

Dijeron que iba a levantar el dinero con la pala: a brief account of early Korean emigration to Mexico

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Abstract/ Resum/ Resumen

In 1905, over one thousand Korean men, women and children crossed the Pacific Ocean in search of a better future to the one that their homeland could offer at that time. Many of these travellers did not have any knowledge of Mexico at all, nor of the type of labour they were going to engage in, as mass Korean emigration out of the Asian continent had only begun three years earlier. For many travellers this was going to be a short term overseas labour experience. However, diverse circumstances of the period greatly influenced on the fortune of these people and turned them from the first Korean sojourners in Latin America into the first Korean settlers in Mexico. This is a brief account of their story.

El 1905, més d'un miler d'homes coreans, dones i nens travessaren l'Oceà Pacífic a la recerca d'un futur millor que la seva terra d'origen els podia oferir. Molts d'aquests viatgers desconeixien del tot Mèxic, inclús el tipus de feina a la que es dedicarien, seguint la massa emigrant coreana fóra del continent asiàtic iniciada tres anys abans. Per a molts d'aquests viatgers va ser una experiència laboral curta a ultramar. Diverses circumstàncies del període influïren sobre la fortuna d'aquestes gents que els convertiria en els primers coreans residents d'Amèrica Llatina i en els primers colons coreans en Mèxic. Aquest és un breu relat de la seva història.

En 1905, más de un millar de hombres, mujeres y niños coreanos atravesaron el Océano Pacífico en busca de un futuro mejor al que le ofrecía su patria en aquel tiempo. Muchos de estos viajeros desconocían totalmente México y las tareas que allí desarrollarían, pues la emigración coreana fuera del continente asiático había comenzado tan sólo tres años antes. Para muchos ésta sería una experiencia laboral de ultramar corta. Sin embargo, diversas circunstancias del período influirían sobre la fortuna de estas gentes convirtiendo a estos en los primeros residentes coreanos de América Latina. Éste es un breve relato de su historia.



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Keywords / Paraules clau / Palabras clave

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1. The background

Although the tacit norm in Korean society was that one ought settle and live in the land of one's ancestors, already in the nineteenth century there was a significant number of Koreans living on foreign soil. This was especially the case of Koreans from the northern area who moved to the adjacent regions of the Russian Far East and Chinese Manchuria after years of lean harvest (Patterson 1988, pp. 1-2).¹ At the turn of the century, however, political instability,

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1. The Qing dynasty of China had banned any foreign ethnic groups from settling in Manchuria through the Ordinance of Prohibition in Establishment (封禁令). Choson agreed to this decree, as it was in the country's interest to closely control tax revenues and safeguard the kingdom from foreign influence. As matter of fact, a penalty was enacted (越境罪) for stricter border control. Despite the existence of the latter, years of continuous natural disasters and agricultural failures obliged many Koreans to cross the border to work on more fertile Chinese soil. By 1875 the Chinese ban had been lifted and the Korean population in Manchuria increased dramatically.

social problems and natural disasters prompted Koreans to look for better opportunities overseas. Hawaii was the initial destination for Korean sojourners. Three years later, the first Koreans left Jaemulpo port, present day Incheon, on the way to Mexico.

As for the motives that promoted Koreans to venture to countries so far from their homeland, the simultaneous effects of numerous problems in Korea in some ways promoted the overseas labour migration. From the late nineteenth century Koreans had witnessed a succession of civil and international conflicts on their soil, increasing Japanese influence on the peninsula, years of droughts followed by years of floods and consequent food crises, outbreaks of epidemic disease such as cholera, monetary instability and economic inflation, repressive tax burden and constant acts of corruption and crime, among others (Patterson 1988, pp. 104 and 112). Initially these problems caused an internal movement from rural areas to urban centres in search of employment opportunities. However, as the situation in larger cities was no better than suburban towns, a considerable number of these sojourners endeavoured to relocate overseas (Patterson 1988, pp. 104 and 112).

