The hibiscus is the national flower of Korea. From ancient times, Korea has been known as the Land of Hibiscus (kŭnhwa hyang or kŭn’yŏk), as hibiscus flowers adorned all corners of the country with varying colors and beauty. In modern Korea, the hibiscus has symbolized, in addition to its beauty, longevity and endurance as Korea struggled to cope with the dark days of Japanese colonial rule and the tragedies of the division of the country and of the fratricidal Korean War. Koreans nowadays affectionately call their land mugunghwa tongsan (land of hibiscus). It so happens that the hibiscus is the state flower of Hawai‘i as well, symbolizing the ever-present beauty of the Island State.

It was from the Land of Hibiscus that the first group of 102 Koreans, dressed mostly in their traditional costumes, landed at Honolulu harbor on January 13, 1903. Thereafter, approximately 7,200 Koreans came to Hawai‘i to work as laborers on sugar plantations. About a thousand of them moved on to the mainland United States in search of better opportunities while about the same number returned to Korea. Although there have been some important and significant studies made recently on certain aspects of Koreans in Hawai‘i, their history has not yet been fully studied, and many aspects of Korean experiences in Hawai‘i still remain largely unexplored.

It was to remedy this regrettable situation that the Center for Korean Studies of the University of Hawai‘i held two academic conferences—one in January 2000 and another in May 2001—inviting scholars from the United States and Korea. Selected papers from those conferences examining the achievements and experiences of Koreans in Hawai‘i are included in this book. As the Koreans in Hawai‘i have left rich and diverse legacies in the past hundred years, the works in this book scratch only the surface of Korean experiences in the Islands. It is hoped that the publication of this book will provide an impetus for more serious research toward a better and fuller understanding of the Koreans in Hawai‘i.

Like many immigrants who came to the United States, the Koreans in Hawai‘i encountered many adversities, such as racism, cultural shock, and economic exploitation and hardship, that were common to most immigrants. Unlike oth-
ers, the Koreans in Hawai‘i had to bear additional handicaps that were unique to them during the first half of the twentieth century. To begin with, numerically, the Koreans remained a small minority within the Hawai‘i community, as their number never exceeded 2 or 3 percent of the total population. This numerical disadvantage deprived them of the ability to exercise meaningful political or social power in protecting and promoting their rights and interests. Moreover, their tiny minority status made it extremely difficult for them to succeed in the economic sector, as they had been obliged to find their clients beyond their own ethnic group and compete against non-Korean businesses that had already established their roots in Hawai‘i ahead of them.

Second, the Koreans were latecomers to Hawai‘i. Arriving in the years between 1903 and 1905, they were the last group to reach Hawai‘i from Asia, except the Filipinos. As late starters, they discovered that many opportunities—economic and otherwise—had already been taken by Chinese and Japanese immigrants. Often they were obliged to content themselves with finding small niches not yet filled by their Asian counterparts.

The most serious handicap, however, was the loss of their country. With Japan’s forcible annexation of Korea in 1910, Korea was reduced to a colony, and the Koreans in Hawai‘i lost their home government. Without their own government to protect their interests, the Koreans in Hawai‘i became “international orphans,” so to speak, and there was no governmental authority that could look after their well-being or help redress their grievances. In addition, with the loss of the Korean nation, the recovery of Korean sovereignty became the foremost priority for most Koreans in Hawai‘i. Much of their energies and resources were directed toward nationalist activities to regain Korean independence. Had these energies and resources been utilized toward promoting their own well-being, the fortunes of the Koreans in Hawai‘i would have been drastically different from what they were. The original dream of the Korean immigrants was to make a quick fortune in Hawai‘i and return home. With Korea under Japanese occupation, however, they had no country to which to return and were obliged to set aside their search for personal wealth and happiness in favor of supporting the Korean independence movement.

