The Early Years of Korean Immigration to Mexico: 
A View from Japanese and Korean Sources

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Little is known about the circumstances and conditions under which approximately one thousand Korean laborers came to Mexico at the turn of the century. And even less is known about their early years on the sisal plantations in Yucatan. While studies of Chinese and Japanese immigrants to Mexico in recent years have reached a high level of sophistication, studies on the Koreans lag further behind primarily because of the lack of primary documentation on this small group of 1033 which arrived in the spring of 1905.1

This essay attempts to shed new light on these Korean immigrants by using recently-discovered archival source material in Japan and Korea. Of this material, by far the most important are the documents collected by the Japanese Foreign Ministry in its desire to curtail the diplomatic independence of Korea in the early twentieth century. Collectively, these documents are entitled “The Prohibition of Emigration to Hawaii and Mexico by the Korean Government-Recommendation and Protection.”2 They provide, as we shall see, some very interesting views of the social history of Mexico and one of its immigrant groups.

It is appropriate to begin at the point when they were recruited in Korea to learn under what conditions these immigrants came and what kind of people they were.

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1 See, for example, Maria Elena Ota Mishima, Siete Migraciones Japonesas en Mexico, 1890-1978

Mexico, D.F., El Colegio de Mexico, 1982

2 Kankoku seifu Hawaii oyobi Mokushika yuki Kankoku wnn kanshi ikkensuki hogo utaku kankoku no ken 3-9-2-18, 1905
Located in the Gaumusho Shiryoken [Diplomatic Records Office], Tokyo, Japan

Hereafter cited as GGSK
The process was initiated in August 1904 when John G. Meyers arrived in Korea. An Englishman of Dutch-German descent who had become a naturalized citizen of Mexico, Meyers sought Korean labor after unsuccessfully attempting to recruit Japanese and Chinese. Soon after his arrival in Korea, attractive advertisements began to appear. They read as follows:

"Mexico in North America is a highly civilized and wealthy country, comparing favorably with the United States and famous for its mild climate, like an earthly paradise, without any disease. There are many rich people, but few poor people. Since workmen are in demand, many Japanese and Chinese immigrants, either single or as families, have earned much money. If Koreans emigrate, they too can surely gain much profit in safety. Although Korea and Mexico have not made any treaty yet, Korea has been granted 'Most-Favores Nation' status, and Koreans can keep all the profits they earn. If people desire to emigrate with their families, there are no obstructions at all, and they are favorably accepted. If they work industriously, they certainly can get much profit. The Continental Colonization Company, LTD has been entrusted by a rich plantation manager who lives in the Yucatan state of Mexico. Thus the Continental Colonization Company, LTD has begun to gather workmen. The emigrants will work at planting hemp, and are not employed at other jobs. They are offered shipping fees and food costs on board by the company and need not pay back those costs later. Wages are calculated every week. Since all of these regulations are in effect with the special employment rules of the rich plantation manager and have already been approved by the Korean Foreign Office, those people who desire to emigrate to Mexico can apply on this occasion without anxiety. Those applicants are welcomed when they come for consultations to the Lim Seoul Branch, at Taedong in Seoul, to the agent of the Continental Colonization Company, LTD or to the agent of each district after they gave considered the following articles:

-The emigration applicants should be accompanied by their families. If they go abroad alone, they often become lonely because they cannot enjoy family pleasures. They can earn more money as families living together and helping each other.

-They are given houses to live in and are exempted from taxation at the plantation.

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They are treated warmly at the plantation. When they contract illnesses, they receive free medicine and medical treatment.

- All of the wages that the workman earn belong to them and are free from taxation.

They are given free firewood for daily use. When the children of the workmen grow to seven years of age, they are allowed to enter the school of the district and receive a good education.

- They receive wages of from $1.30 in Mexican silver (2.60 in Korean won) to $1.50 (about three won) when they work nine hours a day. If they become skilled after several months of labor, they can easily earn wages of from $1.60 in Mexican silver (about 3.20 in Korean won) to two dollars (about four won). Actually, many Chinese workmen earn three dollars (about six won) per day.

- The wages of the workmen are calculated every week and are paid without the traveling costs being subtracted from them.

- They receive wages according to the number of henequen stumps which they have planted, without discrimination as to sex or age.

- The wages should be paid to the workmen themselves and not to other persons.