Coinciding with this turn of events was an interest of Mexican henequen (*Agave fourcroydes*) plantation owners in recruiting Asian labourers for planting and harvesting Yucatán's main cash crop. Since the nineteenth century Mexico had been one of the world's major producers of henequen, the prime material used for twine and rope used in shipping industries.² The thorny henequen plants, also called 'oro verde' (Joseph 1982, p. 14) for the amount of revenue they generated, were particularly successful in the Yucatán region. The extent of this monoculture in this particular region was such, to the point "by the late 1800s... virtually no other crop could compete with henequen in land use." (Joseph 1982, p. 30).³ On the other hand, increasing international demand meant the need for further industrial expansion by the *hacendados*, hence the necessity for more hands willing to work in the production usually filled with the labour of Yaqui from Sonora region and Maya from Yucatán and Quintana Roo. It is worthwhile to note though, that the deficiency of workers was not an unfamiliar setback but rather a chronic and constant problem. In fact, the *de facto* slavery conditions under which these workers were employed was such that their mortality rate was higher than the birth rate and two-thirds of the indigenous population could be expected to die within their first year in Yucatán (Turner 1911, p. 62).

The planters sought to alleviate the labour shortage by importing more Yaquis and Mayans, contract workers from central Mexico and Mexico City, political dissidents who had opposed the then ruling government of Porfirio Díaz, criminals and vagrants, and even foreign labourers (Joseph 1982, p. 72). Eventually this need forced the organisation of *hacendados* to contact a labourer recruiter of British nationality named John G. Meyers (Romero Castilla 1997, p. 133).⁴ Initially Meyers tried to bring Japanese workers to Yucatán, nonetheless in vain. This was the time when the Meiji government was seeking to place Japan among the world powers and for this reason it would not permit its reputation to be damaged by any underprivileged treatment

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2. Numerous books refer the *Agave fourcroydes* plants as sisal (*Agave sisalena*). Although belonging to the same family, henequen has a longer productive life than sisal and grows principally in Mexico and Cuba, while sisal provides better quality and more twine per hundred kilograms of fibre than henequen and grows predominantly in African and South American region (Joseph, 1982).
 3. According to Fox (1961), henequen is particularly sensitive to cold and well drained soils are fundamental for its growth. Mérida, the town in Yucatán where most of the Korean labourers were allocated, fulfilled all the essentials: a dry, high temperature with minimal seasonal variations and the predominance of Calcareous rocks in the soil that prevents the surface from losing water.
 4. In Mexico, where he also held the citizenship, Meyers was known as Juan C. Meyers.

or exclusion of its overseas migrants (Masterson 2004, p. 13).⁵ This is seen in *Estudio que el Licenciado Genaro Raigosa, presidente de la comisión oficial nombrada al efecto, hizo sobre la inmigración Asiática* (1903, cited in Cott 1987, p. 72), where there are remarks that Meyers had failed to secure workers in Japan because of the government restriction and so he left Japan for China in search of less protected labourers. However, due to an unfortunate Chinese coolie experience in Peru and Cuba, the Chinese administration also had already banned any type of labour migration to countries where the interest of its citizens could not be protected (Cott 1987, p. 68). Despite these odds, an interesting encounter occurred while Meyers was in Tokyo trying to recruit workers for Mexico. He had contacted *Tairiku shokumin gōshigaisha* (大陸殖民合資会社, hereafter the Continental Migration Company) in August 1904 (Romero Castilla 1997, p. 136 and Park 2005, p. 6), where the president of the company Hinata (or Hyūga) Terutake (日向輝武, 1870-1918) raised the possibility of Korean labour migration to Mexico.⁶ Soon afterwards the company's representative in Seoul, Oba Kannichi (大庭貫一), was appointed to begin the recruitment of workers for this project (Romero Castilla 1997, p. 136).

2. The emigration company and the recruitment

It seems as though the involvement of the Continental Migration Company in Korean migration to Mexico was far from being an uncontrived enterprise. From 1904 there had been efforts by Japanese official and private sectors to halt Korean emigration started in 1902 to Hawaii (Patterson 1988, pp. 128-134). The increase in the number of Korean workers in Hawaii represented not only competition for the Japanese workers, but from the official perspective, it also represented an increase in the number of Japanese workers moving to mainland US, mostly to California in search of better wages. In the eyes of Japanese authorities, this move from Hawaii to mainland US of its people represented a risk for their national interest, as it could widen already existing Anti-Japanese sentiment in California and finally lead to the enactment of a Japanese exclusion act. For a country interested in becoming in an international power, an exclusion act against its citizen was clearly an uncomfortable outcome they tried to prevent. Meanwhile from the private sector perspective, especially those involved in the emigration enterprise, an increase in Korean emigration meant fewer Japanese workers were required in Hawaii and a corresponding decrease in their profits. So significant was this concern, that the directors of three major emigration companies in Japan presented their concerns to the Japanese

