Introduction

"I went back to Japan to find a bride. Neither of us knew each other beforehand. It was done by *miai* - visits to know each other, arranged by a matchmaker."

"I was deceived into marrying him."

"My wife didn’t know anything about it. If the parents like the man, it was arranged; that’s the way it was done in Japan."

"I didn’t know what kind of a place Canada was, I knew nothing about it."¹

"When I saw him for the first time, I thought his face was quite a bit nicer than in the photos. He was smiling a big smile . . . As for me, I wasn’t especially glad."²

". . . When we saw Victoria, I thought, what a beautiful place this is . . . I was terribly nervous, wondering what kind of man would come to meet me. He was good-looking, just like his pictures. But he didn’t have any brains at all. I was very sad; there was a lump in my throat."³

This paper is about real people - the Japanese women, like the three who witnessed above, who settled in Canada in the early years of Japanese immigration. These three pioneer Japanese women who immigrated to British Columbia, Canada in the early 20th century reacted rather differently when they first met their husbands. The latter two wives were “picture brides” and the impressions they expressed above on the first meeting of their future husbands reflect briefly the ultimate sacrifices they made in a new world.

In this paper I’ll reveal more about the extraordinary lives of these Japanese women - the picture brides - and investigate the period when the immigration of Japanese women was most influential to the growth and prosperity of the Japanese community as well as to the economic prosperity of the western Pacific coast province of British Columbia (B.C.).

*Note: Following Japanese custom, all names are presented with the surname first.*

Background Conditions

Japan existed in virtual isolation from the rest of the world until the second half of the 19th century when Western nations forced the country to open its doors. A revolution by
young samurai and the establishment of a new Meiji government (1868 - 1912) resulted in the introduction of dramatic socio-economic changes to Japan, particularly through the process of industrialization. 4 The Meiji Constitution of 1889, the Imperial Rescript of Education issued in 1890, and the Civil Code of 1898 all contributed to defining the gender ideology which the Meiji government attempted to impose on all Japanese. The values (customs and norms) of the feudal samurai were promoted by the government for the nation as a whole. Samurai customs and norms were promulgated among all other classes, including farmers, merchants and craftsmen, because for Japan to become modernized meant the 'samuraiization' of all the people of Japan. Through this process, primogeniture - the right of inheritance for the eldest son - was codified, and the house and the needs of the house were "more important than any individual member." 5 Rather than love and affection, filial piety and duty were to bind children to parents and wives to husbands. For example, too close a relationship between a wife and husband could be seen as detrimental to the house as a whole. 6 While marriage was increasingly viewed as an alliance between houses, men were considered to be superior to women, which meant that a Japanese woman was expected to obey first her father, then her husband, and later her son. 7 These gender roles were also firmly imbued through the education system. By the late Meiji era, the educational system became universal and centralized, with the introduction of six years of compulsory education and a school attendance rate of over 98% by 1903. 8 This educational system sought to train all young women to be "good Meiji women."

Japanese Immigration to Canada

Emigration of temporary migrant workers began in 1885, when government-sponsored workers were sent to Hawaii under 3-year contracts. Migration to the mainland of the United States soon followed. 9 The rapid modernization of Japan had created economic havoc throughout the country, but the rural areas, where the land tax had provided most of the state's capital, were particularly hard hit. Furthermore, the importation of cheap raw materials together with the process of industrialization contributed to the destruction of cottage industries. Within this context, both the Japanese government and the populace believed that emigration of migrant labourers was one viable solution to the problems of poverty and dislocation. 10

The early Japanese immigrants to Canada primarily were temporary migrant workers and predominantly males. A few women accompanied their husbands and some joined them later. Some men returned to Japan to marry or visit temporarily; some produced children and then returned to Canada.

This emigration period of migrant workers - or wataridori (bird of passage) between
1880 and 1908 has been identified as the first stage of Japanese immigration to Canada. As was the case with other immigrants, such as the Italians, the goal of the Japanese was to work hard, save money, and return home with greater financial security. In most cases, however, these dreams were frustrated by the low wages they received, the severeness of their labour, and their miserable living conditions. Also only men, leading lonely lives in an unfamiliar, predominantly male society, often squandered their earnings on sake, women, and gambling.