In the course of dealing with their adversities and handicaps, Koreans in Hawai‘i encountered many difficulties. Unable to cope, many became victims of dysfunctional families and even lawless elements, adding considerably to the public burden. In the end, however, with their typical resourcefulness and indefatigable determination, Koreans were able to overcome their adversities, and in less than two generations they became the most successful minority group in Hawai‘i. By 1970, their median family income was highest among all ethnic groups in the Islands, according to a Hawai‘i state study.

In Chapter 1, “The Early Korean Immigration: An Overview,” Yong-ho Ch’oe
gives the historical background of the early Korean immigration to Hawai‘i, such as the conditions surrounding their arrival, problems they encountered, and how they overcame their adversities. Accurate statistics are fundamental to a correct understanding of the conditions of the immigrants’ life in Hawai‘i. The tables and figures in the chapter cover such issues as the number of Korean arrivals in Hawai‘i, their occupational backgrounds in Korea, gender and age distributions, hours and wages of plantation workers, number of Koreans working on sugar plantations, rate of juvenile delinquency, illiteracy, interracial marriages, and the like. One notable point of this chapter is that it challenges previous contentions about the social and occupational backgrounds of the Korean immigrants. Both Bernice Kim and Wayne Patterson, perhaps the two foremost authorities on Korean immigration, concluded in their important studies that most Korean immigrants to Hawai‘i were drawn from a nonagrarian urban background in Korea. Ch’oe, however, disputes this conclusion. Analyzing the contemporary socioeconomic conditions of Korea at the turn of the twentieth century and relying on job descriptions immigrants themselves gave to the immigration authorities in Honolulu, the author believes that a majority of the Korean immigrants came from a rural agrarian background.

American missionaries played a key role in persuading the Korean government to permit Koreans to migrate to Hawai‘i and in the initial recruiting of Korean laborers. Horace N. Allen, the first Western missionary in Korea, who later became the U.S. minister in Korea, was largely responsible for guiding the Korean emperor to give permission for Korean immigration to Hawai‘i. And when the initial Korean response to the call for labor recruitment was tepid, Rev. George Heber Jones, an American missionary working in the Inch‘ōn area, exhorted the congregations of the Naeri Church and others to go to Hawai‘i. Persuaded by Rev. Jones’s sermon, perhaps as many as half of the first group of 102 Koreans who went to Hawai‘i were members of the churches under Jones’s missionary charge, and they included some leading members of the Inch‘ōn-area churches. In Chapter 2, “Korean Immigration to Hawai‘i and the Korean Protestant Church,” Mahn-Yol Yi (Yi Man-yŏl) gives us a fascinating account of the role Korean churches played in Korean immigration and its impact upon the Protestant churches in Korea. As a large number of church members joined the Hawai‘i emigration, according to Yi, strong criticisms were raised by the Western missionaries in Korea as well as by the Korean church leadership, who feared that the Hawai‘i migration might drain off those whom they had painstakingly converted to Christianity only recently. Another noteworthy aspect of this chapter is that it shows how Christians among the Korean immigrants played leadership roles in political and social activities in Hawai‘i.

Arguably the most prominent and controversial person in Hawai‘i was Syngman Rhee, who used the Pacific islands as his home base for his political and
nationalist activities. “Syngman Rhee in Hawai’i: His Activities in the Early Years, 1913–1915” (Chapter 3) is a study of Rhee’s early work in Hawai’i. When Rhee arrived in Honolulu in 1913, the American Methodist Mission in Hawai’i was in deep trouble with island Koreans, as American Methodist leaders had publicly uttered remarks favoring Japanese control over Korea, causing a furor within the Korean community. Hoping to mitigate the Koreans’ anger, the Methodist Mission entrusted Rhee to take charge of the education of Korean youths in Hawai’i. Rhee’s initial work was enormously successful, and he introduced some innovative programs. Rhee’s collaborative work with the Methodist Mission, however, did not last long. By the end of 1915, Rhee broke away from the mission and embarked on educational work with Korean youths on his own. Yong-so Ch’oe examines the reasons behind Rhee’s break from the Methodist Mission. The year 1915 was an important turning point not only for Rhee but also for the entire Korean community as well. It was in this year that Rhee first ventured into the politics of the Korean community in Hawai’i. At the time, Rhee’s followers challenged the leadership of the most important community organization, the Korean National Association (KNA). At issue in the dispute was who would control the KNA, an organization that claimed virtual jurisdiction over all the Koreans in Hawai’i, acting as a semi-government agency, and who would lead the Korean nationalist movement against the Japanese occupation of Korea. Ch’oe analyzes the issues and causes of the 1915 feud, which splintered the Korean community in Hawai’i irrevocably and whose long-lasting impact is still being felt today.

