Picture Bride: Fact or Image?
– Immigration from Ireland and Japan

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Abstract: *In the early twentieth century, masses of immigrants from "underdeveloped" nations suffered depravation of honour, dignity and self-respect, despite their hopes and expectations, at the time of their entry into America. Ireland and Japan in those days were included among such nations, and female immigrants were apt media targets for criticism or contempt. Feminist historians have pointed out that Irish women continued to suffer exclusion from the socio-economic discussion of massive emigration from Ireland to America for several decades. Likewise, Japanese women emigrants' "lived" lives, after nearly three generations, still await thorough research and revelation. Only recently, their granddaughters have begun to explore their footsteps, and expose the true intentions of these women, their hopes, disillusionment and perseverance. "Picture Brides" was a term first employed by the Japanese government to evade the U.S. legal barrier against Japanese immigrants, after the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1908, The term was applied to young women willing to marry on the basis of photographs provided through matchmakers. Soon it became a symbolic branding of female immigrants from nations which were poor, different in language, culture and values, and therefore, incomprehensible in the eyes of contemporary Americans.*

New York Times, in a 1922 article entitled "231 Picture Brides on Wedding Liner", reported the arrival of female immigrants from Turkey, Rumania, Armenia and Greece, without any mention of Ireland. The picture panel at Ellis Island Immigration Museum in 1995, however, displays a photo of Irish women immigrants alongside the New York Times' newspaper article as if perpetuating the discrimination in the media.To rescue their forerunners from disgrace and oblivion, attempts have been made by women researchers and artists to revive and retell the stories of those voiceless women. This paper will discuss this process of cultural salvage, using such films as Picture Bride in its attempt to show where Ireland and Japan met in the New World.

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I wonder if, for how many of you, the word, “Picture Bride”, is familiar, and what sort of image that word invokes in you. Do you know any one who was or is called a “Picture Bride”?

The word, whether or not it is familiar to you in any way, inevitably brings us back to the past, at least for those of us who live in what is called “developed countries” now. It is because in our countries, mass emigration occurred when there was a lack of jobs locally, and a demand for labour elsewhere; that is, we had a “population surplus:” more people than we could sustain within our countries for economic reasons.

Since the nineteenth century onward, and especially since the early twentieth century, masses of immigrants from “under-developed” nations have huddled together on the shores of the so-called New World. Ireland and Japan in those days were included among such nations, and many of their citizens were either encouraged or obliged to emigrate to America or elsewhere where opportunities were promised though not guaranteed. The emigrants from these countries sailed long and far with mixed feelings of hope and apprehension for the life that lay ahead, and their nervous excitement was at its highest as they landed and queued for inspections at the Immigration Office at the port of entry.

An optimistic image of these emigrants is epitomised in the depiction of Annie Moore, the first immigrant, and an Irish girl, that arrived at Ellis Island, in New York, in 1892. Annie Moore, was described in the contemporary media as an innocent young woman patronised auspiciously by male adults both upon landing and in the immigration office.[1] It seems there is, not surprisingly, a gender issue behind the story. Moore’s statue in the museum on Ellis Island, therefore, seems to exploit the image of a very young girl, while the same girl’s statue, in which she is represented with her two younger brothers, at the Cobh Heritage Centre, in Ireland, presents Moore as a very different kind of young woman, that is, like Fionnuala, the daughter of King Lir, the very symbol of female strength and perseverance. If the statues depict the same girl, one cannot help wondering how she could possibly forget her responsibility for the care of her brothers upon disembarkation.

Perhaps it is reasonable to think that Annie Moore was a lucky female immigrant to be given such favourable treatment at the immigration office and to enjoy the flattering spotlight of the media, as well. Certainly there were many others who suffered the depravation of honour, dignity and self-respect, at the time of their entry into America, despite the hopes and expectations they arrived with. With more than a million immigrants entering the U.S.A each year during the peak years, over 10,000 of them queued on Ellis Island daily, patiently waiting to be “processed” by the officers and medical examiners.

But I am not going to enter the discussion of the disgraceful treatment of female immigrants in these premises, which has come to light in recent years. Rather, what I would like to bring to the fore is the story of women who emigrated from Ireland and Japan, and how their lives were lived, how they were depicted by the American media, and how their lives have been told. As their stories unfold, the similarity of their experiences will be striking. However, before I begin, one question remains to be asked: Is the "Picture Bride" really a thing in the past?