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5. To this effect Japan was exercising strong control and regulation over international migration. The *Imin Hogohō* (移民保護法, Emigrant Protection Law) enacted in 1896 provided the government with control over essential parts of emigration, namely the prospect emigrants, the organising emigration companies, the security deposit to assure the return of the emigrants and the transport companies (Moriyama 1988, pp. 34-37).
 6. Also known as Transoceanic or Continental Migration Company. In Korea it was known as *Taeryuk Sigmin Hoesa* (the official name was *Taeryuk Sigmin Hapja Hoesa*,). The company was established in 1903 as a joint venture of six small companies. At the time of its foundation, Continental Migration Company sought to send workers to Hawaii and Mexico only. It was actively involved in the migration business until 1908, during which time the company sent 13,133 workers abroad (Moriyama 1985, pp. 49-54). Its main investor and company's president was Hinata (or Hyūga) Terutake (also known as Hinata Takeshi). It is noteworthy that the variation on the surname is based on both types of Japanese kanji reading system, *onyomi* (phonetic reading, by which the surname is pronounced Hyūga) and *kunyomi* (explanatory reading, by which the same surname is read as Hinata).

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Komura Jutarō (小村壽太郎, 1855-1911). One of them was none other than Hyūga Terutake from the Continental Migration Company (Patterson 1988, pp. 128-134).

So it appears as though initially the Japanese authorities were in accord with Korean emigration to Mexico, as their ultimate goal was to halt Koreans from immigrating into Hawaii. This approach can also be read in the diary entry that then Korean vice minister of Foreign Office, Yun Chi-ho (尹致昊, 1865-1945), recorded after a meeting with Oba Kannichi on his way to Hawaii in 1905:

..he [Oba] told me that the Taeryuk hoesa men are opposed to the Korean immigration to the Hawaiian islands as that would interfere with Japan's immigration, and that they would like to see Korean immigration directed to countries –like Mexico for instance– where Japanese are not found, I see from this little talk why the Japanese Legation in Seoul was so anxious to stop the Korean emigration (30 August 1905 in Yun, 1973).

The emigration company opened branch offices in Seoul and other major cities. The first call for workers willing to travel to Mexico appeared in the Incheon edition of the Daehan Ilbo (大韓日報) from 25 November to 1 December 1904, on pages of the Hwangseong Shinmun (皇城新聞) from 17 December 1904 to 13 January 1905 and in the Seoul edition of the Daehan Ilbo in 29 January, 1st and 2nd February 1905 (Oh 2003). Despite a number of differences among calls advertised in the Daehan Ilbo and Hwangseong Shinmun, unequivocally Mexico was pictured as the land of opportunity.⁷ The call was certainly filled with attractive incentives. Not only current farmers and family level migration were strongly encouraged, but the transport fare and other charges were at the expense of the inviting employer (農家) and once in Mexico, housing and arable land fees would be exempted. Fuel for domestic use would be provided at no cost, as well as any medical attention that the workers might need and the possibility of education for their children over 7 years old. Working conditions were set at nine hours per day and the wage was between 1.30 to 3 Mexican Pesos (2.60 to 6 Korean won). Finally, when the contract expired, the farmer was to return to Korea with 100 Mexican Pesos as an additional bonus (Patterson 1993, p. 88-89).

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Curiously, the description of the type of labour the workers were to be engaged in appears in the Incheon edition of the Daehan Ilbo only and yet it was a distorted job description at best. Considering that in all instances the ad describes Mexico as the earthy paradise (Patterson 1993, p. 88), it is feasible that the recruiters decided to alter the truth for the sake of recruitment alone. On the disparity between ads, one possibility is that initially the emigration company exaggerated the notice in the quest for recruiting as many applicants as possible. As Korean labour migration to overseas was under the exclusive control of David Deshler, as will be seen later in this section, it is feasible the likelihood of legal issues arising. The differences between advertisements in Hwangseong Shinmun and Daehan Ilbo are represented in the table below.

7. An interesting detail is that in eight of the eleven offices for recruitment a Japanese person appears being in charge of the office.

