

VOICES

*of the* HEART

Asian American  
Women on Immigration,  
Work, and Family



HUPING LING

Truman State University Press

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## Preface

This volume contains fifty-four interviews selected from over three hundred interviews conducted by me during the 1990s and 2000s and by students under my supervision between 1993 and 1996. The interviewees were identified through public and private directories and personal contacts, and were selected to represent the broad and diverse aspects of Asian American women's lives. A standard questionnaire was used to ensure a uniform and consistent methodology in order to make meaningful comparisons. The questionnaire covers various dimensions of Asian American women's life including immigration or ethnic background, education, settlement choice, employment, discrimination, marriage, dating, family life, child rearing, community service, assimilation, cultural preservation, political participation, and religious practice. Most interviews consisted of two-hour long tape-recorded interviews, and many had follow-up interviews. My assistant team and I carefully read transcripts of each interview, highlighted the information reflecting the above-mentioned aspects, and selected cases that best represent each ethnic group. We then converted all interviews into narratives. I reorganized each by topic and chronology. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, the individual names have been altered. The women's original language and speech patterns have been retained as much as possible to maintain the originality and authenticity of the oral history interviews; however, they have been lightly edited for clarity. The varied length, intensity, and articulation of the interviews cordially reflects the diverse educational, socioeconomic, and ethnic backgrounds as well as the individual personalities and temperaments of these women.

The volume is organized first by ethnicity, then by topic to allow each group to maintain their coherence and interconnections, and to facilitate dealing with each ethnic group's experiences as compared to other ethnic groups. It includes the larger and earlier groups of Asian

American women—the Chinese, Japanese, Filipinas, Koreans, and Asian Indians—as well as the newer groups of Asian Americans who have arrived since the 1970s—the Vietnamese, Laotians, Hmong, Thais, and Pakistanis. The women interviewed reveal the social and economic conditions in their countries of origin, their aspirations and expectations prior to immigration, their frustrations and difficulties in the initial years of their American life, their joys and successes in their education and occupation, and their efforts in preserving their ethnic heritage while assimilating into American society. The women interviewed include those with a single ethnic heritage and many with mixed ethnicity who make up a growing segment of the Asian American population, but are often omitted from literature focusing on single ethnic groups. The interviews also include students, both native-born or naturalized Americans and international students, some of whom may eventually settle in the United States, while others may return to their homelands.

Each chapter begins with an introduction to highlight interview cases in the chapter and significant themes for that ethnic group. Some themes are common to all the women interviewed (immigration, work, interracial marriage, and cultural identity), but the interviews also revealed topics unique to each group. For the Chinese women, a section is devoted to the native-born and foreign-born students in higher education. For the Filipinas, it includes a topic on Filipinas in the health industry. For the Japanese women, it is a reflection on the internment experience. For Korean women, the issue of adoption is addressed. For the South Asian women, there is coverage of the management of hotels and motels, and for the Southeast Asian women, attention is given to the refugee experience and the status of Vietnamese adoptees.

The majority of interviewees are from the midwestern region of the United States, as reflected in its title *Voices of the Heart*. The “heart” here implies not only the deep personal feelings of Asian American women, but also the heartland of the United States. As Asian American studies have been heavily concentrated on the West and East Coasts and Hawaii, the Midwest has been a frontier in the field and awaits further scholarly investigation.

# A Historical Review and Synthesis of Asian American Women

To better understand Asian American women, one needs to first look at their cultural and historical background. Asian American women can trace their diverse cultural and religious background to the lands of their ancestors. Over the past millennia, the landmass of Asia and the neighboring islands have embraced the rich and diverse cultural and religious institutions of Confucianism, Daoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Shintoism, and Christianity. Of these ideologies, Confucian restrictions had the greatest impact on women's thoughts and actions, but other religions' values also profoundly affected their personal behavior.

## Confucian Dominance in East Asia

The bend of the Yellow River in northern China has been known as the cradle of Chinese civilization; here the earliest Chinese dynasty, Xia (2205–1766 BCE), arose. The succeeding Shang dynasty (1766–1122 BCE) has been credited with the invention of the writing system in China, the *jiagu wen*, with characters inscribed on turtle shells and animal bones. The Zhou dynasty (1122–221 BCE) that replaced Shang contributed greatly to the contending schools of philosophy in ancient China, among which Confucianism and Daoism have been the most enduring.