In the early days of their immigrant life, Koreans had a serious problem with their public image. This negative image was partly of their own making, as lawless elements among them muddied the water, which in turn was compounded by the white-owned newspapers that often portrayed the Koreans with racist overtones as uncivilized and heathen. In Chapter 4, “Images and Crimes of Koreans in Hawai’i: Media Portrayals, 1903–1925,” Brandon Palmer examines crimes committed by Koreans in Hawai’i, how the major English-language newspapers handled them, and the ways in which Koreans tried to overcome their negative image. Unfamiliar with the Western legal system, some Koreans attempted to take the law into their own hands in dealing with those who violated their codes of conduct. There were also outright outlaws, who threatened the law and order of both the Hawaiian and the Korean communities, thereby besmirching Korea’s good name. With racial overtones, the two Honolulu newspapers—the Pacific Commercial Advertiser (now the Honolulu Advertiser) and the Hawaiian Star (now the Honolulu Star-Bulletin)—often characterized crimes committed by Koreans in a prejudicial way. It was indeed a formidable task for the Koreans in Hawai’i to overcome the stereotypical image of the
white newspapers while at the same time uplifting the spirit and morale of their compatriots.

On March 1, 1919, Korea exploded with the declaration of Korean independence followed by nationwide demonstrations in what is now known as the March First Movement. Inspired by Woodrow Wilson’s peace proposal in Europe, which called for “self-determination” in dealing with those people who were under alien rule, Korea proclaimed itself as an independent nation and the entire population rose up in peaceful, nonviolent demonstrations demanding the end of the Japanese colonial rule. Although the March First Movement failed to achieve its objective of regaining independence for Korea, as Japan mobilized its brutal force to crush the uprising, the movement had a far-reaching impact upon the Korean nationalist movement with the formation of the Korean Provisional Government in exile in China. The news of the outbreak of the March First Movement was received with great excitement by the Koreans in Hawai’i, who immediately moved to help restore independence to their homeland. In Chapter 5, “The March First Movement of 1919 and Koreans in Hawai’i,” Do-Hyung Kim (Kim To-hyŏng) and Yŏng-ho Ch’oe examine how Koreans in Hawai’i reacted to the March First Movement and worked toward regaining Korean independence. Hungry for any news from Korea, which was heavily censored by the Japanese authorities, the Koreans in Hawai’i relied mostly on reports appearing in the two major English-language newspapers in Honolulu, which carried relatively detailed accounts of events unfolding in Korea, in general sympathetic to Koreans while critical of the brutal way Japan handled the situation. The enthusiasm aroused by the March First Movement brought unity—though short-lived—to a Korean community that had been bedeviled by feuds.

No doubt the most serious problem the Korean community in Hawai’i encountered was division within, which led to factional strife. After Syngman Rhee challenged the leadership and gained control of the KNA in 1915, the Koreans in Hawai’i were deeply divided. Those who were forced out of the KNA leadership—mostly followers of Pak Yong-man—refused to cooperate with Rhee. Feuds and squabbles were periodic occurrences, plaguing the Korean community, undermining the spirit and morale of the Koreans in Hawai’i, and seriously tarnishing their image. In addition to the personality differences between the two leaders, the division involved divergence in opinions about the best strategy to win Korean independence—Rhee favoring diplomatic efforts to gain support of world opinion and Pak advocating military confrontation against Japan.