	Daehan Ilbo		Hwangseong Shinmun (from 17 December 1904 to 13 January 1905)
	Incheon Edition (from 25 November to 1 December 1904)	Seoul Edition (on 29 January, 1st and 2nd February 1905)	
Title	Call for workers requested from North American country of Mexico (北美墨西哥國招工廣告)	Recruitment for farmers ()	Recruitment for farmers (農夫募集廣告)
On the authorisation from Korean government	Affirmative (大韓外部業經承認 ...)	Missing	Missing
Period of contract	5 years	4 years	5 years
Type of labour	Planting hemp	Missing	Missing
Wage	According to the number of henequen stumps planted	Missing	Missing
Recruitment Offices	Seoul	Seoul, Incheon, Gaeseong, Pyongyang, Jinnampo, Suwon, Busan, Mokpo, Masan, Gwangju, Gunsan	Seoul, Incheon, Gaeseong, Pyongyang, Jinnampo, Suwon
Deadline	10 December. (in lunar calendar, or 15 January 1905)	15 January. (in lunar calendar, or 18 February 1905)	10 December. (idem)

Based on Oh (2003) and Patterson (1996)

It is worthwhile to note that the recruiters used the cash in advance system to hire workers for the project (Kim 1971, pp. 14-15). This system of bonded labour, known as *enganche* in Mexico and Peru, meant that once the labourer takes the loan his or her labour belongs to the creditor until the loan and subsistence are repaid, and eventually one can work off the loan

within an agreed period, although this rarely happened (Robinson 2001, p. 207). The *enganche* was one of the bases of the actual labour system commonly practiced in south eastern Mexico, the debt peonage.⁸ Katz (1974, p. 2) characterised debt peonage as “a form of forced labor, which develops when a number of social and economic prerequisites for bondage in agriculture exists... but the state officially refuses to implement bondage while tacitly tolerating and acknowledging it under another name.”

3. The passport issues

Although the emigration company managed to persuade and recruit around one thousand people, there was a problem that could not be easily solved and this was the illegal nature of this emigration project. On 15 November 1902, King Kojong (1852-1919, r. 1864-1907) had granted the Royal edict for Korean overseas emigration matters to American entrepreneur David W. Deshler; therefore, any overseas migration carried out by people other than Deshler was considered illicit (Oh 2003 and Patterson 1988, p. 43). Numerous studies argue that whilst aware of the situation, initially Meyers and the company tried to send the workers to Yucatán using a certificate issued by the company. Nonetheless, conscious of possible legal repercussions once in Mexico if the workers did not have proper travel documentation, Meyers tried to persuade Sir John Jordan, the British minister to Korea, to issue the passports. The minister refused to help but eventually introduced Myer to the French minister to Korea, Victor Collin de Plancy, who managed to get passports issued for the workers (Kim 1971, cited in Oh 2003, Patterson 1993, Park 2005, Romero Castilla 1997).⁹

The abovementioned report raises several questions: first, on the existence of any organisation in charge of overseas migration and passport issuances in Korea at that time. In effect, prior to the creation of Department of Emigration *Suminwon* (綏民院), the permission for overseas travel, known as *jipjo* (執照) or *bingpyo* (憑票), was issued by the personnel in the seaport known as *kamni* (監理) only if a traveller required one. Then in 1902, with the beginning of Korean emigration to Hawaii *Suminwon* was established and the 'Imperial Rules and Regulations of the Department of Emigration of the Empire of Korea' was enacted (Patterson 1988, p. 43). However *Suminwon* and the regulations were abolished by October 1903 and the passports were issued by the authorities in the seaports again. Therefore at the time of the Korean emigration to Mexico, there was no official organisation in charge of overseas migration or passport issuance matters.

