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A new documentary from filmmaker JINYOUNG LEE traces the lives and legacies of Hawai'i's early Korean immigrants and the stories that still shape families today.

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A new documentary from filmmaker JINYOUNG LEE traces the lives and legacies of Hawai'i's early Korean immigrants and the stories that still shape families today.

ALOHA and ARIRANG

Story by SACHI MORTON // Photos courtesy PAWEŁ NUCKOWSKI AND SONGS OF LOVE FROM HAWAII

Filmmaker Jinyoung Lee didn't originally come to Hawai'i planning to make a feature documentary about Korean American history. She arrived thinking the move might last a year, maybe two, giving her and her now-husband ample time to enjoy the sun, waves and beauty the islands have to offer. Instead, Hawai'i reshaped her life — and eventually led her to create *Songs of Love from Hawai'i*, which is now streaming on Amazon Prime Video.

The film explores early Korean immigrant life in Hawai'i through history, music and personal narrative, highlighting stories that often sit just outside mainstream textbooks. It also arrives at a meaningful moment: Jan. 13 is Korean American Day in the United States, commemorating the arrival of the first Korean immigrants to Hawai'i in 1903. For Lee, the timing aligns directly with the themes in her work and the community whose stories anchor it.

"Seeing the world through an immigrant's eyes, and witnessing how diverse cultures become family, lies at the heart of this film," she says.

Lee's path to filmmaking began long before this most recent project. She grew up in Korea and moved to the United States as a young adult. Her early professional life was in journalism and broadcasting, but over time, her focus shifted from reporting news to preserving memory. That transition led her to start NOW Production Films, a nonprofit studio dedicated to capturing stories at risk of being forgotten.

"I also realized that belonging is not defined by the country printed on a passport," says Lee. "It comes from the people we laugh and cry with, and the stories we share. In that sense, I now embrace both Korea and Hawai'i as my homes. Carrying two homes has become a source of strength and pride, rather than conflict."

The idea for *Songs of Love from Hawai'i* emerged from time spent in archives, libraries and family living rooms. She encountered images of picture brides, plantation workers, and families navigating migration, identity and loss while building new lives in Hawai'i. Those photographs and oral histories carried emotion, but they also carried silence, gaps where stories had not yet been fully told.

"Because of (those families), the work never felt like a burden," Lee says. "Instead, it became a deeply humbling and grateful experience — one that allowed me to live, in some small way, alongside that earlier generation."

The film took several years from concept to completion. That long timeline reflects both research depth and the reality of working with a small production team. Lee describes the process as careful, deliberate and grounded in respect for the people

whose histories she was documenting. The project also built upon interviews she conducted for her earlier work, *Words of Wisdom from the Rainbow State*, which introduced her to descendants of early immigrants and eventually pointed her toward the generation before them.

Songs of Love from Hawai'i brings together three central threads: the broader history of Korean immigration, the life of picture bride Lim Ok Soon, and a tribute to those who lived in the Kalaupapa settlement on Moloka'i. The structure is designed to move between large-scale history and intimate personal experience, making the story accessible whether viewers come from Korean heritage or not.

"I chose this structure because I believe history is shaped not only by large movements, but by individual lives," she says.

Kalaupapa, in particular, presented chal-

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Filmmaker Explores Korean Life In The Islands



(Left) The film *Songs of Love from Hawai'i* was screened at the Hawai'i International Film Festival and aired on PBS Hawai'i. (Above) Lee converses with violist Richard Yongjae O'Neill during a shoot in Kalaupapa, Moloka'i.

PHOTOS COURTESY DEOGHYUN KIM

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enges. Many people who lived there were never formally documented, and archival records remain limited. Lee spent time searching both locally and internationally, and she credits librarians, archivists, researchers and families for opening access to personal albums and memories. That co-operation shaped not only how the film was made, but why it feels so personal.

Music is not simply an element in the background of the film. Rather, it drives the emotional core. Lee originally trained as a cellist, and although she eventually pursued filmmaking instead of performance, her musical foundation remains evident in her storytelling style. In the film, music becomes a bridge between past and present, linking historical narrative with lived emotion.

The project features artists Keola Beamer, Ignace "Iggy" Jang, Chee-Yun Kim, Richard Yongjae O'Neill and others. Their performances carry history forward not through lecture, but through sound. Lee selected both musicians and musical pieces intentionally, seeking performers who could convey depth, sensitivity and connection to the subject matter.

"Even so, I have always believed that music can communicate emotions that words cannot fully reach," she notes.

One moment during filming stands out

strongly in Lee's memory. While shooting in Kalaupapa, musicians began performing *Aloha 'Oe*. Surrounded by landscape, ocean and history, the sense of time felt compressed, past and present layered closely together. Experiences like that reinforced her belief that art doesn't simply illustrate history; it can heal it, honor it and make space for reflection.

Audience responses have confirmed that impact. Some viewers have discovered connections to their own family histories

after seeing the film. Others have written to share how it reframed their understanding of Korean American experiences in Hawai'i. Lee also recalls moments when veterans and elders approached her after screenings to talk about memory, migration, identity, and the pride and grief intertwined within them.

The film has already screened at the Hawai'i International Film Festival and aired on PBS Hawai'i. Both milestones were meaningful, but PBS held special signifi-

cance because Lee taught herself much of filmmaking by watching public television.

"In the early cut, I struggled with the proper use of the Hawaiian 'okina, and Chuck Parker, a programmer at PBS, patiently guided us for more than six months so the film could meet broadcast standards," Lee recalls. "That process reminded me once again that this film was not mine alone — it was truly shaped by the community."

At its heart, *Songs of Love from Hawai'i* is about connection — between Korea and Hawai'i, between past and present, between the experiences of immigrants and the lives built by their descendants. It invites viewers to reflect on the people who came before them and on the ways love, sacrifice and resilience shape communities across generations.

For viewers discovering the film on Amazon Prime Video, Lee hopes it opens conversations at home, in classrooms and across communities. The story she tells is specific, but the themes — migration, belonging, memory and gratitude — extend far beyond one group or one place.

And as *Songs of Love from Hawai'i* reaches wider audiences, it remains rooted where it began: in Hawai'i, in archives and living rooms, and in the belief that history matters most when it is shared.

Learn more at therainbowwords.com.



Lee works closely with members of her sound team, including veteran sound engineer Pierre Grill (far right), during the recording of the film *Songs of Love from Hawai'i*. PHOTO COURTESY DEOGHYUN KIM