In 1931, the Korean community witnessed another bitter feud, once again over the control of the KNA. When the annual delegate convention was con-
vened in January, disputes arose over the proper qualification of the delegates who attended, which in turn led to physical violence. Again, Syngman Rhee was a key man behind the disputes as his followers tried to take over the meeting by force. In Chapter 6, “Local Struggles and Diasporic Politics: The 1931 Court Cases of the Korean National Association of Hawai’i,” Richard S. Kim gives us a perceptive analysis of the background of the dispute and the outstanding issues involved. Going beyond local politics, Kim sees the 1931 dispute as part of a transnational struggle over the control of the Korean nationalist movement that became increasingly important after the formation of the Korean Provisional Government in exile in Shanghai in 1919. The 1931 feud was in the end adjudicated by the U.S courts, in which Rhee suffered a humiliating defeat, resulting in considerable damage to his reputation.

The world witnessed in the 1930s a significant change in the international climate as Japan provoked war in China with the Manchurian Incident in 1931 and the Sino-Japanese war in 1937. The war in Asia gave rise to an anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States, which was welcomed by the Korean nationalists, who believed such a development might be conducive to the liberation of Korea from Japan. For such an eventuality, they reasoned that there was a strong need for all Koreans to unite their energies and resources for the common cause. Three main groups had vied for leadership in the Korean community. Founded in 1909 as a representative organization for all Koreans, the KNA came under the influence of Syngman Rhee in 1915 and was renamed Taehan’in Kyomin-dan (Korean Residents Association) in 1922, following an ordinance issued by the Korean Provisional Government. After the bitter court battle over the control of the association in 1931, Rhee lost influence, and in 1933, the Residents Association reverted to its old name, the KNA, now dominated by those who either had seceded from Rhee’s camp or had opposed Rhee all along. The second group was the Tongjihoe (Dong Ji Hoi), which Rhee organized in 1921 as his own support organization. Although after the 1931 court battle, some key members broke away from Rhee, the Tongjihoe remained staunchly loyal to Rhee throughout the politically tumultuous years he spent in Hawai’i. (The Tongjihoe even named Rhee as its president for life.) The third group consisted of followers of Pak Yong-man, who had lost the control of the KNA to Rhee in 1915. They organized the Tae Choson Tongniptan (Korean National Independence League) to provide support for Pak. But with the loss of their leader in 1928 when Pak was assassinated in China, it lost centripetal force. Although there were many other smaller organizations, these three groups formed the backbone of the Korean community. In Chapter 7, “The Unification Movement of the Hawai’i Korean Community in the 1930s,” Sun-Pyo Hong (Hong Sŏng-p’yo) offers us a detailed account of the very complicated and complex efforts to bring unity within the Korean community during the 1930s.
With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States entered the war against Japan. Japan, against whom Koreans had been waging a lonely struggle for more than three decades, now became the common enemy of both Korea and the United States. This was a welcome turn of events that Koreans had long awaited. Identifying their nationalistic aspirations with the military goals of the United States, the Koreans in Hawai’i offered their un stinting support for the war. But, to their horror and astonishment, the U.S. martial law authorities in Hawai’i declared Koreans “enemy aliens,” effectively classifying them as Japanese subjects—a humiliation no Korean could bear. Even though the federal government in Washington exempted Koreans living in the mainland United States from registering as enemy aliens, the military governor in Hawai’i refused to do so. Imposition of enemy alien status placed many restrictions on Koreans, such as in bank transactions, travel, and curfews. What were reasons for such a ruling? Was it racially motivated? What were the reactions of the Koreans? In Chapter 8, “How Koreans Repealed Their ‘Enemy Alien’ Status: Korean Americans’ Identity, Culture, and National Pride in Wartime Hawai’i,” Lili M. Kim offers a perceptive analysis of how Koreans came to receive enemy alien status, the rationale behind the U.S. officials’ justification of their decision, and the strategy Koreans in Hawai’i pursued to repeal enemy status.