- The living cost for one person per day is approximately twenty cents in Mexican silver (about forty ch’ön in Korean money) to twenty five cents (about fifty ch’ön) in Mexico. When they grow some vegetables, raise chickens and pigs and sell them, they can meet their living costs from those profits.

- They work for five years on construction. After this term, the workers can choose whether they will return to their country or stay in Mexico. At that time, the plantation company gives the workers one hundred dollars in bonuses.

- The plantation company will hire a Japanese who has mastered both Korean and English to translate the forms for the workers when they send letters or money.

- The trip to Mexico takes about one month. The agents inform the applicants of the schedule of the departure.

- When workers are industrious and live with their families, they can become skilled in farming. Workers without their families should live with their friends.

- The agents deal fairly with every applicant. When you desire to emigrate to Mexico, please come to the Lim Seoul branch at 81 T’ong in Seoul, to the agent of the Continental Colonization Company, LTD or to the agents of each district.

- The deadline for contracts is the end of the tenth month in the lunar calendar.4

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4 This advertisement appeared as an enclosure with Ariyoshi Akira, Consul in Pusan, to Baron Komura Jutarō, Foreign Minister, March 14, 1905 GGSK
Recurring offices were established throughout Korea, with headquarters in Seoul and branch offices in ten seaport cities. By that winter, shorter advertisements appeared in the newspapers under the heading "Agricultural Recruitment Advertisement":

"In North America, Mexico is a country equal to the United States in wealth and civilization, where the land and water are good, the weather is warm, and there is no typhus virus. There are many rich men and few poor men and therefore there is a shortage of workers. Recently, unmarried Chinese and Japanese men have made a lot of money. Korean young men too, come. Register your name quickly at the agency before the tenth day of the twelfth month [of the lunar calendar] and do not fail to appear on that day. Do not make a mistake." 6

It is apparent that these two advertisements were designed to persuade Koreans to emigrate to Mexico and it is clear that every effort was made to paint a bright picture. Indeed, the available evidence suggests that the promise of high wages was the biggest lure. For example, the Korea Review reported that "Glowing accounts have been given them and they are expecting large wages and an easy time in working the hemp fields of that land." 7 An immigrant who returned to Korea wrote in the Tong-A Ilbo in the August 5, 6, 7 and 9, 1922 issues that many immigrants went because they were told they could become rich there in three years of three hours of work a day and that they could immigrate to Hawaii after three years. 8 The promise of high wages was given another boost when the recruiting company lent the emigrants from seven to twenty yen for traveling expenses, a relatively large sum. 9 Moreover, there is evidence that some emigrations were unable to distinguish between Mexico and Hawaii, as emigration to the islands had been ongoing for nearly three years and enjoyed a good reputation. 10

Because of these efforts and the promise of high wages, there was little difficulty
in recruiting emigrants. By March of 1905 a total of 1033 people had been gathered, consisting of 702 men, 135 women and 196 children, the majority being from the Seoul area.\textsuperscript{11} All indications are that these emigrants were a motley group consisting of small farmers, ruffians and beggars, workers, ex-civil servants, others from the lower classes of society who had been influenced by Christianity, and about two hundred ex-soldiers.\textsuperscript{12}

The contract which these emigrants signed and affixed their seals to was written in Korean and English and bound the workers to four years of labor:

"The employer guarantees to welcome honest workers to Yucatan State in Mexico. The emigrant family can get at least three Mexican dollars per day if they work industriously. Subject to the condition that the emigrants will work at the farming jobs determined by the employers on the ___day ___month, 1905.

"Article One: The employer bears the travelling expenses for the worker and his family from Korea to Manzanillo or to Salina Cruz in Mexico, and the travelling expenses from the port to the working place, as well as miscellaneous expenses.

"Article Two: The employer contracts that he will offer proper jobs to the workers and their families through all seasons of the year.

"Article Three: The employer will give free medicine and proper care in case of illness.

"Article Four: The employer will calculate the wage for the worker every week and will take charge of two tenths of the wage which will be repaid when the contract falls due. If the worker moves to another farm without going through the proper procedures, he shall forfeit this money.

"Article Five: The contracting term is for four years from the day when the worker arrives on the farm. The worker can extend the contract if he so desires.

"Article Six: The employer will pay wages to the workmen according to the following rate

--The reaping of henequen leaves. 72 Mexican cents for two thousand leaves, 40 cents for each additional thousand, and a percentage of this rate for fewer than one thousand leaves.

--Mowing and clearing the field: 25 Mexican cents for one meteka (one meteka is 404 square meters).