I

The United States, or more commonly "America" to many outsiders, was the ultimate destination of their long voyage for many emigrants in the 19th and 20th century. According to the figures that the U.S. Census Bureau makes available on the Internet,[2] the foreign-born population has shown a constant rise since 1850 (total 2,244,602). Every decade after showed an increase of over a million in the number of the foreign-born citizens until 1880 (over six and half million, 6,679,943), but there was then a sudden surge in the numbers in 1890, as the foreign-born population jumped to over nine million, (9,249,547); by 1930, three decades later, it had reached 14,204,149.

Among that foreign-born population were Irish immigrants, 1,871,509 of them in 1890, but this number decreases to 1,037,234 in 1920, and soon afterwards gets divided, of course, into separate figures for Northern Ireland and Ireland, making the total of 923,642 in 1930. The numbers remained high, regardless; in 1960, there were as many as 338,722 from the South and 68,162 from North – till in 1990 the number dropped to 169,827 from the South and 16,531 from the North (total 186,358).

On the other hand, the number of Japanese emigrants from Japan in 1890 was a mere 2,292 (which was less than 40 years after Commodore Perry set foot on the shores of Japan, forcing the country to abandon its self-imposed isolation policy in 1853), but it was ten times that in 1900 (24,788), 67,744 in 1910, and, in 1920, reached a peak of 81,502, only to decrease as U.S.-Japan relationship worsened.

According to population statistics for the year 2000, it is estimated that there are now over 40,000,000 Irish Americans in America, and 1,150,000 Japanese Americans. If one considers the vast gap in the total population between Ireland and Japan (120,000,000), a comparison of these figures only make the Irish exodus more significant. However, I have said enough about the figures now, and would like to go on to the issue of female emigrants.

II

It is a well-known fact nowadays that the Irish emigrants after the Famine were remarkable for the large number of single women they included. As Diner points out:

> "Irish women differed from most other immigrant women in terms of numbers. They were the only significant group of foreign-born women who outnumbered men: they were the only significant group of foreign-born women who chose to migrate in primarily female cliques" (Diner 1983, xiv).

Emigrants from other European nations often travelled as families, while cohorts of single women were a distinctive feature of Irish emigrant groups. To explain this phenomenon of "massive female exodus," Diner points out such reasons as "late and infrequent marriage, high rates of celibacy, social environment of gender segregation and reluctant sexuality, etc." (4) Although the land of promise did not offer easy access to contrary conditions or status, Irish women continued to leave the old home, forcing 20th century Ireland to emit its young women and men as "its chief export." (4)

At the superficial level, the feature of Japanese female emigrants seems quite similar; there, too, were cohorts of single women on board the emigrant ships. However, these women were in fact destined to marry unseen husbands after landing. How did they decide whom to marry? Through photos or pictures; hence they were called "picture brides".

There has been a common understanding among historians that the term "picture bride" applied only to Japanese women who imigrated to America to be wedded to Japanese men whom they had met only through photographs. *The Encyclopaedia of Women's Studies* specifies that the term describes women from Japan, Okinawa and Korea immigrating to the U.S.A. for marriage (Tierney, 355).

This style of marriage was a notion based on a conservative custom in Japan that considered marriage not as the culmination of romantic love, but as an agreement reached through a matchmaker between the families of both parties; Or, to be more precise, between the patriarchs, because women were not normally included in the process of decision making.

This process is documented in various sources, and I would like to quote one passage from "The Japanese in Hawai'i: 1885-1920" by Ogawa and Grant. In the case of Japanese emigrants, they describe that male labourers went first, hoping to earn a fortune to bring home. However, the reality was not quite what they had expected.

> [So] they would make Hawai'i their home until perhaps at some distant time they again could see their parents and homeland. First they would need families, and being dutiful sons of farmers they knew they would need dutiful Japanese brides.
> Letters were written home requesting that their parents contact the matchmakers in the village so that respectable women could be found for the distant sojourners. Pictures of the men were taken by professional photographers who often used the same worn suit over and over so that these labourers looked a little more distinguished. The portraits were then tucked into the letters. In time they would receive from Japan the exciting news that a bride had been found and if approved, arrangements would be made to send the young woman across the seas to this foreign land. Inside the envelope would also be the photograph of the prospective bride.

Ogawa and Grant write that "[t]he first major waves of Japanese 'picture brides' began in 1908 and [...] [d]uring the peak years between 1911 and 1919, 9,500 picture brides bolstered the Islands' female population."

Another observation based on the Hawaiian experience by Bell shows the other aspect of this marriage style:

> "It is part of our [the] immigrant folklore to expect a mismatch of a young beautiful woman with an older, work-wearied husband whose matchmaking photo was taken many years before. The folklore of romance includes the not uncommon tales of those couples who grew to love and cherish each other. However, no community is immune from the social ills of abuse, alcoholism, gambling and the stress of a new marriage in a new country."