While the sojourner pattern of immigration was similar to that of other groups who emigrated to Canada, the Japanese (together with the Chinese) faced far greater levels of racism than did most European immigrants. In British Columbia, which was the primary destination of Japanese and Chinese workers to Canada, there was particularly strong animosity. White British Columbian citizens argued that Asian immigrants (except for certain B.C. legislators, few seldom distinguished who were Japanese and who were Chinese) were "inassimilable" and resented them because they undercut the wages of white workers (the Asians were willing to work cheaper). While there had been violent anti-Asian incidents in B.C. since the 1880s, growing hostility to increasing Asian immigration led to a major riot in Vancouver in 1907. Mob violence during the riot focused on Chinatown and the Japanese sector on Powell Street. In the aftermath of the "Vancouver Riot of 1907", the Canadian government capitulated to B.C. pressure to limit Japanese immigration by entering into the Lemieux-Hayashi Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1908, which limited the number of labourers entering Canada to 400 per year. Thus, the year 1908 marked the beginning of the second stage of Japanese immigration.

The Gentlemen’s Agreement decreased the number of male immigrants, but accelerated the immigration of women. Some were wives (left behind in Japan by their earlier immigrating husbands) accompanied by their children, but the majority were picture brides. Japanese men in B.C., the majority of whom had reached marriageable age and had been unable to achieve their goal of returning to Japan with sufficient capital to purchase some land or to begin a small business, sought wives. They hoped that their lives would become more comfortable and that they could achieve their dreams sooner. The arrival of these women brought about a tradition from wataridori labouring overseas to more long-term settlement. Although many still hoped to return to their native land, as the second generation grew up, Japanese families became permanent residents.

The picture bride system was a practical adaptation of the traditional Japanese marriage custom. Marriages were family affairs; decisions were made by the heads of the two households through intermediaries, nakodo or baishakunin, and the principals were rarely able to get acquainted before marriage. In the case of the picture bride marriages,
photographs were exchanged, but beyond that there was little communication. Japanese government regulations stipulated that the name of the bride be entered into the husband’s family registry six months before the passport application, and the bride could not be more than thirteen years younger than the groom. These proxy marriages usually worked well and fulfilled an important function at that time. But it was obviously not without serious defects. Adachi Ken has aptly described the implications of the shashin kekkon (photo marriage) system for Japanese women as follows:

Many of the women who wanted to get married were those who didn’t seem to be able to get married in any other way, and many were not of the most desirable type for marriage. It is said that girls with great big ugly moles on their chins would hide the lower part of their faces with fans, and in that way give the impression of looking very well. Old men would have their pictures touched up so that they looked years younger . . . Men would put on their best collar-shirts and Sunday suits to have their pictures taken when in reality they put on such clothes only once in several months.

By 1924, 6,240 picture brides had arrived in Canada. The visible increase of Japanese immigrants and the influx of their children into the B.C. school system generated growing concerns and complaints, so that the Canadian government instituted a revised Gentlemen’s Agreement in 1928, which implemented a drastically reduced quota of 150 per year, including women and children. As part of this Agreement, the picture bride system was also terminated.

Women of the Meiji Era

The pioneer women who emigrated to Canada had been educated at girls’ high schools that were distinctly oriented toward the cultivation of qualified brides and wise mothers in their families and villages. Through the educational system of the late Meiji era, the women were socialized and educated to become the stable core of family and society. Many of the picture brides were better educated than the average Japanese girl and than their future spouses, having graduated from girls’ high school (jogakko). Not only domestic skills such as sewing and cooking but manners too were an important part of the curriculum, along with academic courses. The whole school system may have been labelled a “bridal school”, or hanayome gakko in this sense. These women had been taught, and trained, through sewing, cooking, flower arrangement, tea ceremony, koto and shamisen music, classical dance and calligraphy, that the ideal women was modest, elegant, tidy and courteous.