As war clouds loomed over the Pacific with Japan’s expansionism, the fractured Koreans in Hawai’i and the United States began to realize the importance of presenting a united front to fight for Korean independence. In the spring of 1941, a convention of overseas Koreans was held in Honolulu, where delegates from various organizations in the United States and Hawai’i discussed strategy for their nationalist struggle against Japan and agreed to form an umbrella organization that would embrace all Korean nationalist groups so as to present themselves as united for the common cause of regaining Korean independence. This important organization was the United Korean Committee in America (Chae-Mi Hanjok Yŏnhap Wiwŏnhoe). The timing of the Korean unity could not have been more opportune, as shortly thereafter Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, inducing the United States to declare war on Japan. The American entry into the war raised the hope of Korean nationalists significantly as the United States now assumed the main burden of defeating the militaristic Japan. In Chapter 9, Ann Soon Choi gives the first serious study on the activities of the United Korean Committee in America and the various problems it had to deal with. Though launched with great optimism and enthusiasm, the Committee soon encountered serious issues such as the personal political ambitions of certain individual leaders and honest differences over the strategy for winning Korean independence. Organized as a showcase of unity, the United Korean Committee was caught in a bind. On the one hand, it had to demonstrate to the
outside world that Koreans were capable of uniting for a common cause; on the other hand, being a volunteer umbrella organization, it lacked any force to coerce those unwilling to abide by its rules and principles. Choi examines and analyzes the work of the Committee in promoting Korean nationalist activities in the United States and at the same time its attempt to coordinate its work with the Korean Provisional Government then in exile in Chungking, China. We learn from Choi’s study that in spite of many difficult obstacles, the United Korean Committee, under the leadership of a new generation of Korean Americans who, unlike the earlier generation, had received thorough American educations, worked strenuously and selflessly for the Korean nationalist cause toward achieving Korean independence as well as improving the lot of the Koreans in the United States.

Unfortunately, the cultural aspects of the life of Korean immigrants in Hawai‘i have not yet been fully studied. With regard to literature, for example, virtually nothing is known, with the exception perhaps of a manuscript of epic poems left by Yi Hong-gi. Arriving in Hawai‘i in 1904 to work as a plantation laborer, Yi Hong-gi wrote poems reflecting the harsh life he experienced as a plantation worker in a strange land and expressing his longing for the homeland. Written in the difficult Sino-Korean classical writing (hanmun), Yi’s poems have yet to be studied and introduced to the public. For the Korean immigrants in Hawai‘i, music and dance were an integral part of their life. Through music and dance, they could vent their frustration and regain cheerfulness after a hard day’s work. In music and dancing, they found solace and comfort from homesickness. Unfortunately, we do not have many records on music and dance. In spite of the paucity of data, we are fortunate in the field of dance that Judy Van Zile is able to present us with her study in Chapter 10, “Korean Dance in Hawai‘i: A Century in the Public Eye.” Through this valuable study, we learn of important contributions made by three key individuals in preserving and promoting Korean dance in Hawai‘i as well as many roles public performance of Korean dance played for the Korean and the Hawai‘i communities.

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Note: Romanization of personal names posed some problems, as many Koreans in Hawai‘i used their own ways of spelling their names. In principle, the McCune-Reischauer system is used as much as possible. For those whose spelling is different, the McCune-Reischauer romanization is given in parentheses at the first occurrence. For example, Hyŏn Sun spelled his name as Soon Hyun. Hence, his name is given as “Soon Hyun (Hyŏn Sun)” when it first appears.