Secondly, it is curious why Meyers had to turn to the British minister for the issuance of passports. Clearly the subject of legality was an issue in obtaining the travel documentations. However, in an official document from then minister of Foreign Office, Yi Ha-yong (李夏榮 , 1858-1919), to the authority of Incheon seaport on 3 April 1905 there are instructions to halt the issuance of passports to those willing to travel to Hawaii and Mexico on visit or commerce purposes, in order to ultimately prohibit any type of overseas migration. Days later the Incheon seaport authority presented his concerns to the minister in two separate official documents,

8. Joseph (1982) explains that recruited labourers were divided into deportees and voluntary contract workers, even though there barely existed any distinction between them. Deportees were mostly indigenous population and political dissidents, among others. Korean workers belonged to contract workers group.
9. Curiously, numerous previous studies note in their research the British minister as Sir John Gordon and the French minister as Blanche. However, according to websites of British and French embassies in Korea the representatives of British and French government to Korea in late Choson period were Sir John Jordan and Victor Collin de Plancy, respectively.

stating that “Deshler, who is in charge of the emigration to Hawaii and Oba Kannichi, who is in charge of the emigration to Mexico will object to the sudden stop of passport issuance without any doubt.” (Incheon Seaport Office, 1905). The officer was afraid that as a humble seaport official he lacked the authority to impede Deshler and Oba even if they decided to send Koreans to foreign countries without proper travel documentation (Incheon Seaport Office, 1905). The official documents between the Foreign Office and Incheon seaport officials reveal interesting details: the recruitment to Mexico, although illegal, was well known to Korean officials and among the authorities the organiser of Korean emigration to Mexico was Oba Kannichi and not Meyers.

Despite all these issues, over one thousand persons left Incheon in April 1905.¹⁰ According to Lee (2005, p. 33), quoting the official correspondence from then Japanese consul in Incheon, Katō Motoshirō (加藤本四郎), to Japanese Foreign Minister Komura Jutarō (小村寿太郎, 1855-1911) the contingent of emigrants to Mexico was composed of 702 men, 135 women and 196 children and most of them came from Seoul and Incheon. Interestingly, the group of emigrants was made up of 257 families and 196 single men. The background of the emigrants was immensely heterogenous: there were not only farmers, labourers and fishermen but also a number of retired military personnel, lower class bureaucrats, *yangban* and even beggars and juvenile vagabonds.¹¹ There were also Christians leaving the country so to they could freely practice their religion (Lee 2005, p. 38).¹² What is apparent from previous research is that these Koreans intended to travel to Mexico only temporarily. Lee (2005, p. 42) notes that the fact that female population represents only a tenth of the emigrants is possibly explained by the family bread winners deciding to leave their families behind and depart to work in Mexico for only a determined period of time.

4. Korean emigration to Mexico and Japanese interest

The departure to Mexico was not without its incidents. Initially the departure was set for 21 March 1905, but before leaving Korea, a young passenger was found suffering from a form of skin eruption and the departure was delayed two weeks for quarantine purposes (Oh 2003 and Romero Castilla 1997, p. 143).¹³ Soon after, a rumour started to circulate that the labour migration to Mexico was in fact slavery (Romero Castilla 1997, p. 144) and as seen previously, on 3 April 1905 the minister of Foreign Office Yi Ha-yong sent instructions to *kamni* in Incheon to halt the issuance of travel permission to all Koreans willing to travel to Hawaii or Mexico. Even so, the cargo ship of British nationality, the Ilford, succeeded in leaving Jaemulpo with the first Korean migrants to Mexico on 4 April 1905. After a stopover in Yokohama, they arrived

10. It is worth to note that there are controversies on the date of departure and the total number of Korean migrants according to the sources used. There are records suggesting that the contingent of migrants left on 2nd and 4th April 1905, while the number of migrants varies from 1,014 to 1,033.

11. Lee (2005) remarks that an agent from the emigration company noted in *Choson Hoegorok* () of cases of child abduction.

12. Interestingly enough, a second generation Korean born in Mexico declared in an interview that he used the bible as a means to learn Korean language (Kim 2004).

13. Korean authors (Park 2005, p. 12 and Oh 2003) note that the young passenger was suffering from “ ” (Chickenpox in Korean) while Romero Castilla (1997, p. 143) calls it as “*viruela*” (Smallpox in Spanish). Seen as these are two different viral illness caused by different agents –Varicella-zoster virus and Orthopoxvirus, respectively- and not having read the primary material where the condition of the passenger is depicted, I use a descriptive term skin eruption to make a note of the occurrence.

in Salina Cruz (State of Oaxaca) on 8 May 1905. It is said that there were two deaths during the journey (Romero Castilla 1997, p. 146), but in general there are no detailed records of the trip to Mexico except for a letter that Meyers sent to his agent in Japan where he states:¹⁴