Did the emigration of the picture brides occur simply as the obedient behaviour of well-trained brides and daughters? Certainly some women emigrated in obedience to the dictates of the family. The vast majority, however, played a more active role in the decision to marry and emigrate to “amerika”. For many, this choice was confined by the limited
available options to Meiji women. Recognizing that spinsterhood was socially unacceptable within Japanese society, many chose to become picture brides. Some women felt that emigration gave them the opportunity for marriage which they believed would not otherwise be available to them. For example, women who were perceived as over-aged for marriage, or who were divorced, or women like Ms. Ishikawa Yasu who considered herself physically unattractive and had better go overseas, might “choose” to become picture brides:

“As you see, I’m not good-looking, and even among my brothers and sisters I’m the plainest. That’s why there was no talk of marriage for me when I came of age. At the time, every girl got married by the age of 20. I thought that with my looks, nobody would ever marry me in Japan, and that I’d better go overseas. So I came after making up my own mind. I wanted to work very hard and make money. I thought, I can do it if I go to Canada . . .”

Similarly, Ms. Nakamura Tami believed her chances for marriage were low for the reason she explains as follows:

“So when I graduated I was like everybody else; I took lessons in sewing and the koto (a Japanese harp). If I started wanting to go overseas, it was because of a silly reason. I’ve never told anybody about this before, but . . . It’s because I wasn’t good-looking. That isn’t very flattering to my husband, but there it is. Besides my face, there’s my frizzy hair, as you see, and it’s dreadful. It’s thin now, so it isn’t noticeable, but it’s terribly kinky. When I was a young girl in Japan, the fashion was smooth upswept hair; they had different pompadour styles, and my hair wasn’t right for any of them. I suffered so much, I got to feel that I couldn’t get married, and that’s why I started wanting to go overseas.”

The extent to which remaining single was not a viable option for many of these women is seen most starkly in the fact that a number of ex-samurai class women who had been married, divorced, and sent back to their natal homes were subsequently urged to marry a peasant who had emigrated. These women were willing to become picture brides, and to marry far below their class, rather than remain single.

Other women’s decisions to emigrate as picture brides can be interpreted as more active, positive choices, although these were still made within the context of limited alternatives. Many picture brides had been daughters of well-situated families, too independent to agree to marry the eldest sons who would have been chosen for them. Such marriages would have entailed subservience to a mother-in-law and possibly a number of sisters-in-law, an unimaginable fate for a spirited, adventurous, strong-willed women. For many of these women, the decision to emigrate also reflected a desire for excitement and adventure, a wish to move beyond the confines of their present lives. Makabe Tomoko provides evidence of such reasoning from the life of Ms. Ishikawa Yasu:

Mrs. Yasu Ishikawa’s home village, Yuki-cho is located in a mountainous area (of Hiroshima Prefecture) . . . From this area, you see nothing but mountains. The temperature drops by several degrees, and the atmosphere is completely different from that of the coast . . . You have a sense of being shut in, enclosed by mountains. It is, therefore, not surprising to hear Mrs. Ishikawa say, “There was almost no overseas emigration from the Yuki-cho area, . . .”
Mrs. Ishikawa, who had the "weird ambition" of wanting to go overseas to a place where nobody from the village of Yuki had ever gone (and after her, none ever did), has certainly led an exceptional life.39

While many picture brides may have defined their decision in these terms, they were nonetheless emigrating as the wives of specific men - men whom they had never met, and with whom they were often very disappointed upon arrival in B.C. The majority of these picture brides had agreed to marriage after merely viewing a photograph and reading letters, which were often written by better educated friends of their future partners. Not surprisingly, Japanese men seeking wives exerted considerable effort to present themselves in the best possible light, particularly as attractive, wealthy, well-educated prospects who had taken on the North American emblems of successful manhood. Thus, their letters to their future brides often contained rosy stories of their living conditions, and the enclosed photographs often showed prospective husbands wearing black suits, white "high collar" shirts, and at times a homburg. It was believed too, that some men had posed in front of a mansion or even the Hotel Vancouver (the most luxurious in the city at that time), implying that they either lived in or owned the property.