--The cutting of henequen stems: 35 Mexican cents for one hundred stumps, on

\textsuperscript{11} Kato to Komura, April 4, 1905 GGSK
\textsuperscript{12} Kato to Komura, March 29, 1905, also Kato to Komura, April 4, 1905 GGSK.
the condition that worker brings the cut stumps to the streets or tracks.

--The planting of henequen. 25 Mexican cents for one hundred stumps.

--The splitting of firewood: 50 Mexican cents for an amount of two para in length, two para in width and one para in height (one para is 836 millimeters).

--The gathering of brushwood: 50 Mexican cents for every one meteka.

--To pay the local customary farm wages for other jobs.

"Article Seven: The worker shall work at the above mentioned jobs, as well as any other jobs the employer orders on the farm every day except on Sundays and holidays."

"Article Eight: The employer must give the workman his drinking water, house, firewood, and vegetable garden."

"Article Nine: The employer shall hire the children of the worker for the above wages when the children become twelve years old."13

Once the Korean emigrants had signed this contract, the only remaining issue was the transportation to Mexico. Meyers had chartered an English ship, the Ilford, which stopped at several ports in Korea to pick up emigrants before proceeding to Inch'on, a seaport city about thirty miles west of the capital, Seoul, where the remaining emigrants would board and from where the voyage to Mexico would begin.14 Up to this point, except for clearly deceptive advertising, there was nothing unusual or out of the ordinary about the entire emigration project to Mexico.

The situation, however, changed radically just as the fully loaded ship was about to depart Inch'on for Mexico. Two incidents occurred which were to have a lasting impact on the project from this point on and taint the entire episode. First, just before departure, a child on board contracted smallpox, which forced the emigrants off the ship and into quarantine while the ship was disinfected. Since it was a British ship, the British Minister to Korea ordered the ship to remain in port for two weeks.15

A second disturbing aspect of the project arose at this time when it was discovered that the recruitment for emigrants to Mexico had been done illegally since only the American agent recruiting Korean for Hawaii had been given governmental permission to gather emigrants. As a result, none of the emigrants to Mexico possessed Korean passports. (The Korean government later did issue

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13 Katō to Komura, March 29, 1905 GGSK
14 Katō to Komura, March 29, 1905 GGSK.
15 Katō to Komura, March 29, 1905, GGSK
passports when the French Minister intervened on behalf of the Korean emigrants at the behest of the British Minister.\textsuperscript{16}

Nonetheless, the threat of an epidemic and the seeming illegality of the project was an unfortunate beginning of this exodus to Mexico because they became the basis for charges that the Koreans had been sold into slavery in Mexico. This charge began to be heard even before the ship departed. The charge originated because when friends and relatives of the emigrants learned that the ship had not yet departed they went to visit once again. Since Meyers did not want word of the smallpox outbreak to reach the ears of the Korean government as that would only complicate his legal problems, when these friends and relatives arrived they found the emigrants cordoned off without explanation. Not surprisingly, those who had come in vain to see their family members held incommunicado concluded that they were being treated as slaves.\textsuperscript{17} We shall see that this charge of slavery was to persist and increase throughout the entire episode.

By the time the emigrants finally departed Inch'on on April 4, 1905, these charges and rumors had come to the attention of the Korean government. On the following day, a Korean newspaper reported that "The Korean government, knowing that the Koreans who emigrated to Mexico will be sold and treated as slaves, prohibits Koreans from going abroad in large numbers. It is wise for the government to do so."\textsuperscript{18}

