

# Under the Black Umbrella





# Under the Black Umbrella

VOICES FROM COLONIAL KOREA, 1910–1945

HILDI KANG

Cornell University Press

Ithaca & London

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Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street,  
Ithaca, New York 14850.

First published 2001 by Cornell University Press  
First printing, Cornell Paperbacks, 2005

Printed in the United States of America

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Kang, Hildegard S., 1934–  
Under the black umbrella : voices from colonial  
Korea, 1910–1945 / Hildi Kang.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-3854-7 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8014-7270-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Korea—History—Japanese occupation, 1910–1945.
2. Korea—Social conditions—20th century.
3. Japan—Politics and government—1912–1945.

I. Title.

DS916.54.H33 2001

951.9'03—dc21

00-011299

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our website at [www.cornellpress.cornell.edu](http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu).

1 3 5 7 9 Cloth printing 10 8 6 4 2  
5 7 9 Paperback printing 10 8 6 4

*For  
my Honorable Father-in-law  
Kang Byung Ju  
who made me aware of the voices  
and  
the Korean elders  
who shared their life stories  
with apologies  
to the many  
whose equally powerful stories  
we were not able to include.*



*The reason for writing  
is to shelter something from death.*

ANDRE GIDE



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## PREFACE: COLLECTING THE INTERVIEWS

*Under the Black Umbrella* chronicles the changes in Korea during the first half of the twentieth century, before and during the years when Korea existed as a colony of Japan. The Japanese presence hovered like a cosmic umbrella above the peninsula, casting a shadow of distrust, uncertainty, and fear over every life and every action. The takeover, to a greater or lesser degree, blocked the light of world awareness and left the Korean people living in the shadow cast by their colonial rulers.

My own knowledge of the Imperial Japanese colony originally came from two genres—the systematic detail in history books and the passionate stories of martyrs—and neither of these had prepared me for the gentle humor as my father-in-law recounted his early life. The family chuckled as father recalled entering a modern school dressed in old-fashioned *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing), and smiled as he remembered helping his family make noodles by standing on the handles of their old noodle press. I let his stories slip by one after the other, until suddenly it struck me that every story took place under Japan's onerous rule of the peninsula. Where were the atrocities I had come to expect?

His memories shook loose my narrow view of colonial life and made me aware that often, under that shade cast by the Japanese presence, some people, some of the time, led close to normal lives. Of course, I now realized, during those years there must have been the entire gamut of life experiences, but where were their voices?

I looked again at the available sources, and still found only the catalogue of events. It is inevitable that over time, powerful personal events gradually become impersonal facts and detach from the lives that generated them. However, these events did once live and breathe as real people, and it was those people I decided to find. I wanted to seek out the richness and complexities of life under Japanese rule by collecting oral histories from Koreans who had lived through those times. Their stories became this book, restoring life to this period of Korean history, and shattering the silence

long held by many who lived under the black umbrella of Japanese colonial rule.

Together, my husband and I developed our plan. We set out to interview not only a distinct ethnic group but also a narrow age range within that group, so we took care to think through the interview process, considering both what the older Koreans would deem respectful and what would put them most at ease. We knew that many, if not most, of these elders live within the cultural protection of the Korean community, rarely deal with Caucasians, and speak limited or no English. First we ruled out my typical western forthrightness, and planned that my husband, a native Korean speaker, would conduct the interviews.

He began by interviewing the most elderly Koreans in our San Francisco Bay area—first friends, then acquaintances, then those attending Korean senior centers. One by one, he traveled to each of the centers of the San Francisco Bay area and met with the presidents of the associations. After sharing tea and general conversation, he explained our project, presented his business card, and made clear his University of California affiliation. He left with an appointment to interview the president, and spent the next hour circulating and meeting individual elders. Then he returned week after week, tape recording interviews.

