

Luke Ik Chang Kim

The Doctor Who Listened for the Whole Person

1930–2015 · Psychiatrist and pioneer of cultural psychiatry



The Doctor Who Listened for the Whole
Person

Luke Ik Chang Kim was born in 1930 in Sinuiju, a city in the far north of Korea, near the Chinese border. By the time he reached adulthood, he had already lived under three different governments. First came the Japanese, who had occupied Korea for decades and ruled it harshly. When Kim was just fourteen, they forced him into labor at a weapons factory in Pyongyang — one of countless Korean children pulled out of childhood to serve an empire. After Korea was freed in 1945, a Soviet-backed communist government took over the north, and Kim's family fled south to escape it. Then came the Korean War. During the chaos, his mother, a leader in her Presbyterian church, was kidnapped by North Korean authorities. He never saw her again.

Most people who survive that much loss spend the rest of their lives trying to forget. Kim did the opposite. He became a doctor of the mind — a *psychiatrist*, a physician who studies how people think, feel, and heal from emotional pain and mental illness. He finished medical school at Seoul National University in 1956, then traveled to the United States to earn a PhD in clinical psychology at the University of Arizona. His plan was simple: learn everything he could, return to Korea, and build a psychology department there. But while he was studying, his mentor died, and the plan dissolved. Kim stayed in America.

He took a job that most American-trained psychiatrists carefully avoided. For three decades, he served as chief psychiatrist at the California Medical Facility in Vacaville — a prison hospital that held some of the

most notorious inmates in the country. Among the people he treated were Charles Manson and Sirhan Sirhan, names that made headlines for terrible crimes. Working inside a maximum-security prison is difficult, sometimes frightening work, and the patients there are among the hardest in the world to reach. Kim did not flinch from it. He believed that even the most reviled person was still a person — and that a doctor’s job was to understand, not to judge.

That belief grew into the idea that defined his career. At the time, when psychiatrists examined a patient, they often treated the person’s background — their language, their religion, their family, their homeland — as mere decoration around the “real” diagnosis. Kim argued the opposite. He insisted that *culture* was not background scenery but a central part of who a person was and how they suffered and healed. You could not truly treat someone, he said, without first understanding the world they came from. This way of thinking became known as **cultural psychiatry**.

From 1973 to 2005, Kim was a clinical professor at the UC Davis Medical School, where he taught younger doctors to listen for the whole person, not just the symptoms. He became one of the first psychiatrists in the United States to put these arguments into print and into training programs. He helped create the American Psychiatric Association’s Task Force on Asian American Psychiatrists, and in 1997 he became the very first recipient of the APA’s Kun-Po Soo Award, given for deepening the field’s understanding of Asian issues.

But Kim was never only a scholar tucked away in classrooms and clinics. In the early 1980s, he and his wife, Grace, did something startling: they mortgaged their own home to help pay for the legal defense of Chol Soo Lee, a young Korean American man wrongfully convicted of a murder in San Francisco's Chinatown. The campaign to free Lee became one of the defining moments of Asian American civil rights organizing — and the Kims had bet their house on a stranger's freedom. Then, in 2006, they gave again, funding an endowed professorship at UC Davis so that cultural psychiatry would keep being taught long after Kim himself was gone.

Why Luke Ik Chang Kim matters

Kim's life shows that you can be a healer and a fighter for justice at once — and that the fight can be as quiet and technical as changing how doctors are trained. He treated some of America's most hated people and fought to free one of its most wronged, and the thread connecting both was the same conviction: people only make sense inside their own context. The most lasting way to change a profession, he proved, is not just to join it, but to change how it thinks.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Dr. Luke Kim in a white coat, seated and listening intently across a small table, with faint images of a Korean hometown and an American medical school layered softly behind him — two worlds held together in one attentive face.