Some time later, the Korean Foreign Minister expanded upon his reasons for prohibiting Korean from emigrating: "(T)here had recently come to Korea a new and irresponsible Company, who, by the promise of high wages and other advantages, had induced some nine hundred Koreans to take passage on a vessel especially chartered to convey them to Mexico; that the management of this new Company did not meet with their approval, that they had misrepresented his views and opinions in the matter of the Korean emigration to Mexico, and that he did not consider Mexico a suitable to stop the exploiting of Koreans and inducing them to emigrate to undesirable places by irresponsible people..."\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Warren Y. Kim, p.15, also, So", Number 7.
\textsuperscript{17} Kaib to Komura, March 29, 1905, GGSK
\textsuperscript{18} Hansōng Sinbo, April 5, 1905
\textsuperscript{19} David W. Deshler to Huntington Wilson, Charge d’Affaires, United States Legation, Tokyo, January, 1906 (no date) Enclosure No 1 in Wilson to Elihu Root, Secretary of State, January 27, 1906 U.S. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Japan. Despatches from U.S. Ministers to Japan, 1855-1905 Washington: National Archives and Records Service, 1946. This document can also be found in Carter–U.S. Departments State October, 1905–June, 1907 Archives of Hawaii Honolulu, Hawaii Also in Wilson to Kaitō Takaaki, January 19, 1906 GGSK
Thus the action of the Korean government in prohibiting any further emigration guaranteed that this boatload would be the only Korean emigrants to go to Mexico. As we have seen, the government acted on the charges of slavery that had been raised at the departure of the emigrants. At any rate, the more than one thousand emigrants to Mexico were now out of the government’s hands, and there remained little that the Korean government could do for them since Korea had no diplomatic representatives in Mexico to look out for the Koreans. For the emigrants themselves, they were now enroute to Mexico, a trip of about one month. The only information we have on the voyage comes from a portion of a letter from Meyers to his agent in Japan.

“As regards the treatment and the furnishing of provisions to the emigrants who sailed on the S. S. “Ilford” to Mexico, I repeat the statement, that you purchased provisions sufficient to last them twice the time that the passage actually occupied, from Chemulp’o [Inch’ŏn] to Salina Cruz, Mexico; and the merchants in Pusan [Pusan] and Chemulpo can easily testify, that every article that was purchased was of the very best quality. The people enjoyed the greatest comfort on board the steamer, the special fittings for their accommodation had required an outlay to carry the number, which she actually did carry. A first class Japanese physician, at an inclusive salary of two thousand yen for this very passage, had been engaged and actually went with the people as far as Salina Cruz, carrying the necessary medicine, drugs and surgical instruments, which might eventually have been necessitated. Although most of the emigrants, and especially the children, arrived on board the S. S. “Ilford” at Chemulpo in an almost starved condition, very few cases of sickness occurred during the voyage, and, with the exception of a few cases of beriberi, which had been contracted in Korea, not a single case of sickness occurred during the journey, and when the people arrived at Salina Cruz, they were all in prime condition, and excited the admiration of the Mexican officials and the Mexican public by their healthy and cheerful appearance. Moreover, as the steamer sailed under the British flag, before departure, a thorough investigation of all conditions on board was ordered by His Excellency, Sir John Gordon, His British Majesty’s Minister in Korea, and this examination proved most satisfactory, and the steamer was allowed to sail as an emigrant ship under the British flag, because all the requirements as to the welfare of the emigrants had been complied with; and it is well known that there is no country more strict in its laws regulating the traffic of emigrants from and to foreign countries than Great Britain. This is all I have to say regarding the transportation of the people.”

The Korean immigrants arrived on May 15, 1905 at Salina Cruz and after resting
for three days, traveled by way of Coatzacoalcos and Progreso to Merida, where they were divided among 22 sisal plantations. It is at this point that charges of slavery surface with even greater intensity. A number of independent sources indicate that conditions were, on the whole, undesirable. We shall look at these accounts; both secondary and primary.

One researcher who interviewed Koreans in Hawaii wrote: “When they landed in Mexico, however, these Koreans found themselves to be a sort of slave-laborers. Many of them made attempts to escape... but they were caught by Mexican authorities and died of the unbearable and harsh slavery.”

Another (secondary) source writes as follows: “On the henequen plantations the immigrants suffered afflictions as henequen is thorny plants [sic] they had to collect under the unbearable burning heat. The Mexican plantation owners treated the Korean immigrants as slaves, keeping them on plantations and prohibiting visitors and correspondence with the outside world. They employed private police to watch over the immigrants, to shut them off from the outside world and imprison them on the plantation for four years until their contracts had expired.”

A third secondary source writes: “On the first day of their work on these farms, Korean immigrants knew that they had been totally deceived by the Continental Settlement Company. Not only the stifling weather but also the wages and working hours were totally different from what the immigrants had been told in Korea. They worked twelve hours a day, cutting henequen leaves with a knife, for a wage of thirty to thirty-five cents... Some Korean immigrants ran away from these farms only to be caught in a few days because they were totally unfamiliar with the local geography. Farm managers beat the runaways with wet rope, and in order to keep them from running away, their barracks were locked and watched by guards.”