Confucianism is named for its originator, *Kong Fuzi* (Latinized as Confucius). Confucian ideology has strongly influenced spiritual and political life in East Asia. Rules of successive dynasties found it a most effective governing ideology; consequently it became entrenched in Chinese society and was introduced to its neighboring countries of Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Throughout history, generations of Chinese scholars have interpreted and elaborated Confucian teachings in numerous volumes; however, the



essential ideas of Confucianism are centered around basic concepts of virtue and individual behavior. In terms of governing, the Confucian ideology stresses the moral ethic of the ruler and his government. Individuals maintain their proper places in the hierarchical society by obeying central, local, and familial authorities in their roles as subjects, wives, sons, and daughters.

For Chinese women, the multilayered hierarchical structure is encapsulated in the Three Obediences and Four Virtues. A Chinese woman is expected to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son when widowed. She is also expected to possess virtues of obedience, reticence, pleasing manners, and domestic skills. These rigid ideological constraints were reinforced by a physical torment known as foot binding that instilled the concept of women as weaker and, therefore, inferior creatures. The practice of foot binding may have begun with dancers at the imperial court during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). By the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE), the custom had been introduced among upper-class women. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911 CE), the custom became common throughout Chinese society. At the age of three to five, girls had their feet tightly wrapped and gradually bent until the arch was broken and the toes, except for the big one, tuned under. The “lily foot” produced by such practice crippled women to the extent that they could barely walk without support.<sup>1</sup>

The origins of Korea are related to the movement of people from the Manchurian area of China into the Korean peninsula. Tan’gun, supposedly a scion of the Shang royal line of China, founded the Korean state in 2333 BCE. The area came under China’s direct rule when Wudi of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) conquered Chosŏn (the ancient name of Korea) in 109/8 BCE and set up four commanderies in the peninsula. When the Chinese colonies in Korea dwindled in the fourth century, three native Korean kingdoms emerged and divided the peninsula among themselves: Koguryŏ in the north, Paekche in the southwest, and Silla in the southeast. By the late seventh century, the peninsula was unified by Silla. During the Silla period (668–935 CE), Korean society was greatly influenced by the Chinese ideals of the Tang dynasty; the sinicization of the peninsula was so profound the state was nicknamed Little Tang. Yet, it was the Yi dynasty (1392–1910) that was seen as a model Confucian society.<sup>2</sup> The Koreans in

<sup>1</sup>Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters*; Fairbank, *East Asia, Tradition and Transformation*, 142–43; Ling, *Surviving on the Gold Mountain*, 19; and Xu, “Sancun LinLian” [Bound Feet].

<sup>2</sup>Fairbank, *East Asia*, 300–2.

the Yi dynasty adopted Confucianism with great enthusiasm and restructured their government, value system, and society strictly along Chinese lines, revering and observing Confucian principles as dogmatic rituals. Koreans faithfully practiced filial piety and dutifully observed the three-year period of mourning for parents. Women were restricted and the remarriage of widows was severely condemned.

The Vietnamese people can be traced back to Mongoloid groups who, in prehistoric times, migrated from South China into the Southeast Asian peninsula. China extended control over this region by the end of the third century BCE and called it Nam Viet, meaning "South Yue," referring to the southern frontier of the Chinese civilization. The Han dynasty annexed the region and established a Chinese government, along with the Chinese writing system, Confucian classic learning, and a Chinese officialdom. Chinese domination continued until late in the Tang dynasty (about 939 CE), when disorder in South China encouraged the Vietnamese upper class to develop a sense of national identity. They established the Vietnamese dynasties of Later Li (1010–1225), Tran (1225–1400), Later Le (1428–1789), and Nguyen (1802–1945). Though purely Vietnamese regimes, these dynasties continued the early imitation of Chinese government, high culture, literature, dress, and codes of conduct.<sup>3</sup>

The Japanese, like their neighbors in Korea and China, are a homogeneous Mongoloid people. But unlike Korea and Vietnam, Japan was never invaded by Chinese armies; however, Chinese culture and ideologies influenced Japanese society and government. While the natural boundary of water protected Japan from continental invasion, it also made the Japanese more aware of their cultural isolation and more conscious of borrowing from the outside. The Japanese state, which dates back to the first emperor, Jimmu, in the seventh century BCE, had regular contact with the continent, especially Korea. This contact strengthened the Yamato government culturally and economically. In the sixth century, Buddhism was introduced to Japan through Korea. The introduction of Buddhism ushered in a series of cultural and institutional changes including the establishment of the Chinese type of central government, nationalization of land, taxation, adoption of the Chinese writing system and Chinese calendar, and regular trade with China. The process of sinicization came to a halt during the Heian period (794–1185 CE), when the Tang dynasty in China began to decline and the Japanese had been so immersed in many aspects of Chinese culture

<sup>3</sup>Fairbank, *East Asia*, 268.

that further borrowing became less relevant. The decline of the central government in Japan resulted in the rise of a feudal system dominated by a ruling class of warriors (samurai) that lasted for seven centuries. The Confucian ideologies associated with bureaucratic skills were valued again during the Tokugawa shogunate (1600–1868) when prolonged peace meant the government was more in need of Confucian scholar-bureaucrats than warriors. Consequently, Confucian codes of conduct were reinstated and a substantial portion of the samurai transformed themselves from rough warriors into refined Confucian scholars. As a result, the status of Japanese women declined to conform to the Confucian restrictions.

