Paionia Retsuden (The Biographies of Pioneers): Accounts of 127 Japanese Immigrants in Mexico

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Abstract
Paionia Retsuden, or The Biographies of Pioneers (1975) by Kenichi Muray, outlines the personal histories of 127 Japanese immigrants to Mexico aged 80 and over, based on interviews Muray conducted between 1970 and 1975. Prior studies argue that the majority of Japanese immigrants at that time were unskilled farmers and day laborers, and that they tended to migrate to remote, rural towns. This presentation discusses the validity of those claims by analyzing the experiences of the 127 Japanese immigrants. Some of the relevant points of discussion are their places of birth, year of immigration, occupation, and experiences of illegal entry into the United States via Mexico. Although the claims of prior studies are valid, some points are missing. For example, scholars tend to think that the flow of immigrants are bi-national between Japan and Mexico. However, many from among the 127 Japanese who migrated to Peru first, spent several months or years there, then illegally entered Mexico with the intention of entering the United States. Therefore, we must observe Japanese migration to Mexico in the initial stages from the multinational viewpoint.

Keywords: Japanese immigrants, pioneers, Mexico

Introduction

Paionia Retsuden, or The Biographies of Pioneers (1975) by Kenichi Muray, outlines the stories of 127 Japanese immigrants to Mexico aged 80 years old and over, based on interviews Muray conducted between 1970 and 1975.

Prior studies argue that most Japanese immigrants at that time in Mexico were unskilled farmers and day laborers, and that they tended to immigrate to remote, rural towns rather than big cities such as Mexico City or Guadalajara (García, 2014, p. 31). Also, prior studies tend to assume that the flow of immigrants was bi-national between Japan and Mexico, but not multi-national (García, 2014, pp. 21-33). This presentation discusses the validity of those claims, analyzing the experiences of the 127 Japanese immigrants from *Paionia*.

First, let us look at author Kenichi Muray's biography and the background of his book. Kenichi Muray was born in 1901 as the only child of Jitsunosuke and Tsuru in Nagahama City, Shiga Prefecture. When he was 3, his mother Tsuru passed away, and Jitsunosuke, a farmer, took care of him. Kenichi contracted pneumonia during his junior high school years. Entering the University of Osaka, he heard a story about Tsunematsu Fuse, who immigrated to Mexico. He decided to immigrate there because pneumonia could not be treated in Japan at that time, and he wanted to die in a foreign country without being noticed by his family and friends.

Kenichi immigrated to Mexico in 1923. First he worked briefly on Fuse's farm in Jalapa, Chiapas, but he changed his job and became an employee of Tsuji Shokai, a big shop in Tapachula selling imported sundries. He worked there for three years but his pneumonia persisted. So one day he quit Tsuji Shokai to die alone without bothering anybody. Seeking out an isolated place to die, he went to a high mountain near Tapachula. But there, a German coffee plantation owner talked to Kenichi and hired him. While Kenichi was working there, he drank in a bar in Tapachula every Sunday until he would black out, since he was desperate with his disease. After spending countless months in this drunken stupor, he awoke to find that his pneumonia was cured. After that, he went back temporarily to Japan to find a would-be wife.

A friend of his introduced him to Shige, and they married in Mexico. Kenichi and Shige opened a general store called *La Japonesa*, or The Japanese in English, in Orizaba, Veracruz. *La Japonesa* prospered and the family had three children. When World War II started, all Japanese had to relocate either to Guadalajara or Mexico City. Kenichi was also ordered to relocate, but did not move from Orizaba. Then, one day, a City Mayor ordered him to change his family name spelling from Murai to Muray, ending with a y, not an i, He also changed his shop name from *La Japonesa* to *La Provincia*, meaning "the province". By hiding his Japanese identity from his shop and last name, he evaded the relocation. Of course, such was a rare case that only a Japanese with a prominent social status could do (Muray, 2017, p. 5).

Twenty-four years after WWII ended, Japanese Consul Tadaichi Ito suggested that Kenichi visit Japanese immigrants aged over 80 and throughout Mexico. Kenichi accepted and between 1970 and his death in 1975, he interviewed 150 Japanese. The interview was published by a weekly newspaper called *Shukan Nichiboku*, or

Nichiboku Weekly. His wife Shige and her son in law Ernesto Matsumoto collected his Nichiboku Weekly articles and published the book *Paionia Retsuden* in 1975. 42 years later, the Spanish translation of *Paionia* was published, in 2017. The translator, Makoto Toda, is another prominent figure in the Japanese Mexican community (Muray, 2017, p. 7).