Out of such lore emerged the film *Picture Bride* (1994), it might seem, but the film was actually based on the true story of Riyo, a young girl who went to Hawaii as a picture bride in 1918. The film, directed by a woman director Kayo Hatta, is one of the first independent feature films produced in Hawai'i, but I will discuss the film later.

The question now is who invented this funny word "picture bride", and what connotation did it have? I would like to quote Ikumi Yanagisawa in her forthcoming Japanese paper titled "Picture Bride: What was at issue?" She writes that it was in 1905 that the first "distant" marriage between a male Japanese immigrant living in Santa Clara, California, and a woman residing in Japan was recorded in the official documents of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The couple had never met, but the woman was married on paper in Japan, and the government issued her a passport as a married woman. However, when her boat reached San Francisco, the U.S. immigration office refused to admit her, saying the marriage was not valid under Californian law.

What actually was at issue was American resistance to the notion of marrying someone without having even met them; it was unthinkable, and such a marriage, if it were to be called "marriage", was a false or falsified one. Therefore, it was assumed that the woman was either a prostitute, or else the China-based custom of polygamy, which was morally unacceptable, was about to invade American society. In this case, the Japanese woman was given accommodation at a training centre of the Methodist Church for Japanese in San Francisco, and eventually married her husband in an American style wedding ceremony.

In the documents related to this first case, no such words as "picture bride" are used, but certainly this is the first example of "marriage through exchange of pictures" (Yanagisawa, forthcoming). Soon after, the Japanese government began to take precautions so as not to stir up suspicion or animosity about Japanese immigration. The antagonism toward Chinese immigrants had been a precedent, and Japan did not want to be seen as a threat to the States, while aspiring to be seen as the newly emerging power in Asia and one of the "first class" nations of the world.

The problems with massive immigration in the eyes of Americans were seen as two-fold: economic and moral. The increasingly growing number of ethnic groups, especially Asians in California, presented a threat to the land ownership by white

Americans, and differing customs and values presented an impediment to social assimilation.

Between 1907 and 1908, negotiations continued between the US and Japanese governments over the restriction of Japanese immigrants, and what is called a "Gentleman's Agreement" was reached between the two, which allowed families of only those Japanese already in the States to join them. Japan agreed not to send any more immigrants to the U.S., except for the ones joining their families residing in U.S. already, which in reality meant wives-to-be to be wedded to bachelors (Yanagisawa 1998, 125).

With women being only 2.3% of the immigrant population, the predominantly male Japanese immigrant society in America typically consisted of unskilled labourers, and had problems with misconduct from excessive drinking, gambling, fighting and the sex trade, which were the cause of much embarrassment to a nation aspiring to be modern. Japan did not want to be looked down on, nor treated as a "yellow peril" by its powerful neighbour.

In order to make single men marry and establish themselves in a country where mixed marriage were prohibited by law, "picture brides" were considered the best solution to such problems in the eyes of diplomats and government officials. Thus, as Yanagisawa argues, marriage through photos were encouraged by the Japanese government as a way of evading the strict ban on immigration, and as a result, many a young Japanese woman braved the distance to marry a man in the promised land.

According to an information online provided by Bill, "[b]etween 1908 and 1920 nearly 20,000 Japanese, Okinawan and Korean women arrived in Hawai'i as "picture brides" while thousands of others also migrated to the U.S. Mainland". And according to Yanagisawa, it is estimated from the record of Immigration Office that between 1912 and 1920, which were the peak years, over 7,000 picture brides entered through Seattle and San Francisco (Yanagisawa, forthcoming).

However, the brides' official entry into the U.S. itself was terminated by the Japanese government in 1919 by refusing to issue them passports. This was an outcome of the political consideration on the part of the government, resulting from the outrage that ensued after the "Alien Land Act" was issued in California in 1913. The Act targeted Japanese immigrants because their diligence and fertility afforded them land acquisition, and their increasing prosperity was perceived as a threat to white citizens. Ethnic fear and prejudice mounted, and gradually a nationalistic "100% Americanism Campaign" raged in California and beyond.

Therefore, it is apparent that the 'picture bride' was a highly symbolic term with very political connotations, and some diplomatic heft to it. Yanagisawa points out that while the term "picture marriage" was used at the beginning, "picture bride" became the set term for referring to the women and the issue. Another possible term "picture groom" has never been used. This reflects the apparent gendered exploitation of the ethnic groups in America, because women seen as objects most acutely epitomises vulnerability and "the otherness" of ethnic groups in the society and the media.

