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A dental clinic in a western painting work from an art exhibition in 1940: The story of a Japanese dental teacher, Dr. Isamu Sugiyama

KEYWORDS

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After the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki between China and Japan in 1895, Taiwan and Penghu entered a 50-year period of Japanese rule (1895–1945). As Japan established the modern science, technology, medicine, education, art, and other new fields in Taiwan and Japanese immigrants moved to various parts of Taiwan, new culture and new lifestyles gradually took root and developed in Taiwan.¹ During the Japanese colonial period, the Taiwan Art Exhibition began in 1927, with 10 sessions (1927–1936) sponsored by the Taiwan Education Association, and 6 sessions (1938–1943) officially organized by the Taiwan Government Culture and Education Bureau. In these 16 art exhibitions, there were more than 2000 paintings and works by more than 600 artists, forming a considerable amount of visual historical materials and historical memories.² Originally, the medicine and art were two parallel lines that were difficult to intersect, but new culture brought new possibilities of interaction. An art exhibition work became an important clue for the study of dental history. This study reported an art exhibition work of the Taiwan Art Exhibition, which led to a journey of exploring the Taiwan dental history.

A western painting work entitled “Landscape” by Hirouyuki Kakiyama living in Taipei City was selected for the 1940 Taiwan Art Exhibition (Fig. 1A). The painter depicted

the street scenery viewed from the second-floor window from the perspective of inside the house. The foreground was composed of curtains gathered to one side and the cast iron railings on the balcony, leading the viewers to look out the window at the street scene. Across the street stood a street lamp and a row of houses in an orderly manner. The building on the left was a traditional tiled roof structure that had not yet been westernized, while the house on the right was a western-style building with an open-air platform on the rooftop. On the platform, it could be seen that several light-colored clothes were propped up with poles for drying. In addition, on the second floor of the western-style house on the right, there was a vertical sign entitled “Sugiyama Dental Hospital” (equivalent to the current dental clinic) in Japanese kanji. On the front, there was a horizontal sign entitled Japanese romanization “SUGIYAMA”.³ This means that a dentist named Sugiyama once performed his dental practice here.

Through the excavation of historical materials, we found there was a dentist named Isamu Sugiyama, who run his dental clinic at the Kyomachi, Taipei City, in the name list of the Postal Life Insurance dentists published in August 1939.⁴ Moreover, there was a postcard published by the Seibanya Store which represented the Kyomachi Street scene in the form of a color drawing (Fig. 1B). Among the

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Figure 1 The historical materials and photographs related to Dr. Isamu Sugiyama and his dental clinic in this study. (A) A western painting work entitled "Landscape" by Hiroyuki Kakiyama living in Taipei City was selected for the 1940 Taiwan Art Exhibition. This art work hid a dental clinic called "Sugiyama Dental Hospital" (equivalent to the current dental clinic). (B) The color drawing on the postcard displayed the Kyomachi Street. There were some buildings with the same style as the building of the Sugiyama Dental Hospital in the western painting work. (C) The image of Dr. Isamu Sugiyama taken in 1926 was collected in the Taiwan Cultural Memory Bank. (D and E) Dr. Isamu Sugiyama's resume and appointment document from the Taiwan Government Taipei Hospital were collected in the Taiwan Historica. (F) An advertisement for Sugiyama Dental Hospital published in 1935 (second from the left) was collected in the National Taiwan Library. (G) According to the same street view on the Google Map in December 2024, there were some preserved buildings with the same style as the building of the Sugiyama Dental Hospital. However, the building that once served as the Sugiyama Dental Hospital no longer exists.

buildings at the Kyomachi Street, there were some buildings with the same style as the building of the Sugiyama Dental Hospital in the western painting work. Therefore, we speculated that the owner of the Sugiyama Dental Hospital mentioned in this article should be Dr. Isamu Sugiyama (Fig. 1C).

According to the Taiwan Historica Document Archives Query System and the Taiwan Personalities (1895–1945) Database, Dr. Isamu Sugiyama was from Kanagawa, Japan, was born in 1899, and completed his high school education in 1917. He graduated from the Japan Dental Medicine College in March 1923 and opened his dental clinic in his hometown in May of the same year. It lasted less than 4 months before he was forced to stop his dental practice due to the Great Earthquake in Japan. Then, he came to Taiwan to develop his dental career (Fig. 1D).

Early on, he served as an attending dentist in the Taiwan Government Taipei Hospital and as a lecturer in dentistry in the Taiwan Government Medical College from April 1924 to December 1925 (Fig. 1E). He then moved to the Japanese Red Cross Society Taiwan Branch Hospital and served as the director of the dental department for several years. Finally,

he chose to run his dental clinic at the Kyomachi, Taipei City (Fig. 1F). The Kyomachi was one of the busiest districts in Taipei City at that time, and Dr. Sugiyama's dental clinic was located near the Taipei Hospital. In 1939, there were 84 dentists operating dental clinics in Taipei Prefecture. Among them, 52 dentists were in Taipei City, including 4 at the Kyomachi Street.⁴ This indicates that the dental resources in Taipei City, where many Japanese people gathered at that time, are quite good.

Dr. Sugiyama was active in the dental field in Taiwan until the end of the World War II in 1945. In addition to serving as the vice president of the Taiwan Dental Association, he also participated in various dental activities, such as academic lectures, paper publication, dentist exchange activities among cities of Taiwan and between Taiwan and Japan, as well as public welfare oral health activities.⁵

Through the artists' brush, the scenes of a specific era (such as architectural features, scenic spots, and local customs and habits) are recorded truthfully. In addition to the artistic value, the artists' works are also valuable historical and cultural assets. As time goes by, people and things are no longer the same, and the building that once

served as the Sugiyama Dental Hospital no longer exists (Fig. 1G). However, amazingly, the artist's creation recreated the architectural appearance of Dr. Isamu Sugiyama's dental clinic, allowing future generations to acquire the opportunity to have a glimpse of its appearance.

Declaration of competing interest

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

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None.

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