Now, let us look at several characteristics of 127 Japanese from *Paionia*. Table 1 shows the immigration years of 127 people to the Americas. I say "the Americas" here, because many immigrated to Mexico, but there were some who immigrated elsewhere, such as Peru and the USA. As you can see, 70%, or 85 out of 127 people immigrated between 1905 and 1919; 37 % or 48 immigrated between 1905 and 1909, about 15% or 19 immigrated between 1910 and 1914, and about 14 % or 18 immigrated between 1915 and 1919.

Table 1. The year of immigration of 127 people
from *Paionia Retsuden* (by year, 1888-1923)

Year	Number	Number (every 5 years)
1888	**1**	**1**
1895	**1**	**3**
1897	**2**	
1903	**2**	**4**
1904	**2**	
1905	**2**	**48**
1906	**10**	
1907	**29**	
1908	**6**	
1909	**1**	
1910	**3**	**19**
1911	**1**	
1912	**1**	
1913	**9**	
1914	**5**	
1915	**5**	**18**
1916	**5**	
1917	**6**	
1918	**2**	
1920	**1**	**4**
1922	**1**	
1923	**2**	
Unknown	**29**	**29**
Nisei (the second generation)	**1**	**1**
Total	**127**	**127**

Source: Kenichi Muray, *Paionia Retsuden*, 1975.

Let us compare these findings from *Paionia* with the overall number of Japanese immigrants to Mexico from 1899 to 1941, which is shown on Table 2. Also, let's incorporate our understanding of historical events in order to frame these numbers. First, let's note two things. Mexico was the first Western country to sign a treaty of equality with Japan - the 1888 Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation. Also, Mexico was the first in Latin America to accept Japanese immigrants. The 1897 Enomoto Colonization Project with 34 Japanese began this phenomenon.

After this project, the number of Japanese immigrants increased year after year, and the two biggest waves of immigrants entered Mexico in 1906 and 1907. But after that, the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907-1908 and Mexican Revolution in 1910 affected Japanese immigration. After 1917, after the Free Agreement of Doctors between Mexico and Japan passed, the number of Japanese immigrants increased again. With this agreement, Mexico welcomed Japanese doctors, which were scarce due to the revolution. The number of Japanese immigrants increased even more after 1925, because in 1924, Mexico and Japan renewed the 1888 Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation. With this, Mexico applied a new immigration policy toward the Japanese known as Y*obiyose Imin*. Japanese could now immigrate to Mexico more easily than before. This 1924 renewal was opposite to the USA's 1924 Immigration Act, which excluded Japanese immigrants.

As we can see in Table 2, the periods 1900-1904, 1905-1909, and 1925-1929 are the top three phases of Japanese immigration to Mexico

Table 2: Japanese immigrants to Mexico (by year, 1899-1942)

Year	Number	Number (every 5 years)
1899	1	1
1900	1	1661
1901	95	
1902	83	
1903	231	
1904	1251	
1905	346	9258
1906	5088	
1907	3822	
1908	—	
1909	2	
1910	5	131
1911	28	
1912	16	
1913	47	
1914	35	
1915	19	286
1916	22	
1917	53	
1918	128	
1919	64	
1920	53	343
1921	69	
1922	77	
1923	68	
1924	76	
1925	160	1407
1926	326	
1927	319	
1928	353	
1929	249	
1930	434	1032
1931	283	
1932	149	
1933	86	
1934	80	
1935	53	223
1936	—	
1937	65	
1938	38	
1939	67	
1940	67	95
1941	28	
Total	14437	14437

Source: Japanese Foreign Ministry, 1972, pp. 140-141.

When we compare Table 1, which is the number of Japanese immigrants in *Paionia*, with Table 2, the total number of Japanese immigrants to Mexico by year, we note the same characteristics; 1906 and 1907 were the two top years for immigration. This is because the Japanese government, anticipating that the Gentlemen's Agreement would be passed in the near future, issued more passports to Japanese in these two years (García, 2014, p. 32). The table of 127 immigrants of *Paionia* mostly reflects the general trend, since *Paionia* includes people who subsequently immigrated to countries other than Mexico. However, we find some important differences too. The *Paionia* database shows the second largest wave corresponds to years 1910-1914, bucking the trend. Moreover, in the *Paionia* statistics its 127 interviewees were over 80 years old, which may have skewed data in unknown ways.

Next, let us look at prefectures of origin for the 127 people from *Paionia*, in Table 3. The top 5 prefectures are Fukuoka with 32, Kumamoto with 12, Hiroshima with 9, Okinawa with 8, and Miyagi, Wakayama, Shizuoka and Mie with 5 each. Table 4 shows the top 10 prefectures of origin of Japanese immigrants worldwide. As you can see, these are Hiroshima, Okinawa, Kumamoto, Yamaguchi, Fukuoka, Wakayama, Fukushima, Hokkaido, Nagasaki, and Okayama.