The people enjoyed the greatest comfort on board the steamer... a first class Japanese physician... had been engaged and actually went with the people as far as Salinas Cruz... Although most of the emigrants... arrived on board... in an almost starved condition... when the people arrived at Salinas Cruz, they were all in prime condition... (Meyers to Hinata Terutake, 1905 cited in Patterson 1993, p. 94)

Once in Mexico, these migrants continued their trip by train to Coatzacoalcos (State of Veracruz) followed by a steam boat journey, finally arriving at their destination, the port of Progreso (State of Yucatán) on 15 May 1905 (Corona Baeza 2005, pp. 2-3). The *Revista de Mérida*, published in Yucatán where Korean migrants would finally settle, announced the arrival of Korean workers on the Mexican soil:

*Por las noticias recibidas de Salinas Cruz, en donde desembarcaron los trabajadores coreanos que vienen para los servicios agrícolas de Yucatán... Son esperados en Progreso (en el Estado de Yucatán), a fines de la presente semana (Revista de Mérida, 8 May 1905 cited in Corona Baeza 2005, p. 3)*¹⁵

The same magazine also noted the physical aspect of these Koreans, describing them as “*gente robusta y de buen color, habiendo no pocos de constitución verdaderamente hercúlea*” (May 1905, cited in Romero Castilla 1997, p. 148).¹⁶ The next stopover for these migrants was Progreso, where 73 migrants were quarantined upon the order of medical officials. The official notes to the State Governor explain that,

*del vapor Hidalgo desembarcaron ayer por la tarde en este puerto los un mil catorce inmigrantes a que se refiere... quedaron en centro médico... debidamente aislados setenta y tres individuos, los que al desembarcar, tenían una temperatura mayor de la normal según la opinión de los médicos... (15 May 1905, cited in Corona Baeza 2005, p. 3)*¹⁷

On the same day, the remaining 946 Korean immigrants departed from Progreso by train to Mérida. Once at their final destination, totally unanticipated events occurred to the astonishment of Korean workers: their *sangtu*¹⁸ was cut off and they underwent physical and dental inspections (Hwangson Shinmun 29 July 1905, cited in Lee 2005, p. 42). Then they were divided into groups and during this incident there were cases of families suddenly being

14. This correspondence was sent to Hinata Terutake to explain the situation of Koreans in Mexico after allegations that the migrants were sold as slaves and maltreated in different haciendas. The content of original letter is rather defensive and describes Koreans as being content in the new environment and earning very good wages.

15. Translation: Korean workers who come for farming labour in Yucatan had arrived to Salinas Cruz... They are waiting in Progreso (State of Yucatán) this weekend...

16. Translation: robust people of good colour, many of them being of truly Herculean complex.

17. Translation: a thousand and fourteen immigrants you refer had arrived yesterday afternoon from the steamboat Hidalgo... seventy three individuals had remained in quarantine, who, according to the opinion of medical officers had presented with a body temperature higher than normal...

18. *Sangtu* was a sign of class and prestige that developed from the Choson period. It is where men of the aristocracy would grow their hair long, braid it and tie it like a top-knot on top of their head. To cut off the *sangtu* was considered sacrilege against the body given to them by their parents.

separated. This occurred as the planters who paid more cash chose the fitter workers, and finally these workers were dispatched to 22 different haciendas (Sánchez Pac 1973, cited in Romero Castilla 1997, p. 148).

5. Following the arrival

The reality that Korean workers faced was extremely difficult. Joseph, in his *Revolution from without* (1982, p. 76), observes that the work of a peon consisted of harvesting the henequen for most of the day, cleaning and sowing the rocky soil and weeding “under a broiling tropical sun.” Also, he notes:

work began early, virtually at dawn, to make the most of the “cooler” morning hours... no(r) were the sons and daughters of the plantation exposed to serious educational training... medical facilities generally suffered from the same fate as schools...