A fourth report was filed by a Chinese resident in Merida: “In rags and worn sandals, the Koreans are laughed at by the Mexicans. You can’t watch them without tears, going in groups to henequen farms, men holding the hands of their children and women carrying their babies on their backs. They are worse than animals. Here

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20 John G. Meyers to Hinata Terutake, September 16, 1905, Enclosure in Hinata Terutake to Ishi Kikujirō, Supervisor of Trade and Commerce, September 28, 1905, GGSK. The only other (secondary) source of information about this trip is Wong-yong Kim, Chae-Mt Hanun Osinn-yon Sa [A Fifty-Year History of Koreans in America], Reedley, California, Charles Ho Kim, 1959, p. 11

21 Jose Sanchez, Memorias de la Vida y Obras de los Coreanos en Mexico Desde Yucatan

22 Lyu, op cit., p. 27

23 Yoon, op cit., p. 42

24 Yoon, op cit., p. 42
in Mexico, the aborigines are called the fifth or sixth grade slaves in the world, but Koreans are called the seventh grade slaves. When they fail to finish the assigned work, they are made to kneel down and are beaten until their flesh is torn and bloody.”25

A contemporaneous Japanese source states that the Koreans in Mexico “often have troubles with their employers because of misunderstanding due to the language barrier. Also the Koreans insist that the employers are breaking their contracts.”26

The most detailed report came from a Korean ginseng merchant: “I was passing through Merida, Mexico where I knew that Korean immigrants were present, and I asked a Chinese merchant about Korean immigrants. The Chinese said that there were Korean immigrants on nearby plantations, but as slave laborers under a certain contract none was allowed to travel outside the plantations.

“On my way to locate some plantations where the Koreans were working, I met three Koreans in the street. One was in a regular suit, and the others were in rags and bare-footed. I inquired about the Korean immigrants, but they avoided my questions. However, it appeared that the bare-footed ones were under arrest for some violation. The next day, I followed the bare-footed ones and secured the information I needed.

“At the time of recruitment, the immigrants were lured into slave labor by a false promise that they could earn a fortune in just four years in Mexico. Now they are doomed to live in a human inferno. They implored me to send news to Korea about themselves and stop innocent people who might fall into the same trap. The immigrants were spending the day in thorny fields, sweating under the burning sun and cracking whips of Mexican foremen, and spending the nights nursing their thorn-pricked wounds in the mudhuts. Often they envied the life of the dogs in the house of the plantation owners. They were paid 35 cents (Mexican currency) for a day of twelve hours work. Out of that amount they had to pay 25 cents for the daily food ration.

“Any worker who became ill and could not work was confined in a guarded barn, and those who were unable to work for a prolonged period, regardless of sickness from malnutrition or snake bites in the hut, would be abandoned in the wilderness and left to their own fate.

“Dozens of workers attempted to escape the unbearable hardships and ran away,

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25 Cited in ibid p 42
26 Katsura to Hayashi Gonsuke, August 16, 1905. GGSK The information came from Shugimura, the Japanese Minister to Mexico
but because of the language barrier they could not find any shelter, and when caught by the plantation police they were severely punished. Many of them were still suffering in the plantation jails.

"The plantation owners jealously guarded their workers and forbade visitors. Since my presence has become known to them, I have been under constant surveillance. However, I will leave for the United States in a few days."  

Eventually, these reports made their way back to Korea where even the Korean emperor expressed his concern. "Of late we have been told of the condition of our emigrants to Mexico, and our heart cannot bear to hear more. Traffic in slaves is now prohibited by all nations. Why are more than one thousand of our people to be sold to foreigners? The Government did wrong in not stopping the emigration company on the first day they attempted to collect the people. Now many ignorant people have been taken to a strange place and there is no one to whom they can complain of their sorrowful condition. We can never bear to hear about it. The officials must arrange with the company to recall these emigrants immediately, and thus bring a little comfort to our aching heart."  

Since there were no Korean diplomats stationed in Mexico, the Korean government asked the Mexican government about the condition of the Korean immigrants. The Mexican government cabled in reply that no Koreans had been sold into slavery in their country. At that point, the Korean government attempted to send the Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs to Mexico to investigate the matter first hand, but the Japanese, who were in the process of colonizing Korea, prevented him from going any further than Hawaii.  