Table 3: Prefecture of origin of 127 people (from the *Paionia*)

Prefecture	Number	Ranking of Table 4
Fukuoka	32	5
Kumamoto	12	3
Hiroshima	9	1
Okinawa	8	2
Miyagi	5	
Wakayama	5	6
Shizuoka	5	
Mie	5	
Okayama	4	10
Yamaguchi	4	4
Saga	4	
Shiga	4	
Tokyo	3	
Fukushima	3	7
Aichi	3	
Kagoshima	3	
Nagano	2	
Yamanashi	2	
Iwate	2	
Unknown	2	
Ishikawa	1	
Toyama	1	
Tottori	1	
Nigata	1	
Kochi	1	
Tokushima	1	
Gifu	1	
Nagasaki	1	9
Aomori	1	
Puebla, MX	1	
Total	127	

Source: Muray, *Paionia,* 1975.

Table 4. Top 10 prefectures of origin of Japanese migrating to all world locations

Ranking	prefecture
1	**Hiroshima**
2	**Okinawa**
3	**Kumamoto**
4	**Yamaguchi**
5	**Fukuoka**
6	**Wakayama**
7	**Fukushima**
8	**Hokkaido**
9	**Nagasaki**
10	**Okayama**

Source: Todofukenbetsu no ijyusha sosu. Japanese Overseas Migration Museum. Yokohama, Kanagawa.

Comparing Tables 3 and 4, we find correspondences in Japanese immigrants' points of origin. In Table 3 showing the *Paionia* database, its top four prefectures represent four of the major five prefectures of Table 4. Also, many from prefectures in Table 4, except Hokkaido, can be seen in Table 3. Therefore, trends for the 127 people of *Paionia* match global Japanese immigration trends.

Table 5: The first country of immigration of 127 people (from *Paionia*)

Country	Number
Mexico	**93**
Peru	**18**
USA	**11**
Chili	**2**
UK	**1**
Nisei	**1**
Unknown	**1**
Total	**127**

Source: Muray, *Paionia,* 1975.

Table 5 indicates the first country 127 people immigrated to. About 73% or 93 people immigrated to Mexico. It's worth noting that about 14% or 18 immigrated first to Peru, and about 8 % or 11 immigrated first to the USA. 2 immigrated first to Chile, and 1 immigrated first to Great Britain – rare but interesting cases. Adding these numbers, 25% or 32 immigrated to a different country before they immigrated to Mexico.

In other words, the flow of Japanese immigration to Mexico was mostly bi-national between Japan and Mexico, but it was also multi-national to an extent. This point is underestimated in prior research, because we tend to think that all Japanese immigrated directly to Mexico.

Why did 32 people immigrate first to a different country then moved to Mexico? In the case of people who immigrated to Peru first, their intention was to live in the USA, like those who immigrated to Mexico. After working several days or years in Peru, they entered Mexico illegally to reach the USA. Most entered Mexico by purchasing a boarding pass to Yokohama; due to the Gentlemen's Agreement, ship companies did not sell passes to Mexico. On the way to Yokohama, the ship stopped briefly in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca. There, would-be immigrants would dive into the sea. From there, many people succeeded in entering the USA, but some people failed, found a good job in Mexico, or fell in love with a Mexican woman, staying there permanently.

Tadazo Okuma from Fukuoka provides one such example. He immigrated to Peru in 1916 but after completing his one-year contract, he headed north. Short on funds, he worked in Panama and Mexico for several months. One day he and his friend decided to enter the USA illegally by going up the Colorado River. But they were caught by a police officer and returned to Mexico. There, one Japanese told him that if he cultivated a hillside lot there, he could earn 5 to 8 dollars a day. Okuma said, "if there is a good job like this in Mexico, I do not have to risk my life to enter the USA. Then I decided to stay in Mexico" (Muray, 1975, p. 109).

Those who entered the USA first, before the immigration bans, contrast with Peru's case. They moved to Mexico because of harsh US discrimination against them. One such case was Kakuji Fukuda, who entered San Francisco as a schoolboy in 1907. Several years later, he founded the New Palace Hotel in Los Angeles. But due to anti-Japanese discrimination, his business declined. At that time, many Japanese clients from Ensenada stayed at the hotel, and recommended he visit Mexico. One day he did, and was surprised, because in Mexico, civilians and even police officers treated him very well, which never happened in the USA. He thought, "Mexico is totally opposite to the oppressive USA. It is like a heaven, a true country of freedom" (Muray, 1975, p. 77). He, his wife, and his children moved to Mexico together.

