



## REVIEW ESSAY

**History Reviving the Erased Voices of the Vanished**

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Jung Byung-joon. *Hyŏn aellisŭ wa kŭ ūi sidae: Yŏksa e hwipssŭllyŏgan pigŭk ūi kyŏnggyein* 현앨리스와 그의 시대: 역사에 휩쓸려간 비극의 경계인 [Alice Hyun and her days: The tragic marginal one swept away by history]. Seoul: Dolbegae, 2015. ISBN: 978-89-7199-651-5.

*Alice Hyun and Her Days* is an excellent new work that restores the life and thoughts of a Korean American socialist intellectual and independence activist and her family. It also presents the history of Korean social movements through elaborate historical research and analyses covering an extensive amount of data. The author, Jung Byung-joon, has previously published excellent papers and books on modern Korean history and has received important academic awards for his books, including *Hanguk chŏnjaeng: 38sŏn ch'ungdol kwa chŏnjaeng ūi hyŏngsŏng* [The Korean war: Confrontations at the 38th parallel and the formation of the war] and *Tokdo 1947* [Tokdo island 1947]. Jung also received an award in scholarly writing at the Korea Book Awards hosted by *Hankook Ilbo* [The Korea times] in 2015 for the book under discussion.

As with Jung's other work, this book is a superb academic achievement and an intriguing read that captivates its readers. It is a fine accomplishment that covers and arranges diverse data from various fields, applies analysis and inference to piece together a puzzle of contradicting descriptions and testimonies, and uses historical imagination to overcome any limitations and gaps due to a scarcity of materials. The author has a history of producing outstanding biographies or quasi-biographies. In 1995, he wrote his first biographical work, *Mongyang Yŏ Un-hyŏng p'yŏngjŏn* [The biography of Mongyang, Yŏ Un-hyŏng], followed by *Unam Yi Sŭng-man yŏngu* [A study of Unam, Syngman Rhee] in 2005. Then, in March of this year, he published *Alice Hyun and Her Days*. This book, however, offers a vastly different

perspective and has greater academic significance than the aforementioned studies. Yŏ Un-hyŏng (1886–1947) was one of the principal activists and politicians representing socialist ideals for independence in early modern Korea, and Syngman Rhee (1875–1965) was, needless to say, the dominant figure of Korean right-wing politics in the independence movements and early years of the Republic of Korea. In other words, Jung’s two aforementioned biographies focus on two politicians who represent the left and right ends of Korea’s political spectrum, respectively. In this regard, these works are typical prosopographies of political history.

Compared to these two prominent figures, Alice Hyun is an entirely different type of person. Her name would not show up in most biographical dictionaries, and even many experts would recognize her only as the daughter of Hyun Soon. Anyone who has learned of Alice Hyun likely came to know her through the last moments of her life. From 1953 through 1955, North Korea conducted an extensive purge of Communists who defected from South Korea. Many people, including Pak Hŏn-yŏng, the leader of the group, were charged with and executed on allegations of being “spies for the American imperialists.” Alice Hyun, who was from the United States, served as a key witness and was herself considered a spy. As such, she made an appearance at a critical moment in the history of North Korea, yet hardly anything is known about her personal life. Although she devoted herself to the Korean independence movement within Korean American society, her role was not clearly magnified. She worked at the information censorship unit of the U.S. military forces stationed in South Korea for a short period but was soon deported. During the 1953–1955 trial in North Korea, she was not even called to appear in court as a witness, and her own trial was not open to the public. Any testimonies from those who were supposedly involved with her in one way or another are either based on the trial records from North Korea or are sheer rumor and speculation.