III

It is not actually known who invented the word "picture bride," but the American media did not miss the chance to use this new catchy phrase to describe the ethnic invasion. Representing the general apprehension of middleclass white Americans, the Seattle's *The Star* newspaper reported on 5 March, 1913, that "533 picture brides came from Japan in the past year." Examples of such media exploitation of female immigrants as the photographic subject of the term "picture brides" are many, but the following is a case where the term is used for a different ethnic group, and with an obvious difference in tone from that used for the Japanese 'brides".

The left-hand side panel in the photo (shown by OHP) shows the article in *The New York Times*, July 3, 1922.

> 231 Picture Brides on Wedding Liner
> Grooms-to-Be Say It with Candy and Flowers at Quarantine.
>
> Sixteen nationalities were represented on the passenger list of the King Alexander of the National Greek Line, which docked in Brooklyn yesterday from Constantinople. One Customs Inspector call the ship "the matrimonial special" because 231 of the 700 women passengers from Turkey, Rumania, Armenia and Greece had made the trip to be married here. The majority of them were "picture brides," young women who had exchanged pictures with nationals here during their courtship by mail.
>
> When the King Alexander reached Quarantine more than fifty motor boats and tugs with prospective grooms aboard swarmed around the liner. Lined against the rail of the King Alexander were young women with photographs in their hands looking for the men to whom they were to be married when they stepped ashore. Boxes of candy and bouquets in profusion were hurled aboard the Greek vessel by the happy grooms-to-be. The motor boats and tugs escorted the King Alexander to her pier.
>
> The Travelers' Aid Society, which acts as guardian for the young women until they are married, had a busy day, its appointment list being the largest on record, it was said.
>
> Three young men were doomed to disappointment. Their brides-to-be on the way over had exercised a woman's privilege of changing her mind and announced that they had fallen in love with fellow passengers.
>
> The various nationalities represented on the passenger list were: Greek, 511; American, 35; English 2; Turk, 66; Russian, 92; Rumanian, 22; Armenian, 64; Albanian, 25; Persian, 16; Egyptian, 2; Dutch, 1; Italian, 7; Serbian, 1; Bulgarian, 2, and 11 from Asia Minor.

Compared to the headline of the Los Angeles Times of 3 January, 1915, which wrote, "Right Bride for Right Jap", one cannot help noticing that the tone of the New

York Times headline is more benign, and even a bit romanticising the scene at the port. Nevertheless, while no perjorative term is used in the headline, there is a similar wryness to the reportage, because the grooms-to-be who have to resort to mail order brides are being mocked.

Actually the panel is the same one we saw on 20 July, in 1996, when Maureen Murphy, our host at the Hofstra Conference, took us to the Ellis Island Immigration Museum. The enlarged copy of the photo of the panel, which I took and examined later, gave me the source of the article, and Yanagisawa later confirmed the original. What struck us both at the initial stage was the combination of the article and the photos. Perhaps, some of you have noticed that the photo on the top right is the famous one of the girls looking their best as they arrive at the port of entry in Kerby Miller's *Out of Ireland*. And yet, as I have just read, there was not a single Irish girl on board according to the newspaper article; nor was the term 'picture bride' ever applied to Irish girls, as they did not have such practice, at least as far as we know.

Then, what does this use of the photo mean? I do not like to think that Miller deliberately used a false photo in his book, so I must allow myself to think that it was either the curator of this section or the designer of this panel who simply wanted some suitable pictures to match the article on the panel. If so, this is a typical case of perpetuating undiscriminating discrimination against women in the media and in education.

Apart from this problem, one thing is certain from the panel: No matter where they came from, these emigrant women wanted to look good, and got dressed up carefully before landing. The two photos on the panel show that, and so does the other one showing Japanese brides arriving in their best kimono at SF's Angel Island, which is only one of many examples of groups of "picture brides" covered by the U.S. media. The obvious reason of their best dress, of course, was that the women were concerned about their appearance, as they were about to meet their families or unseen spouses.

However, behind that natural motivation, there were people taking care, especially in the case of Japanese women, to make them look respectable in the media; i.e. the government office and the voluntary Christian groups of Japanese women at home. They saw that the women who volunteered or were persuaded to become "picture brides" were mostly from economically handicapped rural areas, and therefore unsophisticated and vulgar in the "civilised" eyes of Americans. They opened up purpose-oriented boarding schools in Yokohama, Kobe, and in America, too, to teach them "better" manners and basic English. Tanaka clarifies that fact in his article. This seems to remind us of the various functions the Catholic Church and its organisations assumed in taking care of Irish girls in American ports, but I do not have time to go into comparisons now, except to mention the common formative systems for young women coming from Ireland and Japan.