Lastly, let's look at these 127 people's professions when they emigrated, shown in Table 6. These are the top three; about 43% or 55 people were farmers, about 17% or 21 people were miners, and about 11% or 14 people were railroad workers. These three occupations share about 70% (90 people) of 127. All were contract workers and entered rural and remote areas in Northern or Southern Mexico. Many farmers worked at the La Oaxaqueña sugar cane plantation in Chiapas, miners worked in villages in Coahuila, and railroad workers went to construct the railroad connecting Manzanillo, a port in Colima, and Guadalajara, Jalisco.

Table 6: Occupation of 127 people (from the *Paionia*)

Occupation	Number
Farmer and farm laborer	**55**
Mine laborer	**21**
Railroad laborer	**14**
Student	**6**
Shop clerk	**5**
Merchants	**5**
Clew member	**3**
gardener	**2**
Doctor	**2**
Engeneer	**1**
Dockworker	**1**
Servant	**1**
Nisei	**1**
Superintendant of a farm	**1**
Unknown	**6**
housewife	**3**
Total	**127**

Source: Muray, *Paionia*, 1975,

Beyond these top three occupations, we find students and unskilled laborers like shop clerks and sailors. Professionals like merchants and doctors were rare. As historian Jerry García notes, Japanese immigrants during the first decade of the twentieth century were unskilled contract workers and tended to enter remote, rural areas (García, 2014, p. 31).

Many contract laborers fled their work within days or month after their arrival, seeking to enter the USA. As I mentioned before, it was difficult for Japanese to immigrate to the USA due to the Gentlemen's Agreement. Others ran away to find a better job elsewhere in Mexico. It was very rare for them to complete their contract, which generally lasted three years.

For example, Hakaru Tochihara entered Mexico to work at a Colima railroad camp in 1906. But since he and his 6 friends wanted to enter the USA, they ran away after 2 days, and tried to cross a desert near Ciudad Juarez. But 2 men died upon their attempt, so they gave up. Then, Tochihara moved to Chihuahua and started a grocery store. During the Mexican Revolution, he fought in Pancho Villa's army (Muray, 1975, p. 3).

Asakichi Oishi entered Mexico to work in the Oaxaqueña farm in 1907. Since many Japanese laborers died of harsh working conditions and disease, he ran away within a month, and worked at a Veracruz sugar company for four years. He then moved to Mexico City and took odd jobs such as a gardener and a cook (Muray, 1975, 34).

Conclusion

The 127 people from Kenichi Muray's *Paionia Retsuden* match many general characteristics of the Japanese who immigrated to Mexico before WWII.

First, regarding the years in which these 127 people immigrated, the period of 1906-1907 saw most entries to Mexico. This matches Japanese immigration's general trends, because the Japanese government issued more passports in anticipation of the passing of the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907-1908.

Secondly, regarding the birth prefecture of Japanese immigrants, these 127 people's cases also reflect global trends. Fukuoka, Kumamoto, and Hiroshima were the top 3 prefectures of origin among people in *Paionia,* predictably.

Thirdly, the 127 immigrants' professions also dovetail with prior studies. Most who immigrated to Mexico during the first decade of the twentieth century were unskilled contract workers who entered rural areas of Southern and Northern Mexico.

Fourth, as a general characteristic of the 127 people from *Paionia*, and for those who immigrated to Latin America during the first decade of the twentieth century, we can conclude that many of them entered a country in Latin America first to enter the USA illegally, especially through Mexico.

Meanwhile, prior studies somewhat undermines one important dimension regarding the flow of Japanese immigrants to Mexico. As we have seen, about 73% of 127 people immigrated directly to Mexico, so this flow tended to be bi-national between Japan and Mexico. However, about 25% of 127 people first entered a country other than Mexico, such as Peru or the USA, and then moved to Mexico. Those who went to Peru first ended up living in Mexico because it was the backdoor to the USA. And those who went to the USA first moved to Mexico to escape American discrimination.

Paionia Retsuden is a very rare, important source because through it we can understand the daily lives and stories of ordinary Japanese immigrants to Mexico. Historians of Japanese immigrants in Mexico have overlooked this book, since the Spanish translation was just published in 2017. My presentation is probably one of the first to deal with *Paionia* academically. However, there are more points of interest that remain for scholars to consider. There is still much we can uncover from this source to my new viewpoints about the history of Japanese immigration to Mexico.

References

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