Dae-Sook Suh

The Refugee Who Studied the Country He Fled

1931–2022 · political scientist and founder of Korean
Studies in America



The Refugee Who Studied the Country He
Fled

Dae-Sook Suh was born in 1931 in the northern half of Korea — the part that, after World War II, would become North Korea. He was still a teenager in 1946 when a communist government began tightening its grip on the region. Families who disagreed could lose their land, their freedom, or their lives. So Suh made a choice that would mark him forever: he slipped across to the south, leaving behind the only home he had ever known. He could never go back.

Four years later, in 1950, the Korean War tore the peninsula apart. The fighting was brutal, and millions of Koreans were killed or driven from their homes. Suh found work as an interpreter — translating between Korean and English for the Americans who had come to fight. It was dangerous, exhausting work, but it opened a door. Interpreting put a whole generation of young Koreans in contact with the United States, and in 1952 Suh sailed to America to study at Texas Christian University.

He kept going. He earned his way to Columbia University in New York, one of the country's great research schools, and in 1964 he completed his PhD — the highest university degree — in government and law. A *scholar* is someone who studies a subject so deeply and carefully that other people rely on their work to understand it. Suh decided to become a scholar of the very thing that had upended his life: communism in Korea, and the regime in the North.

Think about how hard that is. Suh had personal reasons to hate the government he had fled. But he chose to study it the way a scientist studies a storm — clearly, honestly, without letting anger twist the facts. His doctoral project was titled “Korean Communism and the Rise of Kim,” about Kim Il Sung, North Korea’s founding leader. Suh refused to write an angry pamphlet. He wanted to write the truest book possible, even about the man whose government had forced him into exile.

In 1972, the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa offered him a remarkable challenge: build a Center for Korean Studies from nothing. “Korean Studies” simply means the serious academic study of Korea — its history, politics, language, and culture, all under one roof. In 1972 it barely existed as a field in America. No U.S. university had ever created a center devoted to it. Suh said yes, and his became the first.

Starting a center from scratch is slow, unglamorous work. Suh spent the next twenty-three years, until 1995, hiring professors, recruiting graduate students, and inviting visiting scholars from Seoul and from archives that held rare materials about the North. Brick by brick, he turned a loose network of researchers into what is still the largest Korean Studies center in North America.

All the while, he kept writing. His two most famous books — *The Korean Communist Movement, 1918–1948* and *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* — became the standard works in English on their subjects

for decades. The Kim Il Sung biography was so careful and well-sourced that scholars around the world treated it as the definitive account, the one you had to read first.

His approach wasn't always popular. Some historians in South Korea complained that Suh took North Korean documents too seriously, treating them as real evidence rather than just enemy propaganda. But that was exactly the discipline that made his work last. By weighing every source coldly, even his opponents' words, he produced books that held up long after louder, angrier writing was forgotten.

In September 2022, the Center for Korean Studies celebrated its 50th anniversary. That same month, Dae-Sook Suh died in Honolulu at the age of 90. He was honored at the celebration he had made possible — the founder, remembered at the half-century mark of the institution he built.

Why Dae-Sook Suh matters

Suh's life shows that you can turn the hardest parts of your past into something lasting and useful. A refugee from North Korea, he became the world's most trusted scholar of North Korea — not by nursing his grievances, but by setting them aside to find the truth. And rather than chase fame for himself, he built an institution. The Center for Korean Studies has trained generations of scholars who now teach across America and Asia. He wrote the book a field needed before the field even existed, then stayed to grow it.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Dae-Sook Suh as a thoughtful scholar at his desk, books and Korean documents around him, with a window behind him opening onto the green mountains and ocean of Honolulu.

Hi Duk Lee

The Man Who Built a Neighborhood and Walked Away

*1939–2019 · Entrepreneur, community builder, and
founder of LA's Koreatown*



The Man Who Built a Neighborhood and Walked Away

Hi Duk Lee was born in 1939 in Tae Jung, Korea, the son of farmers. He was a good student — good enough to earn a chemistry degree from Chungnam National University in 1961. But Korea in the 1960s was a hard place to dream. The country was poor, still recovering from war, and ruled by the dictator Park Chung-hee. In

1965, Lee decided to leave. The path out was strange and difficult: he studied hotel management in Switzerland, then took a job as a coal miner in West Germany, descending into the dark to dig for a living. There he met a Korean nurse named Kil Ja, who would become his wife.