Thus, the overwhelming evidence seems to indicate that the Koreans in Mexico found themselves in great difficulty. Not surprisingly, the planters have a different view. This view, while obviously self-serving, is important because it not only allows them to tell their side of the story but also gives us additional information about the conditions under which the Koreans spent their first years in Mexico. The planters' view is contained in a letter from Meyers to his agent in Japan, the relevant portions of which are excerpted here:

"It was said that the emigrants, which your Company procured for me, had been sold into slavery in Mexico, that they were in the most distressed condition, and

27 Cited in Warren Y Kim, op cit, pp. 17-18. The letter was dated November 17, 1905.
28 Korea Review, August, 1905, p 310
29 Korea Review, August, 1905, pp 317 and 319; see also, Hwang’s Hng Smmun, August 23, 1905.
30 Korea Review, August, 1905, pp 393 and 397
should be saved by being sent back to their native country. As to the first charge, it is well known that Mexico has exactly the same Constitution as the United States of America, and that slavery does not exist. Mexico is today one of the most progressive and enlightened countries, and anyone who would attempt to sell anyone, Mexican or foreigner into slavery, would be severely dealt with by the Mexican laws."

"As to their treatment after their arrival in Mexico, I do not think that it was ever surpassed by an enterprise carrying emigrants from foreign countries. As soon as the Koreans landed in Salina Cruz, cattle were slaughtered to furnish them with fresh meat. They were carried by a first class steamer, which was waiting for them, transported to Yucatan. Upon their arrival in Merida, the Capital of Yucatan, these emigrants were not only properly received by the planters, but special preparations had been ordered by the Government of our State to have all their wants and requirements attended to. The people were given several days' rest to recover from the fatigues of the long journey, each one received, free of all expense, four new suits. The men were furnished with as much tobacco as they cared to take, and all orphan boys were attended by ladies who after they had been properly bathed, furnished them with new suits, shirts, hats, shoes and everything they could possibly require. After all this had been done, the people were sent to the different plantations to commence their work. New houses had been constructed everywhere for these Korean emigrants as soon as my cable from Korea arrived, saying that the S. S. "Ilford" had left Chemulp'o with these people. Each house afforded them proper shelter and comfort. Many of the house constructed were furnished with electric light, and proper facilities to take daily baths, and every where the people enjoyed good drinking water and running water for washing.

"As to the charge that the people had been starved I have to say this, that during the first two months all the planters had agreed to furnish all the Koreans with their meals, free of any charge, and to pay them at the same time the full wages, which they were earning during these two months, not deducting for meals. There was no obligation whatever on the part of the planters to furnish their meals free of charge, during these two months, as the emigrants had been given to understand before their departure from Korea, that they were to be paid so much in wages, and that they had to pay out of their wages for their own food.

"Just one instance of what the Minister's decree would style "distress of Korean emigrants in Mexico," I beg to say this. One day I arrived on the plantation of a friend, whose name is Mr. Alvaro Regil. After my arrival I assembled all the Koreans and asked them if they were satisfied with their new surroundings, or if
they had any complaints to make, and, if so, I requested them to make such complaints to me. All of them, with the exception of one, the father of a numerous family assured me that they were very well treated, that they were much better treated and paid than I had promised them before their departure from Chemulp’o, and that they thanked me very much for having brought them to such a good country, where they were so kindly treated by their master, and where they could earn so much money which nobody took away from them; and while saying this, some sixty of them put their hands into their pockets and produced each from $20 to $60, their savings during the first five weeks they had worked on this particular plantation. There was one man, however, alluded to above, who complained of being furnished with scanty provisions, and, in order to convince myself of the truth of this complaint, I went immediately to his house to examine the quantity and the quality of the provisions which he had received for the coming week. To my great surprise I found not only that he had been furnished provisions of a good quality, but of such a quantity that he had two sacks of rice and 1 1/2 sacks of beans, stored away, which he had saved from what he had been furnished in provisions during the past five weeks, and which he wanted to sell to Indian laborers who had to buy their own provisions. This may show that the people were not starved, and furthermore, I and my friends would have never gone to the expense of hundreds of thousands of dollars out of our own pockets, to foment emigration from Korea to Mexico, and then cool the enthusiasm for further emigration by the ill-treatment of the first emigrants we had shipped to Mexico. As our intention is to induce many laborer families to follow those who have already gone, it stands to reason that we must treat the first arrivals well to encourage others to follow them. On the other hand, not the Koreans, but we, the landed proprietors, are practically their slaves and the slaves of all our laborers. Under the present conditions of agricultural prosperity there is such a demand for labor in Yucatan, that if one planter should ill-treat, or underpay his laborer, all the laborer has to do is, to leave his employer and go to the next plantation where he will be received with open arms, and competition being non-existent in Yucatan for lack of about 50,000 laborers which we still need, anyone who is acquainted with the laws of political economy can see that with us, not the laborer, but the employer is a slave at his laborers’ hands.

