



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

Received 22 March 2025

KEYWORDS

Overseas expansion;
Japanese immigrant
dentist;
Immigration policy;
Military dentistry

* 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, Jhongfong 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

America and Hawaii. The latter began from 1895 to 1945, and the immigration areas included Taiwan, Karafuto (present-day southern Sakhalin Island), Choson (present-day Korean Peninsula), Manchuria (present-day Northeast China), North China, and Central China. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Japan had successively carried out collective immigration led by the government, mainly agricultural immigrants, in colonial Taiwan, Karafuto, Choson, and Manchuria. Japan's immigration policy toward North China and Central China (the political, economic, and cultural center of China at that time) was mainly focused on industry, commerce, and free immigration, and these immigrants were mainly concentrated in the large cities.¹ As the number of immigrants increased, the original domestic social management systems of Japan (such as medical, education, and business systems) were also transplanted to the immigrants' locations. This study reported the story of a Japanese immigrant dentist in North China through the excavation and exploration of the historical materials.

In the past, the written records that people created and preserved for economic activities or legal acts (such as financial transaction bills, commercial transaction documents and contracts) have become the important first-hand historical materials for studying human social activities. This study found a check from the Beijing branch of the Yokohama Specie Bank of Japan. The front of the check was recorded that the check was drawn on December 28, 1925 and paid to Shirai Dental Hospital for 1.5 dollars. The stamp showed that the check was cashed on January 8, 1926 (Fig. 1A). The handwritten words on the back of the check showed the street name in Beijing (Fig. 1B). This means that someone paid Shirai Dental Hospital 1.5 dollars with a

check, perhaps a patient paying for his dental treatment fees through a check. This dental hospital might be opened in Beijing by a Japanese immigrant dentist. In addition, the so-called dental hospital at that time was equivalent to the current dental clinic. At that time, Beijing was translated into English as Peking.

Further research revealed that the "Name book of Japanese residents in North China" published in 1936 did mention a dentist named Otojiro Shirai who opened the Shirai Dental Hospital in the Japanese Concession in Tianjin at that time (Fig. 1C). Dr. Shirai was a native of Nara, born in 1891. In 1911, at the age of 20, he was drafted into the army as a medical soldier. He came to China in 1919 when he was 28 years old. His hobbies were fishing and smoking. He served as a dental officer for the Japanese army stationed in China in 1928 until he voluntarily retired in 1936. At the same time, he opened his dental clinic at his residence (in the Japanese Concession in Tianjin).²

In the case of Dr. Shirai, he might first go to Beijing on his own to develop his dental career. At that time, Japan continued to develop overseas, and because of the needs of the country, some immigrants with more urgently needed professions (such as medicine or dentistry) were recruited to serve for the army. There were similar examples in Taiwan and Southeast Asia at that time. Dr. Shirai was one of the earliest known military dentists in Japan. This also proves that Japan had the concept of the military dentistry very early on. According to the concept of the military dentistry, the mission of the military dentist, as often cited in directives, is usually expressed in somewhat the following manners including offering dental service for the preservation of dento-oral health and the prevention and treatment of dental diseases, injuries, and deficiencies

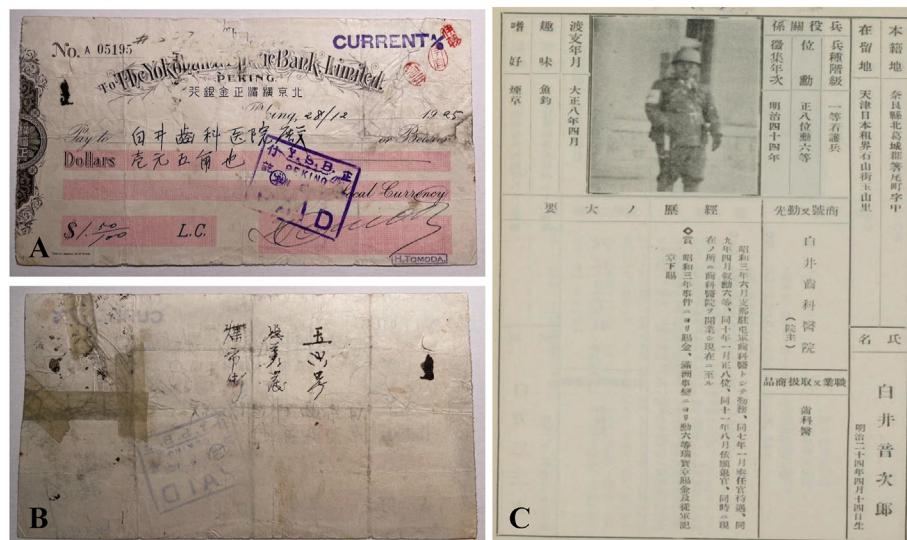


Figure 1 The historical materials related to Dr. Otojiro Shirai, a Japanese immigrant dentist in North China, in this study. On a check from the Beijing branch of the Yokohama Specie Bank of Japan, the front of the check was recorded that the check was drawn on December 28, 1925 and paid to Shirai Dental Hospital for 1.5 dollars. The stamp showed that the check was cashed on January 8, 1926 (A). The handwritten words on the back of the check showed the street name in Beijing (B). The photograph of this check was provided by "Classic Coins", a professional collector. Moreover, the "Name book of Japanese residents in North China" published in 1936 did mention a dentist named Otojiro Shirai who opened the Shirai Dental Hospital in the Japanese Concession in Tianjin in 1936 when he voluntarily retired from the army (C).

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 preparation 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.

Acknowledgments

None.

References

1. Chang SB. National policy company and the development of Japanese emigration - Manchuria development society and Taiwan development Company. *Bulletin of Taiwan Historical Research, NTNU* 2009;2:33–72 [In Chinese, English abstract].
2. Publisher for name book of Japanese residents in North China. *Name book of Japanese residents in North China*. Hebei: Republic of China: Publisher for name book of Japanese residents in North China, 1936 [In Japanese].
3. Snyder OP. What is military dentistry? *Mil Surg* 1953;112:13–5.
4. Shungo K. *Dental practice management based on the Japanese spirit*. Tokyo, Japan: Shungo Kage, 1940 [In Japanese].