Alice Hyun was a Korean immigrant to the United States and a Communist. In South Korea and the United States, she was ostracized for her political beliefs; in North Korea, she was deemed suspicious for having ties to the United States. Everywhere she went, she was viewed as part of a minority, on the fringe, marginal, or in between. Jung does his best to restore these aspects of her life as the marginal one or the one on the border. Yet, in contrast to the influential politicians he has written about in the past, few records are left about Hyun’s life; her political persecution ensured that her record would be scanty, if not completely erased. Most of Hyun’s generation has passed away, and she did not leave much in the way of a personal record. To be more accurate, her life as the one lingering on the peripheries would

not have offered her many chances to express herself or speak out. Furthermore, her era was not one in which memories gently faded, but one that erased and expunged them. What is more, apart from the fabricated trial record, no materials or testimonies remain to attest to the last days of her life in North Korea.

Hence, instead of relying on the scanty firsthand material, Jung used testimonies, secondary historical sources, inference, and historical imagination to reconstruct Hyun's life. Transnational history that goes beyond the boundaries of people and nation has gained attention in recent years. Alice Hyun's journey is a prime, dramatic example of a transnational life, and not just due to twists of fate; rather, she was a brave woman who was not seized and consumed by fear and who was deeply committed to her beliefs and convictions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Jung has broken new ground in the prosopography of Korean modern history by tracing and reconstructing Hyun's life. This book enables the reader to look at history from the perspective of the marginal one, instead of the one belonging to the mainstream. To illustrate this, let me briefly summarize Alice Hyun's life as reconstructed by the author.

Alice Hyun was born in Hawai'i in 1903, the daughter of the Reverend Hyun Soon, an influential Korean Christian minister and independence fighter. Fluent in both English and Japanese, Hyun Soon was from a family that had produced famous interpreters for generations. He entered the government-run English academy in 1897 and then went to study in Japan in 1899. In traditional Korean society, interpreters in charge of translation and the hands-on business of trade and diplomacy accumulated a great deal of wealth. Alice Hyun was in her mother's womb when her parents decided to cross the Pacific Ocean and was born after their arrival in Hawai'i, making her a U.S. citizen. However, she came back to Korea in 1907, at age five, and studied in Korean schools, including what is now Ewha Womans University, until she departed for Shanghai in 1920 to reunite with her father.

Hyun Soon served as the deputy commissioner for the Ministry of Home Affairs and chairman of the Korean Commission to America and Europe in the Korean Provisional Government. He also participated in the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East in Moscow in 1922 after he had a falling out with Syngman Rhee—a leading pro-American and right-wing figure with the government—whom he had supported for a long time. Pak Hŏn-yŏng, who took asylum in Shanghai and devoted himself to the socialist movement, was a close friend of the Hyun family, so naturally he became acquainted with Alice (this tie ultimately led to her tragic end years later). Alice Hyun attended school in Shanghai and

Japan from 1920 to 1921; married Chung Chun, a Korean student from Kyōngsang Province, in 1922; and went back to Korea to live with her in-laws. However, she soon divorced and returned to Hawai'i, where she gave birth to her son, Wellington Chung. She attended college in New York in the 1930s and participated in the activities of the Hawai'i branch of the American Communist Party.

During the Second World War, Alice worked at the U.S. military intelligence agency in order to be directly involved with the anti-Japanese war effort. After Korea's independence in 1945, she returned to Seoul as a civilian employee of the War Department in the Civil Communication Intelligence Group, Korea (CCIG-K). She became associated with the Korean Communist Party and came into contact with Communists among the American soldiers stationed in South Korea. She was investigated by the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) of the 24th Corps of the U.S. Army for these activities and, in April 1946, was dismissed and deported by the U.S. military forces headquarters in South Korea. After coming back to Los Angeles, Hyun became involved in the progressive movement of Korean Americans with her brother Peter and her father, Hyun Soon, by engaging in the activities of a weekly Korean newspaper called *Tongnip* [Independence] and the Korean American Democratic Front. However, the Korean American progressive movement declined gradually and disintegrated. Alice Hyun and her comrades leaned toward supporting North Korea and thought they should take part in the historic opportunity to construct a socialist society. After painstaking efforts, she finally managed to enter North Korea in 1949 with her comrade Yi Kyōng-sŏn via the Czech Republic. She worked at institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in North Korea but was later arrested as an American spy. Alice was used by the North Korean authorities as a critical link between Pak Hŏn-yŏng and his followers to the United States during the purging process. To this day, how her life ended remains unknown.