Cámara Zavala (1936, cited in Katz 1974, p. 15), on the other hand, indicates that “Chinese and Korean indentured laborers were brought to Yucatán, but many could not tolerate the climate, the disease and harsh treatment, and became ill or died.” Many workers tried unsuccessfully to escape from the *haciendas*; however, not only they were caught and brought back by the police but also severely castigated. Visitors were prohibited and there were even cases of suicide (Lee 2005, p. 44).¹⁹ The whistleblower on the situation was the Chinese Hé Hui (河惠). He reported in a Chinese newspaper in San Francisco (Wen Hsing Jih Pao or Mon Hing Yat Bo, 文興日報) on Korean immigrants in Yucatán and their situation in henequen haciendas. This article was later published in the Hwangson Shinmun on 29 July 1905 and certainly caused confusion and grief in Korea, to the point that Kojong ordered *Uijeongbu* (議政府) to discuss the repatriation of Korean workers in Mexico (Kojong Sunjong Sillok, 1 July 1905 or 1 August 1905 Gregorian Calendar).²⁰ The Korean Foreign Office sent a telegraph to the Mexican government in Toluca, which was received on 13 August 1905. In the message, Korean officials voiced regret on hearing about the situation of Koreans who “are compelled to be slaves” and requests “your government will preserve and protect their lives and liberties enable them to avoid calamities until our Government protect them [sic].”

In the meantime, the vice minister of the Foreign Office, Yun Chi-ho, was on his way to investigate the situation of Korean workers in Hawaii. While he was still in Tokyo waiting for the ship to Hawaii, he was instructed to go to Mexico as well (Yun, 28 August 1905). However, Yun was financially not able to reach Mexican soil as his travel expenses were only sufficient for travel to Hawaii. When from Hawaii Yun requested the Korean Finance Department for an additional budget to continue travelling onto Mexico, then advisor of the Department, Megata Tanetarō (目賀田種太郎, 1853-1926), vetoed the extra funding. According to Patterson (1988, p. 161), Japanese authorities feared that Yun might attempt to establish diplomatic relations between Korea and Mexico and this event could overturn Japanese efforts to transfer overseas Korean issues to the control of Japanese diplomatic missions. Nevertheless, the money that Yun requested eventually arrived, albeit late. Surprisingly the sum did not come from the Finance Department but from Kojong himself (Patterson 1988, p. 160). However Yun, after inspecting the situations of Koreans in Hawaii was already in Tokyo and in the end he advised the Korean Foreign Office to, “better instruct Korean Legislation in Washington to investigate and report”

19. According to Corona Baeza (2005), of 1,014 Koreans registered in Progreso in 1905, only 666 were still living in Yucatán in 1908.

20. *Uijeongbu* was the State Council during the Choson period.

(Yun, 16 September 1905). Korean authorities instructed the Korean *Chargé d’Affaires* in Washington, Kim Yun-chong (金潤晶, 1869-?) to locate the whereabouts of Koreans in Yucatán, in order to bring them back to Korea. This can be read in the correspondence that Mexican *Chargé d’Affaires* in Washington, Jose F. Godoy, sent to the Governor of Yucatán Olegario Molina on 19 September 1905.²¹ The Mexican *Chargé d’Affaires* expresses,

tengo la hora de remitir a usted la nota del Señor Encargado de negocios de Corea (Sr. Yun Chung Kim), en el cual solicita se le haga saber el lugar de Yucatán donde se hallan 1.014 coreanos, que parece se encuentran en precaria situación y a quiénes desea ayudar el Gobierno de Corea, a fin de que regresen a su patria... (cited in Corona Baeza 2005, p. 5).²²

Replies given by the Government of Yucatán and its Governor to Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs in relation to Korean workers conditions are that rumours proved to be incorrect and flawed (Romero Castilla 1997, p. 152-153). Later, the office of Mexican Foreign Affairs communicated with its Korean counterpart about the findings, stating:

reports are entirely unfounded, if your Government desires, it can get information at the Pekin Foreign Office where important official report is to be found concerning the good treatment received by Asiatic labourers in Yucatan. Japanese Legation here can also inform you [sic] (Nota de Secretara de Relaciones Exteriores, 13 September 1905, cited in Romero Castilla 1997, p. 152).

There had been no other attempt by Korean officials to inspect the situation of Korean labourers in Mexico. Instead, Japanese diplomats in Mexico monitored the activity of these workers closely, although Korean workers never accepted the Japanese intervention in overseas Korean matters (Lee 2005, p. 45).

