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Perspective article

The overseas expansion of Japanese dentists in the early 20th century: The case of a Japanese immigrant dentist in North China

Feng-Chou Cheng ^{a,b,c}, Ling-Hsia Wang ^{d**},
Chun-Pin Chiang ^{e,f,g,h*}

^a Chia-Te Dental Clinic, New Taipei City, Taiwan

^b School of Life Science, College of Science, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

^c Science Education Center, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

^d Center for the Literature and Art, Hsin Sheng Junior College of Medical Care and Management, Taoyuan, Taiwan

^e Department of Dentistry, National Taiwan University Hospital, College of Medicine, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan

^f Graduate Institute of Oral Biology, School of Dentistry, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan

^g Department of Dentistry, Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, Hualien, Taiwan

^h Institute of Oral Medicine and Materials, College of Medicine, Tzu Chi University, Hualien, Taiwan

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* Corresponding author. Department of Dentistry, Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, and Institute of Oral Medicine and Materials, College of Medicine, Tzu Chi University, No. 707, Section 3, Chung-Yang Road, Hualien 970, Taiwan.

** Corresponding author. Center for the Literature and Art, Hsin Sheng Junior College of Medical Care and Management, No. 418, Gaoping Section, Zhongfong Road, Longtan Township, Taoyuan 32544, Taiwan.

E-mail addresses: milkegg5452001@gmail.com (L.-H. Wang), cpchiang@ntu.edu.tw (C.-P. Chiang).

In the early Meiji period, Japan listed immigration as an important national policy and planned to immigrate Japanese people both domestically and abroad. From the beginning of the 20th century to 1945, Japan's immigration in the colonies particularly reflected its ambition of imperial expansion. From the Meiji period to the end of the World War II in 1945, Japan's immigration flows had two directions: overseas immigration and colonial immigration. The former began in the first year of the Meiji era (1868), with the main areas of immigration being North and South

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among the people subject to the military control.³ Moreover, Dr. Shirai's story shows that in his time, both Beijing and Tianjin were filled with active economic activities by Japanese expatriates. The profession of dentists and dental treatment activities also entered the places where Japanese immigrants settled along with them. In fact, the Tianjin Branch and the Beijing Branch of the Yokohama Bank of Japan were opened in 1899 and 1910, respectively. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that people living there might use checks as payment tools for transactions (including, of course, dental treatment fees).

Japan has been developing the Western modern medicine since the Meiji Restoration. Since the early 20th century, the Japanese have been accustomed to a lifestyle of the modern medical care (also including dentistry). As the number of Japanese immigrants in various places increase, Japanese dentists must also follow suit and develop overseas. The book "Dental practice management based on the Japanese spirit" published in 1940 specifically pointed out in the chapter "Expansion of dentistry to the mainland China": "If we don't promote dental hygiene, there won't be patients." The book also explained in detail the selection of the locations for opening a dental practice in Beijing, Tianjin, Qingdao, Nanjing, and Shanghai, the dental practice fees on the mainland China, the thoughts on Chinese people, the special attention to health in the mainland China, the reparation for expansion into the mainland China and subsequent changes, as well as the dental education of the mainland China, and the educational policy suited to present-day China.⁴ These all show that by the early 1940s, the overseas expansion of Japanese dentists (especially to the mainland China) was probably quite common.

In the past, research on Japan's early immigration policies rarely involved the level of medical immigration, let alone immigrant dentists. It is not known from existing

historical materials whether Dr. Shirai was drafted back into the army during the World War II, or whether he returned safely to Japan after the end of the World War II to continue his career as a dentist. However, the collection of historical materials from various sources has helped researchers to reconstruct the overseas immigration stories of Japanese dentists (such as Dr. Shirai) in the early 20th century, and to further explore the impact of the overseas expansion of early Japanese dentists on the development of dentistry and dental education in their places of residence. This will be one of the important research directions for the dental history in the future.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest relevant to this article.

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