From Hawai'i to Seoul, Shanghai, Japan, Kŏch'ang in Kyōngsang South Province, New York, Los Angeles, the Czech Republic, and North Korea, Alice Hyun's life was in constant motion. As this list of places attests, her trail ran transnationally, but her identity and life's goal centered on nation and motherland. Regarding North Korea as the utopia where revolutionary ideals could be realized, she went back to her motherland, despite all of her trials and tribulations. Having lived in the affluence of American society for decades, it could not have been an easy task for her, at first, to adapt to life in North Korea, where a socialist revolution and war were raging. Why did she long for the motherland so desperately?

To answer this question, to which Alice Hyun herself hardly provides any clue, Jung

analyzes and reconstructs the crucial web of relationships that surrounded her—that is, her family and the progressive movement that constituted her life’s work. In that sense, *Alice Hyun and Her Days* could easily have been titled *Alice Hyun, Her Family, and Her Comrades*, as it is a chronicle of four generations of the Hyun family, as well as a history of the progressive movement of radical Korean Americans. This choice by the author proves quite effective. For instance, apart from rumors that Alice Hyun was the first lover of Pak Hŏn-yŏng, not much has been known about their relationship thus far. Instead of pursuing the gossip surrounding Alice Hyun, Jung chose to analyze the political path of her father around the time their relationship started to form. Hyun Soon played a major role in the birth of the Korean Provisional Government in 1919 and was one of the strongest advocates of Syngman Rhee within the government. Yet, traveling to Washington, DC, as the chairman of the Korean Commission to Europe and America in May 1920, he came into conflict with Rhee on their stance regarding the independence movement, was dismissed in April 1921, and returned to Shanghai by way of Hawai‘i. Around this time, Soviet Russia declared that it would host the Congress of the Toilers of the Far East and announced its support for the Korean independence movement. Harassed by malicious rumors and vile propaganda generated by Rhee’s faction, and disappointed with the attitude of the United States, Hyun Soon sought to form ties with the Soviets and the Communists. In April 1922, Hyun Soon participated in the First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East in Moscow as the representative of the Delegation of Korean Christians and interacted closely with the Korean section of the Irkutsk Communist Party. Hyun Soon’s family naturally fell under his influence—Peter Hyun, Alice’s younger brother, became a member of the Revolutionary Youth Group in Shanghai. Pak Hŏn-yŏng, the representative of the Irkutsk Communist Party’s youth group, was also the leader of the Revolutionary Youth Group in Shanghai. It was natural for Alice to be inclined toward Communism and for the Hyun siblings to interact closely with Pak. At last, thanks to Jung, an account that offers a meaningful explanation for the relationship between Pak Hŏn-yŏng and Alice Hyun has been provided.

Though most of the Hyun family was involved in the progressive movement, Alice Hyun’s path—in particular, after the end of World War II—was in line with the strategy of the independence movement led by progressive Korean Americans in the United States. They attempted to directly engage in armed resistance against Japan, making enlisting in the U.S. Army or serving in an intelligence-related field the most realistic choice for them. Similarly, it was practical for Alice to become a translator in the U.S. Army’s intelligence unit in Korea.

Specifically, by looking at Alice Hyun's life until her defection to North Korea in 1946, Jung convincingly analyzes the process by which the progressive Korean American group in the independence movement, which started out as the U.S. branch of the Korean National Revolutionary Party, became radicalized and isolated, gradually transitioning into absolute supporters for the North Korean regime. The group's ideology and identity were anchored to the concept of nation or motherland. The site and center of real politics for them was the Korean peninsula, while the site of their actual residence was the United States. When independence was their goal, stages outside of the Korean peninsula were sufficient to be the center of their independence movement; however, after independence, living in the United States made them feel that they were not the main agents in the action. Eventually, after 1949, defecting to North Korea to participate in revolutionary work was something that a majority of this group, including Alice Hyun, wanted.