IV

Concerning the Irish women's migration, Kelly and Choille refer to more recent phenomena:

> At school everybody had to read a book called Dialann Deorai (The Emigrant's Diary); [...] we never thought about it too much then, it just seemed like all the emigrants were men. Women never figured too much in those books. [...] I realised that women were also leaving in large numbers but weren't included in the story of emigration that we were told (O'Sullivan 1995, 175).

While emigration was pervasive in both countries, the absence of information about women's emigration is both surprising and deplorable. Women's experiences of emigration, which, till quite recently have been assumed to be the same as that of men, actually need more exploration and telling.

Kelly and Choille write, "Being in an ethnic ghetto, while offering security, imposed the same restrictive values that some women sought to escape," (182) and emphasis on family life restricted and repressed both Irish and Japanese women. Diner writes, "Ethnicity can be a central determinant of human behaviour" (Diner 1983: xv). She points out that Irish women's behaviour "as immigrants and as wage earners, may seem to indicate autonomy and independence. It does not. [...] Their actions stemmed from family loyalties. [...] Their actions represented a commitment to Irish Catholic culture and to its way of life. The move to America did not represent a search for a new identity, nor did it constitute a break with the past (xiv). It is apparent that many women from both groups, Irish and Japanese, shared the social and familial attitudes, and retained the old identity in the New World.

However, their lives should not be generalised, as they are diverse, as the oral history of old emigrant women documents it, and their true stories before they are entirely lost, are beginning to be explored and told by women of younger generations. The already mentioned film "Picture Bride" based on a Hawaiian experience was a conscious effort by the female film makers to do so. The promotional material of the film includes the following introduction:

> As filmmakers we (with a deep aloha for Hawai'i, Kayo Hatta, Lisa Onodera, and) realized that with surviving picture brides in their 80s and 90s, with sugar plantations closing down throughout Hawai'i, and with historical sites such as Honolulu Harbor experiencing transformation into modern shopping complexes, preservation of this history was not only important, but crucial. The closing of one sugar plantation after another would result in the inevitable fading of Hawai'i's unique plantation culture and society. (Mark)

The women emigrants' "lived" lives still await thorough research and revelation, while their granddaughters have begun to explore their footsteps and expose the true intentions of these women, their hopes, disillusionment and perseverance. More oral histories of women have to be recorded and collected, to be more truthfully and artistically presented. Examples like the films "Picture Bride" and "The Piano" have done so, to convey the challenges these brave and tenacious women met, years ago.

These attempts are important and relevant to our contemporary world, because we, in developed countries, see women arriving daily from developing countries accompanied with the familiar baggage of similar ethnic and gender problems. In this sense, I believe that the combined efforts of daughters, writing and reading Irish and Japanese literatures, have much to offer to the world in future generations.[3]

Notes

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[1] In one episode, Annie Moore was said to have been the second passenger to leave the ship, but the first "gentleman" yielded the place to her. In another, she was given a gift of a ten dollar gold piece by Colonel Weber, Superintendent of Emigration, which made Annie "dumfounded", according to *New York Herald*, 2 January 1892, edited and quoted in *The Great Irish Famine Curriculum*.

[2] Much of the information, including photographs, in this paper was obtained through Internet, which seems to indicate that this new information media is of great value for scholars exploring this field, the census statistics, especially.
Gibson, Campbell J. and Lennon, Emily, (February 1999) "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-born Population of the United States: 1850-1990", *Population Division Working Paper,* n. 29, Washington, D.C.: Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, HYPERLINK http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab01.html http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab01.html, 10 October 2002.
The table of "Religion and Country or Area of Birth of the Foreign-born Population, with Geographic Details Shown in Decennial Census Publications of 1930 or Earlier: 1850 to 1930 and 1960 to 1990" (Internet Release date: March 9, 1999), obtained on 4 July 2002, was also the source of information in the following section of this paper (HYPERLINK http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab01.html http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab04.html).

[3] I regret that I was unable to cover the experience of the Japanese immigrant women in Brazil in this paper due to lack of space and sufficient material. Brazil being alternative destination, as America became more exclusive, for Japanese immigrants after June 1908, there must be numerous stories awaiting to be told about the first generation women's experience, and later generations who returned to Japan as migrant workers, which I hope will be carried on by younger scholars in Brazil and Japan.

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____. (Forthcoming), "Shashin-hanayome-wa-naniga-mondai-dattanoka (Picture Bride: What was at issue?)".