In 1968, the couple arrived in Los Angeles, part of a wave of Korean immigrants made possible by a new U.S. law that, in 1965, finally lifted decades of racist limits on who could come to America. Lee, the chemistry graduate, took whatever work he could find — first on a factory line, then as a welder. At the time, only about 5,000 Koreans lived in all of Los Angeles. They had no neighborhood of their own, no commercial center, nowhere that felt like home.

In 1971, Lee and Kil Ja gambled everything on changing that. They pooled roughly \$7,000 in savings, took out a bank loan, and opened Olympic Market at the corner of Olympic Boulevard and Normandie Avenue — the first Korean-owned grocery store in the area. It was a risky bet: a Korean grocery in a place that barely had Korean customers yet. For three years the store struggled. Then, slowly, it began to turn a profit.

But Lee was thinking bigger than a single store. He had studied how Chinese immigrants built Chinatown — not just with businesses, but with architecture, signs, and food that made a place unmistakably theirs. He wanted to do the same for Koreans. So he started buying up the blocks around his market. He opened a restaurant called VIP Palace, the first building in Los

Angeles built with traditional Korean tile architecture — roof tiles he personally sourced and shipped from Korea. He developed VIP Plaza, a shopping center filled with Korean shops. He was no longer building a business. He was building a neighborhood.

Then he did something unusual for a businessman: he pushed the government to make it official. Lee lobbied Los Angeles County to formally recognize the area as a real neighborhood. In 1980, the city agreed, and blue “Koreatown” signs went up along Olympic Boulevard. A place now had a name on the map.

Here is the hard part of the story. The signs went up at almost the exact moment Lee’s empire fell apart. He had planned an ambitious 230-room Korean hotel, but interest rates — the cost of borrowing money — shot up from 9 percent to a crushing 22 percent. The numbers no longer worked. In 1982, Hi Duk Lee went bankrupt. He sold his commercial properties, the ones he had stitched together block by block, and watched the neighborhood he founded carry on without him.

Most people would have stayed and tried to claw it back. Lee did the opposite. He left the country for about a decade. He traveled through Africa and China, learning the tea trade. He wrote a 520-page memoir of his life. Around 2002, he returned to Los Angeles and settled quietly in Silver Lake. In his seventies — an age when most people retire — he opened Echo Garden, an eco-friendly plant nursery in Highland Park. He called

it the greatest achievement of his life. And for his remaining years, he deliberately stayed out of Koreatown, the place he had created.

Hi Duk Lee died of colon cancer in 2019, at 79. Looking back, he did not sound bitter. “I’ve lost much money,” he said, “but I don’t regret what I’ve done since it all happened in Koreatown. My failures became fertilizer to bloom flowers.”

Why Hi Duk Lee matters

Lee’s life complicates the simple story of the immigrant who arrives, works hard, and wins. He founded LA’s Koreatown — a real, lasting home for hundreds of thousands of people — and then lost his stake in it before the city even put up the signs. The founding was real, and so was the bankruptcy, and so was the nursery where he grew flowers in his old age. He teaches us that building something meant to outlast you can mean letting it outlive your ownership of it. The person who builds the neighborhood is not always the one who gets to keep it.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Hi Duk Lee standing before VIP Palace, with its traditional Korean tile roof, as a new “Koreatown” sign rises along Olympic Boulevard behind him — proud, weathered, and quietly hopeful.

