

Korean Immigrants' Place in the Discourse of *Mestizaje*: A History of Race-Class Dynamics and Asian Immigration in Yucatán, Mexico*

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Abstract At the turn of the nineteenth century, Mexico experienced a series of historic events: the Caste War, the rise of the henequen industry, and the Porfirian project of modernization. These events, combined with the immigration policies at the time, begot an increase of East Asian immigration, which complicated the race-class dynamics especially in the state of Yucatán. Despite the arrival of East Asian immigrants initially as laborers, the changes in their class identity in the process of permanent settlement resulted in the creation of new social categories and the difficulty in positioning them in the existent social dynamics. Amid such difficulty was the contradiction in the Mexican reception of foreign immigrants. Even though Mexico welcomed East Asians in the first place, they were later excluded from the discourse of *mestizaje*. The account of the first wave of Korean immigration to Mexico is most notable as a case that demonstrates the contradictory attitudes and the complexity of the race-class dynamics in Mexico at the time. Forgotten by Korea due to a political turmoil in East Asia and disregarded by Mexico due to their diminishing economic value and small size, the Korean immigrants were indeed without a place in terms of national and cultural identity in the host country. That is, while Koreans as physical individuals inevitably mixed into Mexican society both biologically and culturally, Korean as an ethnicity was unable to become a part of what constituted *Mexicanidad*. By looking into the

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(lack of) Mexican references to Korean immigrants in official government correspondences and Yucatecan print media from 1904 to 1909, this thesis reinterprets the significance of Korean immigration from a Mexican perspective. Unlike most analyses that tend to read Korean immigration only as an extension of Korean history, it contextualizes the event within Mexican history. It also identifies the economic and political interests of the Mexican government and Yucatecan plantation owners in relation to its Korean population.

Key words Porfiriato, race, henequen, Korean immigration, *mestizaje*, Mexico, class, Caste War, Yucatán

I. Introduction

In May 2005, the Korean community of Mérida, Yucatán, celebrated the centennial anniversary of the arrival of the first 1,033 Korean immigrant laborers who had been contracted to work for four years in the henequen plantations of the region. During the week-long Henequen Festival funded by the Korean embassy, the building hosting the *Asociación Coreana* reopened after four decades and the *Hospital Amistad México-Corea* was unveiled along with a commemorative monument.

¹⁾*Canal Once TV* and *MBC*, two leading public broadcasting networks respectively from Mexico and Korea, also co-produced a three-part documentary titled *Henequen* exploring the history of Korean immigration to Mexico. In an interview from Henequen, the then First Lady of Mexico, Marta Sahagun de Fox, expressed “gratitude towards the Koreans that came over one hundred years ago and towards their contribution to Mexico” and

1) *Asociación Coreana* is a group/building founded by first and second generation Koreans in Mexico in 1950 that hosted cultural activities and served as a headquarter for Korean-Mexican support for the Korean independence movement; *Hospital Amistad México-Corea* is a medical institution built in 2005 and jointly funded by the Korean and Mexican governments.

described the first Korean arrival as “the beginning of a friendship between the two countries.”²⁾ Backed by Fox’s friendly political gesture, the Korean press alluded to the festival and the co-production of the documentary as a diplomatic feat that would contribute to Mexican-Korean relation.

The referred significance of the commemoration, however, hollows out the immigrant descendants’ national, cultural, and even racial identity by emphasizing the Korean perspective on the history. The subject of commemoration had been the Korean-Mexicans whose identity is rooted in both countries with equal importance, if not more so in Mexico due to the discontinued inflow of Korean immigrants after their first arrival.³⁾ However, the Korean media undisputedly concentrated on painting the immigrants and their descendants as patriots that retained their Korean identity and the Mexican media did not seem to have problem complying with such depiction—the descendants were by all means Korean, not Mexican, to both cultures at the moment. The relative lack of active endorsement of Korean immigrants as Mexicans in part of the Mexican media and government, in fact, reflects their consistent attitude towards Korean immigrants since 1905.

2) “A estos coreanos que vinieron desde hace cien años les apreciamos muchísimo toda la aportación que han hecho a nuestro país y les recibimos en México como siempre los sabemos hacer los mexicanos con los brazos abiertos. [...] empieza la amistad entre los dos países” (*Henequen* 2005).

3) It is also notable that the hyphenated Korean descendants in Mexico were not active agents in the internationally scaled production but merely thematic subjects. The event committee in charge of the festival, *Comité del Centenario de la Inmigración Coreana a México*, was headed by a more recent Korean immigrant, Gwang Suk Lee, and funded by the Korean government. The presence of the first generation of Korean immigrants that were still alive along with their families was felt only in the festival’s inauguration ceremonies and a handful of interviews from *Henequen*. Although there have been efforts to connect the original *Asociación Coreana* founded by the first Korean immigrants and their racially mixed descendants and the later *Asociación Coreana* consisting in contemporary Korean immigrants, such is only a recent phenomenon.