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As for the degree of adaptation to their new environment, in the beginning the first generation of migrants did not attempt to learn the local language nor assimilate the local customs, as their ultimate goal was to return to Korea once the contract was over. Sánchez Pac (1973, cited in Lee 2005, pp. 56-59) noted that Korean migrants built Korean style kitchens in their houses, prepared *kimchi* from cabbages and made *meju* from *frijoles*.²³ However, clothing and hairstyle were soon readjusted to the local custom: possibly the change proved to be more appropriate for the hard toil in which they were engaged. An interesting detail is that Korean surnames, especially those hard to be pronounced by Spanish speaking planters, were transformed into

21. According to Joseph (1982, p. 39), Olegario Molina was the largest landowner and henequen producer in the state of Yucatán by the end of Porfiriato.

22. Translation: ..hereby I am remitting the note from Korean *Chargé d’Affaires* in Washington (Mr. Yun Chung Kim), who requests the location in Yucatán of 1,014 Koreans who are apparently in a precarious situation and the government of Korea wants to help them to return to their homeland

23. Medina (2002) argues that the change or acculturation of food practice in a migrant society is perhaps one of the slowest to suffer variation. Even when the original ingredients are modified depending on the availability in the host country, usually the method of preparation is preserved over time. On the other hand, Calvo (1982) observed that certain features of cuisine are retained even when the original language or culture has been forgotten, calling it as le plat totem. To celebrate the century of Korean emigration to Mexico, KBS World Radio conducted an interview (7 September 2005) with a fourth generation Korean Mexican, Javier Corona Baeza. Interestingly enough, he was mentioning how few Korean dishes such as *juk* (porridge), *kimchi*, *bap* (rice), *guksu* (noodles) and sauces such as *gochujang* and *ganjang* were handed down over generations from mothers to daughters.

phonetically closer local surnames.²⁴ Despite all these physical changes, the immigrants tried to retain their traditional Confucian customs (Arai 1909, cited in Lee 2005, p. 55). Finally, Lee (2005) argues that there had not been much interaction between the Korean migrant community and the other workers' group, accounting language and cultural differences as the main barriers that prevented Koreans from being closer to workers of different ethnicities and concludes that Koreans, albeit independent, formed a rather closed community. Whilst language and cultural differences certainly represented a barrier, the extremely high mortality among the indigenous workers should be added as another factor that hindered Koreans from having more interaction with other communities.

Once they completed four years of contract labour, Korean workers had to face a new reality. Most of the labourers had failed to save money as they expected and there was no homeland to return to, due to increased Japanese power in Korea. This turn in history turned Korean sojourners into settlers. Some worked in henequen plantations as *jornaleros* and others tried their luck in different cities. Koreans in the US and Hawaii, who were already aware of their countrymen's situation in Mexico through a report of Pak Yeong-sun (朴永淳) to the Korean *Kongnip* Association of San Francisco in late 1905,²⁵ tried to bring them to Hawaii, however this failed.²⁶ With the dramatic decline of henequen fibre demand after World War I (1914-1918), 288 Koreans decided to seek better opportunities in Cuba, leaving the port of Campeche in 1921.

Conclusion

In this brief work I have attempted to reveal some of the unknown facets of the history of Korean emigration to Mexico. Immensely complicated international and political issues of the time, along with personal interests set these Koreans en route to the Mexican henequen plantations. It is necessary to remark that, this migratory movement was not unknown to Korean officials nor was the latter unaware of the circumstances of Korean labourers in Yucatán peninsula. On a number of occasions I found previous research labelling them as *kimin* (棄民, abandoned or given up). They were never meant to be forsaken. Instead, they suffered the consequences of a weakened government who was clearly unable to deliver the help they so desperately needed. In recent years, a considerable number of visual and written materials on these emigrants have been presented in commemoration of the century of Korean emigration to Mexico. While 'well begun is half done', it is equally important to continue the research on these group of overseas Koreans, as there are innumerable areas on Koreans in Mexico yet to be studied and explored.

24. For example, Ko was changed to Corona, Yang to Yánez, Chang to Sánchez and Heo was transformed to Jiménez.

25. Pak was a ginseng retailer who had visited Yucatán to sell his merchant and discovered the maltreatment under which his countrymen were.

26. According to Kim (1971, p. 20), Korean residents in Hawaii and US raised around US\$ 9,000 to bring Koreans in Mexico to Hawaii. Whilst the Association was still working on the method, however, a few Koreans in Mexico tried to enter the US illegally and they were deported back to Mexico. After this incident in 1911, US government rejected the petition of the Korean National Association to bring their countrymen into US territory.

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