Reconstructing Alice Hyun's life through the activities, ideologies, and network of her family and comrades does, however, present limitations to explaining Alice's life itself. In particular, this approach is insufficient to describe how Alice lived and thought as a minority immigrant and female intellectual. Let me go over a few shortcomings of the author's narrative, one of which was the issue of language. English must have been a foreign language to Alice, unlike to her brothers, Peter and David. Although born in Hawai'i, she moved to Korea at age five and was educated under the colonial government until her late teens, and she subsequently attended school in Shanghai and Japan. Could it be that she tried to major in English, despite having a lot of trouble with grammar, as an effort to overcome this limitation? The fact that she could not manage to finish college may symbolize the failure of her efforts to make herself heard in American society.

In fact, Jung makes a great effort to explain Alice Hyun's life as an individual. The most important element in a woman's life at the time was marriage. In an earnest attempt to find out more about Alice's husband, Chung Chun, the author went through the alumni directories of Japanese universities and managed to establish that Chung Chun was in fact Chung Pong-gyun, who took part in the March 1st Movement in 1919. Yet the impacts of marriage, divorce, and the renunciation of motherhood on Hyun's life is not thoroughly explained. Let us imagine these aspects of her life in more depth.

Alice Hyun, who was married in Shanghai in 1922 to a man she met while studying in Japan, returned to Korea with her husband to her in-laws' house in Kōch'ang. Jung describes

Alice's married life through her brothers' accounts. Alice's brother Peter said that Chung Chun, being content with the old feudal way of life, continued to live as an indolent landowner who wasted away his time with drinking and entertaining. Alice's efforts to turn his life around were, apparently, of no avail. Alice's youngest brother, David, stated that she left her husband after finding out that he had a concubine. Yet Chung Chun is portrayed differently in other sources from the time, such as Korean newspapers. According to a *Dong-A Ilbo* [East Asia daily] article on August 6, 1923, the promotion committee for the establishment of private universities in the Kōch'ang branch introduced a touring team of lecturers that it had organized to speak about the purpose of establishing private universities in fourteen villages. The first name on that list is Chung Chun. In another article, on October 23, 1923, *Dong-A Ilbo* [East Asia daily] announced that the Kūmwon youth group based in the Kōch'ang area would hold a general assembly in the town of Wich'ōn for its revival, the chairperson of which would be Chung Chun. Around 1923, Chung Chun was not some man about town who idled away his life partying and drinking, as Alice's brothers suggested, but a youth influencer whose ability and potential were recognized by people in the local community.

If that is the case, what could be the reason that Alice split up with her husband? Another of David's testimonies presents a different possibility. The author does mention that Chung Chun, like many Korean students who left home to study abroad, may have already had a wife back home whom his parents had picked out for him, and it is likely that Alice was shocked to discover this fact during this period. It was not unusual for the son of a local aristocratic magnate to bring back home a pregnant "student concubine." This was, of course, a shock to the first wife at home, but the shock was beyond description for the newly wedded bride. Although Alice Hyun's father was an influential figure in the provisional government, Alice was still the granddaughter of an interpreter. In the eyes of an aristocratic family, a formal marriage with a *chungin* (member of the Chosŏn middle class, which consisted of petty bureaucrats and other skilled workers) was inconceivable, so Alice was probably treated as a concubine by the Chung household. She had no choice but to stay in Kōch'ang during her pregnancy, but she must have declared separation from her husband and returned to Shanghai afterward.