After waiting approximately a year while the necessary papers were processed, after receiving the boat fare from their groom, and after an toilsome voyage of many days across the Pacific the picture brides arrived in the port of Victoria, B.C.'s provincial capital. Apparently, some men sent at least 100 yen - roughly equivalent to 100 Canadian dollars at the time - or 200 yen, including money for preparations, so that the amount can be estimated at an average of 150 yen. Clutching the exchanged photographs, the men and women searched for their mates. While many groaned with disappointment but nonetheless accepted their fate, a few refused to disembark and sailed back to Yokohama. The refusal of some brides to accept their arranged partners is an often told story, but these rejections cannot be confirmed for obvious reasons - the incorrigible brides have disappeared and the abandoned grooms have been too proud and ashamed to admit what had occurred.

The picture brides who remained in British Columbia faced isolation and hard work. While some lived in urban areas, many were taken to remote lumber camps, saw mill towns, fishing villages, and wilderness farms in the Fraser Valley (a fertile farming area situated due east of Vancouver; bordering both sides of the Fraser River), and the Okanagan - an area in the centre of the province, approximately half way between Vancouver on the coast and the Canadian Rockies. Here they often faced harsher economic conditions than those to which they had been accustomed in Japan. Ms. Suzuki Moto recalled her first impression of her new home:

*When I came [in 1925], it was like a wild field or like in the mountains. The grass was this high [hip-high]. There was a boardwalk around the house and the grass was so long it swayed from side to side. It looked like such a deserted wild place, like where foxes might be living. I'm from farm country, but even*
near my village I’d never seen a place like this. Back home we used to have a little storage shack in the
field; I felt as though I were living in that shack. I didn’t know anybody. And then, too, compared with
my native place, it was cold. I’d never seen snow at home.”

In addition to facing poverty, isolation and strange surroundings, Japanese immigrant
women were expected to take on back-breaking labour. Women who emigrated in the early
years of the century faced particularly daunting tasks: many became responsible for car-
ing for the daily needs of as many as 40 Japanese males, who were working in the lumber-
ing or fishing camps. This involved not only cooking many pots of rice, miso soup, dried
fish, and vegetables, but also laundering work clothes covered in pine pitch or reeking fish-
erman’s clothes, using washboards, and hauling pails of water. Other women, living in ur-
ban areas, ran boarding houses, and their tasks included cooking, changing linen, and do-
ing all the laundry.

The birth of children added to the already heavy burdens of these Japanese women. If
they were fortunate, they were attended by midwives, often in their lonely wilderness
shacks. This childbirthing experience stood in stark contrast to the customary practices in
Japan, where women returned to their birth home to be cared for by their mothers and
covalesced for at least 3 weeks. In B.C., however, women usually resumed their daily
labours within a week of giving birth, strapping their babies on their backs, or leaving
them alone at home in their wicker basket cots. Traditionally, grandmothers would care
for the young and more affluent families hired wet-nurses and maids. This type of assis-
tance was sadly lacking in B.C. During the early years of settlement, however, children
were often sent to Japan to be cared for by their relatives so that mothers could continue
to work. Others were sent back to Japan when they reached school age in order to obtain
an education, even though a Japanese school, following the curriculum of the Ministry of
Education in Japan, was established in Vancouver in 1906. In later years, as the goal of re-
turning to Japan appeared increasingly remote or ill-advised, children were sent to Cana-
dian schools and received additional education at Japanese language schools. By 1921, the
curriculum at the Vancouver Japanese School focused exclusively on language instruction.

Whether their husbands were worthy or not, most Japanese picture brides behaved as
good, biddable wives, as proper Meiji women were expected to and as they had been
trained in Japan. However, while most Japanese women may have been obedient to their
husbands, they were certainly not passive individuals. They actively sought to improve
their lives, and more particularly, the lives of their children. While racism limited the type
of jobs Japanese women could engage in, many did take on paid work available to them. A
number of women laboured in fish canneries, in lumber camps as cooks and laundresses, in
white homes as housemaids, in clothing factories, and in their own homes sewing. They
carefully saved to purchase small dry-cleaning and alterations shops, corner convenience stores, or rough, uncleared farm land in the Fraser Valley. Hence, there was a trend to reach temporary economic stability and consolidate their financial position.\textsuperscript{26} The driving force for permanent homes was most often their children's educational needs. The land that was purchased at such sacrifice, unfortunately, was seized by the Canadian government in early 1942 and sold for a pittance.\textsuperscript{26}