"I understand from informations with which your Company furnished me, that the last named decree was promulgated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Korea against further Korean emigration to Yucatan, because information had been received from a certain Chinese in San Francisco, warning Koreans not to emigrate to Yucatan, because they were badly treated and starved in that country. If it should
prove true, that these informations were sent to Korea from Chinese sources in San Francisco, I fully understand the nature of such unscrupulous statements. We have today about 20,000 Chinese laborers in Yucatan, working on our plantations, most of whom are earning three yen a day or more; and these men are entirely in the hands of a number of Chinese bankers of Canton and San Francisco, to whom they have to pay out of their wages a certain tax every month, so that they may not be molested upon their return from Mexico to China with their savings. As the taxes raised by the Chinese bankers amount to at least $50,000 a month, it will be seen, that they are greatly interested, that no Korea emigration arrives in Yucatan, as we are able to take very good care that the Koreans will remain masters of their own earnings and not pay a farthing to any Chinese banker, contractor, or anyone. Of course these Chinese bankers have a special interest to invent all kinds of ill-founded charges in order to kill the Korean emigration to Yucatan in its germ.

"The only people who are the best judges, and in fact the only judges of good or ill-treatment in Yucatan, are these very Korean laborers, who have left their country in April last, and have settled in Yucatan. I know that over 300 letters have been sent from Koreans in Yucatan to their friends in Korea, and I should be very much surprised, if among these letters there is a single one that complains of the country, of the wages, or of the treatment the Korean laborers receive on our plantations. Furthermore, you yourself informed me that your agents in Korea had been collecting a number of these very letters received from Mexico by friends in Korea, and that these letters were full of praise of the new conditions under which the people lived in their new surroundings. I should suggest, that the Korean officials themselves appeal to all the friends, relatives and others, who have received communications from Mexico, and find out how the emigrants are satisfied in Yucatan.

"A few days before my departure from Yucatan a great number of Koreans came to me to send their friends and relatives also to Mexico, as they would like them to enjoy the same new privileges with which they were surrounded."

"I have to say, that not all the emigrants have proved satisfactory. As far as the emigrant "families" are concerned, every family has given satisfaction, but one, and this one consisted of a former Korean official who smuggled himself on board the steamer under the disguise of a country laborer; upon arrival in Yucatan he refused to do any work whatever, declaring that he was a noble by birth and had come to Yucatan in order to protect his fellow countrymen, and obtain as much money of these poor country people in return for his so-called protection. My Korean interpreter, Mr. Kwang, upon investigation found out, that this man had been a
former Korean Court official, who had been dismissed from his office on account of fraudulent proceedings, and that he went on board this emigrant steamer to escape prosecution and just punishment by the laws of his country. We kept this man with his wife and boy, for six weeks in idleness; he received first class treatment, but finally, when he refused to do any [work], we sent him to the United States, at our own expense, and gave him $150 out of our pocket, to start a new life in a country, where he either will be obliged to work, or if he does not, will starve or be taken up as a tramp. Besides this man there are a few others, who turned out undesirable elements who came on board the S.S “Ilford” under the disguise of emigrants, but turned out, upon their arrival in Yucatan, to be former highwaymen, tramps, and professional thieves, for whom the soil of their own country had become too hot. Most of these characters left the plantations two or three weeks after their arrival, with their savings in their pockets, and attempted to continue their former occupation of tramps and robbers, and these were promptly taken care of by our police authorities, and given the option of being punished for their misdeeds, or to leave our country for any other country where they would like to go; their passage being paid out of the planters’ pocket. I reiterate what I have told you over and over again, that we have no room for bad characters in Yucatan, but that every honest, thrifty country laborer from Korea will be welcomed, well treated and find himself after a year’s residence in Yucatan in a very prosperous condition, having no taxes to pay, receiving good wages, and being given the chance of saving about 75% of his wages after paying the expenses for living and personal comfort ....