Yet she returned to South Korea and reunited with her husband in 1926. She became pregnant with a son during this period, but divorced her husband the following year and

returned to Hawai'i alone to give birth. Why did she reunite with her husband only to part ways again? Could it be that Chung Chun divorced his first wife in 1926 and asked Alice to come back? In 1927, Chung Chun became a low-level government official for Tongnae County in Kyöngsang South Province. His status and salary seem much too low for the son of an aristocratic magnate who had studied in Japan. Could he have chosen the job because he wanted to try to earn a living without financial support from his family in order to break away from their influence? Initially, Alice must have accepted Chung Chun's request, which led her to return to Korea and register their marriage. Although it is unclear why they split up again, Jung speculates that it might be because Alice could not bear living on the income that her husband—once an independence fighter—earned as a low-level bureaucrat under the Japanese Government-General. If she wanted to divorce him and not have her baby taken away from her, she had to leave before the baby was born, which meant she had to hasten back to Hawai'i. A series of bitter experiences from her marriage, including the birth of her baby and the divorce, could have been the triggers that pushed Alice to devote herself to the nation and the progressive social movement.

Meanwhile, what most attracts the reader's attention are Alice's final days. Unfortunately, despite Jung's efforts, this is something he could not quite capture. However, he carefully investigated and analyzed the trial transcript for the case against Pak Hön-yöng and those involved with the South Korean Workers' Party, the individuals who ultimately drove Alice Hyun to her bitter end. The author affirms that there is absolutely no chance that Alice was an American spy, or admitted to being one. By comparing the trails left by Yi Kyöng-sön, who was accused of being an American spy along with Alice, against other historical sources, one can see that the espionage activities produced in the trial were completely infeasible works of fiction. This means that the espionage charge against Pak Hön-yöng, mediated through Alice Hyun and Yi Kyöng-sön, was also fabricated. In fact, the trial record states that John R. Hodge, the commanding general of the U.S. Occupation Forces in Korea, gave direct orders to Pak Hön-yöng, the deputy prime minister and foreign minister of North Korea, is, as the author puts it, "an absurdly childish set-up" (301). It was perhaps inevitable that the North Korean authorities came up with such a weak scenario, since they lacked proper information and knowledge on the organization of the U.S. military and intelligence agency. Jung evaluates this trial as "the result of a power struggle that occurred in the course of finding the scapegoat to put the blame for the war and reorganizing power structure in the aftermath of the war" and "a North Korean version of a witch hunt," which did

“not display the slightest political rationality or tolerance” (320–321).

*Alice Hyun and Her Days* contains many stories about Alice Hyun, her family, and her comrades, mostly people for whom even the slightest traces have faded. As Korean progressives, they were driven out of and persecuted in the United States as alleged Communists; in North Korea, which they believed to be their true motherland, they were either executed or put under constant surveillance on the charge of being American spies. Wellington Chung, Alice Hyun’s son, traveled all the way to the Czech Republic in 1948 to follow his mother to North Korea, while he was attending medical school in the United States. However, Alice was arrested by the North Korean authorities and suddenly vanished, which left Wellington stranded, able neither to return to the United States nor to enter North Korea. Even after he finished medical school in the Czech Republic and became a surgeon, he tragically ended his life by committing suicide.<sup>1</sup>

Jung Byung-joon never portrays Alice Hyun as a helpless victim. She strived to do her best in every moment of her life and acted according to her ideals and will. Though the wheel of history has crushed and left her, it is the historians’ task to find the traces and restore them. In that sense, this book serves as a great exemplar for what a historian of this era should do.

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### **Note**

- 1 Byung-joon Jung co-authored an English article on Wellington Chung that could provide further information for English-speaking readers (Hlasny and Jung 2014).

### **References**

- Hlasny, Vladimir, and Byung-joon Jung. 2014. “Wellington Chung: Child of the Korean Independence Movement Crushed by Cold War Regimes.” *Korea Journal* 54 (4): 106–146.