Some Japanese picture brides were willing to move well beyond women's traditional roles, but unfortunately this often came as a result of facing early widowhood. Many Japanese faced the dangers of working as fishermen, while the majority of male Japanese immigrants were engaged in hazardous unskilled work in forestry, in mining, and on the railway.\textsuperscript{27} The wives of these men had to live with the constant worry that their husbands might be killed or injured on the job. As well as the personal loss, the death or injury of the main breadwinner obviously had major financial implications. While some widows married their late husband's sibling, many more married bachelors, who were relieved of having to go through the expense and the complicated procedure of obtaining a picture bride. Others never bothered to remarry. Returning to Japan was rarely an option, since their impoverished families there would have been unable to support them. Rather, as was the case with most widows in Canada, they struggled to survive in a society which assumed that all women were or should be financially supported by men.

While Japanese widows faced major financial hardships, some married women also faced significant difficulties. Wives were expected to adhere to the Meiji gender creed and remain subservient to their husbands. Like many Canadian women, some had to deal with physical abuse from their male partners, an aspect of Japanese pioneer society that is rarely mentioned. Meiji husbands expected absolute obedience. Thus, a woman who objected to any decision that her husband made would be perceived as undermining his hierarchical authority. As well, the frustrations of Japanese men, working at poor jobs at low wages and suffering racial slurs and insults, were often vented on members of their families. After indulging in sake, some husbands beat their wives. In the face of physical abuse from their husbands, most women quietly bore their shame and pain. To reveal the family secrets to relatives or friends would have been unthinkable.

Those few Japanese women who refused to put up with domestic violence, and those widows who could not manage to support their children had few options. Absence of primary control - the extended families of most of these women lived in Japan - tended to add to the problem of domestic stability, "since the young couple were now left to their own resources after years of a regimented life" in Meiji Japan.\textsuperscript{29} Also, the racism of the host B.C. society meant that most of the limited public and private welfare services of the early 20th
century were not accessible to them. As a result some turned to Christian missionary organizations. The missionaries hoped that foreign girls and women would assimilate the values of Canadian culture and in turn would raise their children in Christian and Canadian homes. Despite the declared intention of the missionaries, and even though it was considered a social disgrace among the Japanese to seek assistance outside the Japanese community, some Japanese women did make use of these Christian organizations as a refuge from poverty and abuse.

While some Japanese wives demonstrated through their survival abilities under difficult conditions that they were more than docile, obedient wives, a minority of picture brides rebelled more dramatically against the precepts of Meiji womanhood. Nevertheless, most did not. The majority of Japanese picture brides who did move beyond accepted roles did so for traditional reasons, such as the willingness of certain women to take on non-traditional work to further the interests of their families, particularly their children. In their relationships with husbands and children, most picture brides appear to have learned their lessons well and fulfilled their roles as subservient “qualified brides and wise mothers.” Their lives were difficult, with strenuous exhausting work, inside and outside the home. While many worked alongside their husbands, or in some form of paid labour, some were forced to take on most or all of the responsibility for keeping their families together. This was certainly true for women who were widowed. Some married women also faced other difficulties, as their male partners continued the dissipated lives that they had led in their early years and continued to gamble and drink.

Many dedicated, devoted mothers struggled single-handedly to provide stable homes for their children. It was probably only when they began to raise their children from birth, that they could express unconsciously, in love for their children, a considerable part of the drives that otherwise might have been expressed in marital relationships. They could give to their child, especially if he was a boy, thoughtful and sympathetic attention throughout his infancy, childhood and adolescence, catering to his new wants. Even so, many women who arrived from Japan, were hard-working, uncomplaining working-class or farm wives, taken out to the fields where they laboured and continued to do so after the birth of their children, preventing them from giving their children the care and attention they needed.

Notwithstanding, for all Japanese women, total obedience and self-denying servitude were the highest virtues. Search for, or preoccupation with one's own happiness was sheer self indulgence. Many strove to behave as they had been taught, and succeeded in leading what appeared to the outsiders as exemplary lives. Privacy is treasured in Japanese Canadian society, and few publicly flaunted their independent thinking or behaviour.