He began gently. Perhaps people would not want to bring forth old, possibly traumatic, memories—and at first people *did* hold back. “Oh,” they said, “nothing much happened to me.” Gradually, however, as they became used to this visitor and his tape recorder, individuals approached him saying, “You haven’t heard my story yet,” or “I have an interesting story to tell.” Again and again he heard the comment, “I haven’t talked about this in years,” or “No one ever asked me that before.” But memories returned quickly, and simple questions often released powerful stories.

In all interviews except one, the elders preferred to speak in their native Korean, and thus we had a second job at home. My husband translated the tapes into English, doing his best to catch the subtleties of Korean language with its different levels of speech. I typed the stories into the computer and puzzled over ways to organize and synthesize the thousand pages of material—what to include and what to leave out.

Inclusion began with one overarching goal—to document diversity. Stories were then excluded that fell into one of two categories—uneventful

or redundant. Some people said that nothing much happened to them, and they were correct. Yet in their quiet lives there were often small moments of interest, and these entered the collection of smaller vignettes.

Next we sought to exclude redundancy. Many people shared similar experiences, especially at school or at work. From these, we chose the stories where details or personalities came through most strongly.

One single collection of stories cannot hope to capture the complete picture of life across an entire country, and our selection is admittedly limited by the locale from which we gathered our respondents—they are all people who wanted and could afford to move to America. The stories might take on a different tone if, for example, they had been gathered from among Koreans who had stayed in Korea, in North Korea, in Yanbian, Manchuria, or from among those forced to labor in and still residing in Osaka, Japan.

In spite of this limitation, the stories presented here show lives that range from poverty to riches, and from comfort and acceptance to fear and torture. We are constantly reminded that even under the black cloud of Japanese rule, life was never one-dimensional.

The interviews in this book are arranged into six major stories and many small vignettes. We chose these six longer stories for the diversity of their experiences, and made no effort to reflect the percentage of poor, average, or well-to-do families. Yet looking at them now, we realize that of the six, two (Hong Ŭlsu and Chŏng Chaesu) started in severe poverty—one staying and the other rising by his own efforts; two (Kang Pyŏngju and Yu Hyegyŏng) came from prominent families and in spite of troubles, stayed there; and two (Yi Hajŏn and Yi Okhyŏn) were born into prominent families and pulled down by their troubles.

In all cases, to help jog their memories, we presented the elders with open-ended questions covering their town, schooling, jobs, religion, contact with Japanese authorities, and name change from Korean to Japanese. In addition, we encouraged them to relate any other experiences they remembered as significant in their lives. Taken together, the fifty men and women interviewed represented a wide range of occupations, education, birth locales, and religious beliefs.

This collection has three caveats. First, I acknowledge that these stories do not necessarily represent all Koreans; second, I acknowledge that not all

memories may be completely accurate; and third, in a matter of semantics, I have not always translated the word *communist* as given us by the Korean elders.

First, with the exception of my father-in-law's memories taped years ago in Seoul, the interviews are from people living within a reasonable commute between Monterey and San Francisco, California. This may raise questions about the types of people most likely to emigrate, and whether their stories are skewed as a result. We found, however, that our local area was not restrictive, for over 100,000 Koreans now live in the greater San Francisco Bay area. The elders interviewed were both independent and dependent, educated and illiterate. They had been farmers, businesspeople, teachers, and scientists.

Second, memories are just that—memories. Each one is full of the passion of personal involvement. Many are clear and accurate, while others are colored by emotion or rumor. Throughout the book, small building blocks of historical information are supplied in an attempt to set these memories in context.

Beyond the scope of this book, but perhaps food for further discussion, are questions considering the veracity of remembered content, the effects of time and distance on memory, and the selectivity of geriatric reminiscences. Researchers with knowledge of colonization history may choose to consider whether or not the Korean situations are unique when compared with other colonized countries around the world.