That is, Mexico may have welcomed their economic contribution but had excluded them from the nationalist discourse of *mestizaje*, an ideological passport to *Mexicanidad*.

Commonly understood as the racial mixing of the Spanish and the indigenous Amerindians, *mestizaje* has been employed as a political ideology of modern national identity in post-revolutionary Mexico. At a glance, *mestizaje* seems to celebrate racial and cultural integration; however, it serves more as a mask of harmony that overlooks the racial division prevalent in Mexican society. It disregards not only the economic and political disempowerment of the indigenous but also the multicultural presence of various immigrant populations. Hence, investigating the presence of immigrants in pre-revolutionary Mexico is crucial in questioning the supposed validity in the multicultural aspect of *mestizaje*.

This thesis seeks to highlight the ambiguous and exclusive nature of Mexican *mestizaje* especially in the state of Yucatán by re-evaluating the significance of Korean immigration to Mexico. It identifies Mexico's disregard for multicultural presence—or more specifically, the presence of Koreans in this case—as the equivalent to a cultural shock resulting from a contradiction between the reality of Koreans as Asian immigrants and the racial/ethnic stereotypes based on the pre-existing race-class dynamics.⁴⁾ Such

4) Like any other concepts used for social categorization, race and ethnicity are as fabricated a notion as class is. It is difficult to distinguish the definition of the terms race and ethnicity, but this essay will use them under the following premise: (1) the categorization of race is based more on phenotypical differences whereby biological and ancestral origins are important and (2) that of ethnicity is based more on cultural differences whereby the origin in terms of cultural geography is most determinant in its definition (Wade 1997, 14-21). For example, race would refer to categories like *blanco*, *ladino*, *mestizo*, *indio*, and Asian; ethnicity would refer to those that accentuate differences in cultural practice like Maya, Yaqui, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean.

shock seems to have made it difficult for Mexican society to designate a social category and a stereotype to Korean immigrants in accordance with those of other Asian immigrants. Unlike how Chinese immigrants were dubbed as the agents of el peligro *amarillo*, negative stereotyping or any reference to Koreans were not prevalent at the time. Yucatán, in particular, seems to have had much difficulty with the non-place of Korean immigrants in its socio-economic system. That the first Korean immigrants landed on the Yucatecan state, therefore, is of great importance due to its already complex race-class dynamics.⁵⁾

To demonstrate the historical background of the Yucatecan perception of race and class that molded Mexico's contradictory attitude toward Korean immigrants, this essay will point to four social phenomena: (1) the ambiguity in the caste system and a consequently fabricated nature of racial stereotyping as demonstrated through the Caste War of Yucatán (1847-1901); (2) the decreased domestic labor supply and increased labor demand in Yucatecan plantations during the henequen boom (1880-1915); (3) the popular belief in the correlation between racial superiority and economic capability reflected in the immigration policy of Porfirio Diaz's regime (1876-1910); and finally, (4) the subsequent inflow of Asian immigration to Mexico (1887-). Then it will explore the history of Korean immigration in detail—the current state of research and the immigration process. Yucatecan newspaper articles and Mexican government documents from 1905 to 1909 will be referred to in order to highlight the region's economic interests and political stance in relation to the Korean population in Mexico.

According to Yucatecan print media and official documents regarding the

5) Throughout the essay, Asian immigrants refer specifically to the East Asian population—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean in order of arrival.

topic of Asian immigration from 1905 to 1909, Korean immigrant laborers seem to have met the least resistance in integrating into Mexican society among Asian populations.⁶⁾ However, the relative lack of resistance in part of Mexican society seems to have been true insofar as Korean immigrants made economic contributions and did not pose an economic threat to the local residents. The lack of Mexican sources directly referring to Korean communities indicates a relative “success” of Korean integration, which seems to be a result of a general confusion and the lack of political and economic necessity in assigning Koreans to a specific race-class category. Ironically, such confusion concludes in the ultimate failure of Korean ethnic identity being a part of Mexican identity as could be seen from Sahagun’s comment mentioned before. Under the premise that race is a created notion which is based off a combination of certain biological, cultural, and socioeconomic features, one’s position in the relations of production must have contributed to how a society defines race; and in this sense, Koreans were a racial shock to Yucatán that differed from Europeans, the indigenous, and even from their fellow Asians like the Chinese and Japanese.