It was the arrival of the Japanese wives, however, that broke up a tendency among the
immigrants towards increasing immortality, and the wives were responsible for making more tolerable the incidence of degeneracy (gambling, drinking, visiting brothels, . . .), one of the characteristics of the initial stages of settlement in Canada, and the almost inevitable consequence of an immigrant population which was predominately male. And despite the often shattering disappointments, gruelling hardships and maladjustments, divorces or separations were few, unlike the situation in Japan where divorces were almost commonplace, depending more often than not on the whims of a domineering mother-in-law (who could send the bride away, and the husband - who could not question the decision - would have to agree to a divorce according to the obligations imposed on him by filial piety and the proper repayment of indebtedness to parents). 29

Conclusion

The Meiji gender ideology accurately played a central role in the lives of the picture brides - but it did not define the behaviour of all of them. While many of those who emigrated to Canada did so within the confines of gender roles which provided women with few alternatives to marriage, some actively chose the adventure and excitement they hoped to find in amerika, while others rejected the subservience that would be expected of them by their mothers-in-law if they had remained in Japan. Once in B.C., most appear to have obeyed their husbands, as good Meiji women were expected to do. The strength and endurance of the Meiji gender ideology is further revealed by the fact that those Japanese women, who had immigrated to Canada and had thereby escaped the influence of their mothers-in-law, became faithful adherents of the Meiji family codes, in the socialization of their own daughters and sons, and in their treatment of their future daughters-in-law. They often tyrannized their own daughters-in-law and made greater demands on their children than did the fathers. Moreover, while the nisei daughters were more exposed to Canadian social mores than their mothers, they were also taught at home and at Japanese school to cling strictly to Meiji morals and customs.

Besides the dictates of gender expectations, what also shaped the lives of most Japanese picture brides was the unending struggle with back-breaking labour, farm labour, and paid work in seeking to better their lives and the lives of their children. In their efforts to improve their children's opportunities, some were willing to move well beyond traditional "women's work." The various difficulties they faced stemmed not only from the lack of essentials of immigrant life, but also from the racism of Canadian society, which further limited their options and those of their children. While a few of the picture brides dramatically rebelled against both gender precepts and racist policies, most simply struggled and endured.
Whatever the problems, the “picture bride” system proved highly efficient. By the 1920s, the population structure of 1900, which consisted almost exclusively of young males, was improved profoundly. The birth rate, by that time was beginning to reach it’s maximum. In 1921, out of a total of 15,868 Japanese in Canada, 5,348 were female, and the Canadian born totalled 4,334. So not long after the “picture brides” began to arrive, a short-lived period of tranquility made the “family-building” phase viable. At this time, everywhere in the province a rise in the economic situation was accompanied by a rise in population, so when the immigration of Japanese women began, the prognostics for settling down in British Columbia were favourable.

The inpouring of the picture brides and the early “family-building” years influenced the internal organization and pattern of immigrant life. Settlement became more and more concentrated and stabilized on the Pacific coast of Canada and was accompanied by a lateral movement into occupations that promised a more secure future for all the Japanese immigrants.

_Unfortunately, the history of Japanese immigration to Canada, principally to British Columbia on the Pacific coast, centred largely on racial prejudice tendencies that already existed among the peoples of B.C. That suffering retarded their integration into the local community and coloured their whole existence in the province. In future I next hope to investigate the way Japanese Canadians were treated just before, during, and after World War 2. And furthermore, to reveal how the Japanese-Canadian population of today was influenced in subtle and powerful ways by the immigration of the Japanese._

_Notes_

3. Ibid., p. 106
6. Ibid., p. 26
7. Ibid., p. 37
9. D. Kaduhr, op. cit., p. 22
10. Ibid., p. 22
12. Ibid., p. 73
13. D. Kadauhr, op. cit., p. 25
15. Ibid., p. 88
17. D. Kadauhr, op. cit., p. 25
18. K. Adachi, op. cit., p. 92
21. T. Makabe, op. cit., p. 104
22. Ibid., pp. 130-131
23. Ibid., pp. 95-96
24. D. Marlatt, op. cit., p. 18
25. D. Kadauhr, op. cit., p. 26
27. D. Kadauhr, op. cit., p. 23
28. K. Adachi, op. cit., p. 90
29. Ibid., p. 89
30. Ibid., p. 91

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