Yong Soon Min

The Artist Who Built the Room

1953–2024 · Visual artist, curator, and educator



The Artist Who Built the Room

In 1953, in a village called Bugok south of Seoul, Yong Soon Min was born into a country that was tearing itself in two. That same year, the Korean War paused

— not with a peace treaty, but with an armistice, a temporary cease-fire. The fighting stopped, but the war never officially ended, and Korea stayed split along a line called the 38th Parallel. Min carried that broken line with her for the rest of her life. Decades later, when she became a famous artist in America, that unfinished war would become the great subject of her work.

She was seven when her family immigrated to the United States in 1960, settling in Monterey, California. She was good at school and worked her way through not one but three degrees at the University of California, Berkeley — a bachelor's, a master's, and a Master of Fine Arts. Then, in the 1980s, she made a bold choice. She moved to New York City to become an artist, even though there was no Korean American artist ahead of her showing the way. She was inventing the path as she walked it.

New York in the 1980s was the center of the American art world — and it had almost no room for Asian American artists. Galleries and museums rarely showed their work or took their ideas seriously. Min and a group of others decided not to wait politely for an invitation that might never come. They built their own organizations. She became a founding member of Godzilla: Asian American Art Network and the Asian American Arts Alliance, grassroots groups that gave Asian American artists a place to gather, show their work, and fight for visibility. This was a turning point: instead of spending all her energy on her own career, she spent it building space for everyone.

Her art changed too. She moved away from quiet, abstract work and toward art that spoke openly about identity and politics — at the exact moment the mainstream art world preferred artists who kept quiet about such things. Much of her work was “conceptual” and “installation” art, meaning the idea behind a piece mattered as much as how it looked, and a single artwork might fill an entire room. In *Make Me* (1989), she showed self-portraits stamped and partly erased with words others had pinned on her: “Exotic.” “Immigrant.” In *deColonization* (1991), she placed a traditional Korean dress at the center, overlaid with gold lettering and panels of testimony from Korean women who had lived under U.S. military occupation. In *Defining Moments* (1992), she wove the 1980 Gwangju Uprising — a pro-democracy protest in South Korea that the military crushed by force — into images of her own body and life. Her work entered the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and the Seoul Museum of Art.

In 1993, Min moved to Los Angeles to join the art faculty at the University of California, Irvine. She taught there for more than twenty years, until she retired in 2014, and remained a professor emerita — an honored retired teacher — until the end of her life. Her students and the young artists who visited her studio remembered her the same way: as someone who took every conversation seriously, asked for their opinions, and treated their work as genuinely worth her attention. She mentored relentlessly. Even in her later years, she kept building. She co-founded GYOPO,

a Los Angeles collective of Korean diasporic artists and cultural workers — proof that you can still create something new in your sixties. “Diaspora” means a people scattered far from their homeland, and that scattering, that sense of belonging to two places at once, ran through everything she made.

Yong Soon Min died of breast cancer in March 2024. In 2027, UC Irvine’s Langson Institute and Museum plans to open a retrospective of her life’s work, titled *Both Sides Now*.

Why Yong Soon Min matters

There is a version of the artist’s life that is only about your own paintings, your own fame. Yong Soon Min did not choose it. She made major work — collected by world-famous museums, shown around the globe — and she also built the organizations, the classrooms, and the collectives where other Asian American artists could thrive. The lesson isn’t that you must do both. It’s that someone always does. The artists you admire are usually standing in a room that someone like Yong Soon Min built so they could stand there at all.



Illustration: A dignified chapter-opener portrait of Yong Soon Min standing in a gallery beside one of her installations, a faint map of a divided Korea and its 38th Parallel glowing behind her — thoughtful, grounded, and quietly determined.

A closing word

Twenty-four lives cannot hold an entire community's history — for every person in this book, there are hundreds more whose names we may never know: the laborers, the mothers, the shopkeepers, the students, the organizers. The people here stand in for all of them. They paved the way, and they left the road open.

Now it's your turn to walk it — and maybe to build a little more of it.

Each chapter is based on a longer profile in the NetKAL profiles/ collection, where you can find sources and read further. Created for the NetKAL Korean American storytelling project.