"Another question to which I have to refer is the climate of Yucatan. Our climate is not bad, but it does not allow a European laborer to work in the open field, and all the importation of European labor has proved a failure in Yucatan, for climatic reasons. The only emigrants who so far have prospered in our climatic conditions are the Chinese, and I am very glad to say that this statement also refers to the Koreans, for although they have arrived in the worst season of the year, we have not had a single case of fever among the Korean emigrants, and I have made it my particular business to ask every laborer on the plantations, if he has any complaint to make about the heat or the climate, and in every instance I have been informed that they were not in the least troubled by heat or climate, as the days are not so hot as in Korea, and the nights after sunset much cooler; and this is the most important point that encourages us to continue the emigration of Koreans to Yucatan, as we are perfectly satisfied that the climate is in favor of such immigration, and that we get the benefit of the work, for the heavy outlay of transportation, and the emigrant the benefit of good wages and kind treatment, which will enable him after four or five
years to return to his own country, if he so desires, a man who has seen something of the world, and returns to his own country with a few thousand dollars of his own property, made by honest work in Yucatan.

"As to medical treatment. I beg to repeat, that on the big plantations are resident physicians; but every plantation is visited once a week, sickness or no sickness, by a physician, and, if a person is sick, medical attention and medicine is furnished, free of charge, and in case of serious illness, the patient is sent to the Government hospital in Merida, one of the finest in the world, where he stays till cured.

"The husband of a wife died of berri-berri, brought from Korea, on the plantation of my friend, Mr. Rafael Peon, the widow and her child received clothing, house, provisions, free, and one yen in cash per week, as is customary with widows on most plantations."

"When I arrived on a visit, with the interpreter on this plantation, this particular widow appealed to me to be allowed to work, which request was granted, and now she receives her wages, in addition to free house, provisions, and her one yen a week."

"Such is the general treatment of all honest Koreans in Yucatan, who are willing to work eight hours a day, while for students, tramps and other like characters, Yucatan is perhaps one of the worst countries in the world, as idle people and tramps are not tolerated on any account. The planters of Yucatan do not pose, by any means, as ultra-humanitarians, but extend generous treatment to their laborers, as otherwise, Korean or Mexican, would leave the plantation and go elsewhere, work being super-abundant, for, before the Mexican law, all are equals, Korean and Mexican, and no man can be kept on a plantation, against his will, but is free to go wherever he pleases, as long as he is willing to work and thus be a useful member of the Commonwealth." 31

One final document, of a negative nature, describes the situation after the four-year contracts expired: "The predicament of the liberated immigrants is beyond description, and the most difficult question is how to help them all. While they were in the plantation, they barely eked out an existence, but once they are released their existence is threatened, because they cannot find jobs and have no savings for emergencies. Out of malice, the plantation owners will not hire these liberated workers, and they refuse to pay the bonus of one hundred pesos as provided in the contracts. Furthermore, they are detaining all the women and children who were

31 Meyers to Hnata, September 16, 1905 Enclosure in Hnata to Ishu, September 28, 1905, GGSK Emphasis in the original
born on the plantation, so many families have been separated. Cases of this nature should be solved by court action. Every day hundreds of immigrants visit our office for assistance. Please expedite the relief fund.\textsuperscript{32}

Despite these problems, some Koreans apparently were able to return to Korea,\textsuperscript{33} while others were able to go to Hawaii.\textsuperscript{34} After the First World war, there was a sugar boom in Cuba and so in 1921 288 Koreans in Mexico left for the sugar plantations in Cuba.\textsuperscript{35}

The vast majority, however, were to remain in Mexico and their story is beyond the scope of this paper.

In conclusion, these newly-discovered documents go far toward giving us a picture of the early years of the Korean immigration, and it is not a pretty picture. The naivety of the Korean immigration, which led them to believe in vain that they would become rich led them to a terrible situation from which there was no escape. Their exploitation by the planters is well-documented as several different sources come to the same grim conclusion. Further research is necessary, of course, to supplement the sources in this essay which are largely from Japanese and Korean archives. Indeed, Mexican sources in particular need to by discovered and examined. Moreover, further study is necessary to examine the Korean minority in Mexico from the time their contracts expired to the present. I hope that this essay will stimulate further research in this area.

\textsuperscript{32} Warren Y Kim, p 19 The letter was signed by Hwang Sa-yong on June 22, 1905, Hwang died in Los Angeles in 1978

\textsuperscript{33} Sō Kwang-un, \textit{Han'guk ilbo}, July 3, 1971(Article No.18).

\textsuperscript{34} Bernice Bong-hee Kim, " The Koreans in Hawaii", M A Thesis, University of Hawaii, 1937, p 84, fn 3

\textsuperscript{35} Warren Y Kim, pp 20-21