During the Meiji period (1868–1912), the Meiji government abandoned feudalism and encouraged economic growth and industrialization to modernize Japan and enable it to meet challenges from the West. The entire country was mobilized to realize the patriotic dream, with the women's role defined as ensuring the smooth operation of a male-centered, authoritarian, traditional family.<sup>4</sup> The Meiji government's slogan "Good Wife, Wise Mother" promoted Japanese state policy that emphasized a woman's responsibilities in the domestic sphere. The Meiji Civil Code of 1898 established the samurai ideal of the *ie* (house) as the legal unit of society and the national standard for the family. The code legally subordinated women to men in several ways: a wife needed her husband's consent before entering a legal contract; a husband could divorce his wife on the ground of adultery; and a woman under age twenty-five could not marry without the permission of the household head.<sup>5</sup> These Confucian-centered and authoritarian restrictions placed women in a disadvantageous position within their own societies. They also helped form the perception among outsiders that Asian women were more family-oriented and were docile, submissive creatures.

### Religious Traditions

Confucianism, though not a religion, has been revered as such by many in East Asian countries. Other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Shintoism, and Christianity, have also contributed to the cultural traditions of Asian American women.

The term Hindu is derived from the Sanskrit *Sindhu*, referring to the River Indus. The Aryan invaders who arrived in the Indus Valley region in

<sup>4</sup>Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women*, 8.

<sup>5</sup>Bernstein, *Recreating Japanese Women*, 8.

the second millennium BCE (and from whose language Sanskrit is derived) practiced the Vedic religion, which was based on the worship of deities related to natural phenomena with rituals centered on animal sacrifices and the use of soma to enter a trancelike state. Modern Hinduism evolved from the ancient Vedic religion, with the development of philosophical concepts of ethics and duties (*dharma*), the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth (*samsara*), action and subsequent reaction (*karma*), and liberation from the cycle of *samsara* (*moksha*). According to Hindu doctrines, the ideal life for a Hindu man consists of four stages: *brahmacarya*, a period of discipline and education; *vanaprasthya*, the retirement stage, a time of retreat for loosening bonds to the material world; and *sannyasa*, the ascetic stage, a time of renouncing worldly attachments and preparing to shed the body for the next life. Thus, the Hindu system of values emphasizes the attainment of knowledge, active work, sacrifice and service to others, and renunciation of earthly pleasures.

An important component of Hinduism is its caste system, which divides people into social groups depending on descent, marriage, and occupation. There are about three thousand castes, divided into four major groups: Brahmins (priests and religious teachers), Kshatriyas (kings, warriors, and aristocrats), Vaisyas (those engaged in commerce and trades), and Sudras (farmers, servants, and laborers). Over time, the hereditary caste system has maintained a uniform division of labor, class stratification, and stable social interactions, and has therefore been mostly preserved by Indian society. The caste system also prohibits intercaste marriage, although anuloma marriage (in which the bridegroom is of a higher caste than the bride) has been acceptable and children of such marriages belong to the caste of their father.<sup>6</sup> Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs in India also have castes, although they are usually more fluid than Hindu castes. The Hindu religious ceremonies generally can be classified into several categories of daily meditations, prayers, and rituals; weekly religious observances such as fasting on a certain day of the week; prayers and penances performed according to the lunar calendar; and the annual festivals connected with the worship of particular gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon.

Buddhism, which also originated in India, follows the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 BCE), prince of a small kingdom on the south edge of Nepal who renounced his princely life to seek enlightenment.

<sup>6</sup>Molly, *Experiencing the World's Religions*.

## About the Author

Huping Ling is author of five books, *Chinese St. Louis: 1857–2007*, *Chinese St. Louis: From Enclave to Cultural Community*, *Ping Piao Mei Guo: New Immigrants in America*, *Jinshan Yao: A History of Chinese American Women* which won a 1999 Ford Foundation Award, and *Surviving on the Gold Mountain: A History of Chinese American Women and Their Lives*. She has edited four volumes and has contributed to scholarly books and journals. Ling is professor of history at Truman State University and holds a doctorate from Miami University.

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