Finally, in translating these memories, I have attempted to reserve the label *communist* for Communist Party members or their activities and to use the terms *leftist*, *radical*, or *partisan* in areas where actual membership in the party may not have existed. During the colonial years, various groups—leaning right, middle, and far left—worked to free Korea from Japan, and in that sense, all were nationalists. During the 1920s various communist groups entered Korea, all with the common goal of resistance to Japan. The current antagonism between Korean communists and nationalists emerged at the 1945 division of the peninsula into two countries, and from then on, the political groups polarized into “bad guys” and “good guys” (or reversed, from the northern point of view!).

In spite of these caveats and questions left unanswered, this book presents a fresh view of Korean history, told by the people whose lives, with both conscious effort and unconscious acceptance, intertwined the dis-

parate themes of political oppression, economic gain, and personal passage from the ancient to the modern world. These elders graciously shared their memories with us and have given us a clear and varied picture of life under the black umbrella of the Japanese occupation. We offer them our thanks.

H. K.

*Livermore, California*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The birth of a book depends on many people, and in this case, my first and greatest debt is to the more than fifty Korean elders who opened their hearts and memories and shared their stories with us. This book obviously could not exist without them.

In addition, numerous friends and acquaintances helped shape my chaotic thoughts into some semblance of order, and I am indebted to them all. The book had its genesis in my father-in-law's story; it grew to infancy during a conversation with Professor Gari Ledyard, who suggested this project and later read and critiqued the draft. The first tangible step, collecting the interviews, depended completely on the support and energy of my husband of over forty years, Sang Wook Kang, who gave uncountable hours to the task. Later, during the long hours of writing, his continual barrage of questions helped to focus my thoughts. Thanks also are due my sons, David C. and Steve Kang, for their constant encouragement and advice.

Special thanks go to attendees of the Fourth Pacific and Asian Conference on Korean Studies in Vancouver, whose lively response both tested and enriched my ideas. Professors Gi Wook Shin and Soon Won Park did me the honor of reading the draft and offering comments to guide the finished product, and Norman Thorpe contributed both suggestions and photographs from his extensive private collection. Assistance in locating other appropriate photographs came from Professor Hong Yung Lee and graduate assistant John Shin (University of California, Berkeley), and research assistants at the Library of Congress. Colleen Redpath restored and reproduced the private family photographs supplied by two of our interviewees.

On the technical side, I credit my daughter, editor Laura Kang Ward, with keeping me humble. After handing her what I thought was a flawless manuscript, ignoring her "All authors think their manuscripts are flawless"

comment, I then saw red ink flow like a waterfall down the margin of every page. Thank you, Laura, for your amazing eye for detail.

Finally, my thanks to the outside reader who provided a wealth of useful comments and to Roger Haydon, my editor at Cornell University Press, for his years of interest and encouragement. From our first exploratory conversation, he has pushed me slowly from idea to reality.

## CONVENTIONS USED

### *McCune-Reischauer System of Romanization*

Not all Korean letters (*han'gŭl*) have clear and direct equivalents when transliterated into the roman alphabet, and thus Koreans commonly romanize their names to their own personal taste. For example, a single Korean name, Yi, may be spelled Lee, Li, Rhee, Rhi, Nee, or Ni. This book follows the McCune-Reischauer (M-R) system for all Korean words except those personal names where individuals have already chosen their own spelling. In this case, the M-R spelling comes first, followed by the personal spelling in brackets; for example, Hong Ŭlsu [Hong Eul Soo].

### *Pronunciation*

vowels as follows:

a as in father	ae like the a in apple
ō as the u in but	o as in Ohio
e as in egg	oe like the ö in German
ŭ as the e in taken or spoken	u as in rule
i as in India	

consonants:

ch = j	t = d	t' = t	ch' = ch
p = b	k = g	k' = k	p' = p

### *Listing of Interviewees*

Last name, first name [personal choice of spelling if there is one],  
(m) or (f) for male or female, birth date, job, province of birth.

Four interviewees chose to remain anonymous and are listed simply as last name, first initial [anonymous], (m) or (f), job.

*Parentheses* are used for interpolated translations;  
for example, village school (*sōdang*)

*Brackets* are used for explanatory material inserted  
by the author into an interview.