II. Historical Context

1. Race-Class Relations during and after the Caste War, 1847-1901

In relating the Caste War to the reception of Korean immigrants, it is

6) When referring to the relatively successful integration of Korean immigrant population, I define integration from two perspectives. From a Mexican perspective, level of integration depends on the immigrants’ economic contribution to the nation and Mexico’s superficial societal inclusion demonstrated with favorable behavioral and racial descriptions. From an immigrant perspective, it depends on the degree of racial mixing and the promise of permanent settlement.

imperative to recognize the complex system of social categorization prior to their arrival that intertwined concepts of race and class and that at times emphasized one over the other. Race and class dynamics functioned as the foundation on which Yucatecan politics and economy established itself since the colonial times. The interracial relations and relations of production together configure into a tangible reality as a system of social categories consisting of Spaniards (*españoles*), Indians (or the indigenous, hereon referred to as *indios*) and the Castes (*castas*, hereon referred to as *mestizos*), the last being a term that the colonizers employed to refer to persons of mixed race.⁷⁾ Spaniards, indios, and mestizos were accorded distinct cultural norms and legal obligations, the most notable one of which was related to labor. For instance, *indios* had to pay tributes and provide forced labor for the Spaniards, while mestizos and other castes were not obliged to do so.⁸⁾ The Maya indios were pushed into a single class of peasantry as opposed to the Spaniards and mestizos who comprised the higher social classes (Patch 1993, 67).

After Mexico's independence from Spain, the race-based social categories reduced down to two in Yucatán: the non-indios called *vecinos*, *blancos*, or *yucatecos* (hereon referred to as *vecinos*) who enjoyed the privilege of civil rights and the indios who did not.⁹⁾ The new post-independent system of

7) There are three macro-categories as such, the Caste referring to mestizos and mulattos/zambos/pardos. Note difference between the caste *system* and the *category* called Caste (Reed 1964, 20).

8) During the colonial period, racial purity had more importance than did the race itself and the pyramid structure of power based on racial difference. For instance, *pure* native indios and caciques, were exempt from tribute and labor duties and enjoyed certain legal privileges like the Spaniards despite belonging to the general indio category placed at the most bottom of the pyramid. This would continue in post-independence Yucatán (Gabbert 2004, 19).

social categorization used for administrative purposes thus held indios in a legally subordinate position. Here, the new system may seem to highlight the relations of production between the indios and vecinos, thereby correlating racial hierarchy with socioeconomic stratification—for example, consider the indio peasants versus the vecino plantation owners (hereon referred to as *ladino hacendado* since most plantation owners were Spanish-speaking vecinos).¹⁰⁾ Nonetheless, the racially dichotomous system obscures the more complex socioeconomic stratification within the Yucatecan population, making it seem as if all vecinos belonged to the upper class and all indios to the lower class. The race-class distinction is not as clear-cut as mentioned and commonly believed, because the implication of the term Maya stretches beyond the mere notion of race.¹¹⁾ That is, there were poor Maya-

9) Everybody “not belonging to the pure Indian race” was called vecino. Though vecino, blanco, and yucateco have different nuances in terms of political and economic status, the three terms were used interchangeably as the opposite of indio (Gabbert 2000, 5).

10) The creoles took the position of the peninsulares in post-independence Yucatán whereby they formed the “ladino” society with the mestizos, as privileges and restrictions accorded to each social category within the old caste system deteriorated. Ladinos would refer to those of certain socioeconomic class with any degree of “white” blood. The term ladino had been originally meant for those who speak Spanish in Central America though not in Yucatán; however, it describes better the culturally and linguistically hispanicized population in Yucatán than do vecino, blanco, or yucateco (Gabbert 2000, 2; 2004, 63; Reed 1964, 22). Hence, in this paper, the term ladino refers to Spanish-speaking Spaniards and mestizos, and the term vecinos encompasses both Spanish-speaking and Maya-speaking Spaniards and mestizos but is associated more with the latter.

11) Gabbert questions the definition of Maya as an ethnic category with rigid standards based on language, phenotype, and culture, as he defines ethnicity in Benedict Anderson’s terms of *imagined community*. Apart from the fact that the Maya weren’t the only indigenous population in the area, many lower class vecinos who were not pure-blooded Maya spoke the Yucatec Maya language, lived and dressed like those labeled indios, and were as politically and economically disadvantaged as lower class indios (2000, xii-xvii). To dub the two parties of the war Maya and ladino discounts such important details that can redefine the Caste War in terms other than race/ethnicity.

speaking vecinos belonging to the lower caste and Maya indio elites (hereon referred to as *batabs*) somewhere in between the lower and upper caste, both of whom were referred to as Mayas. Although ladinos owned a majority of the haciendas, there were some economically well-off indios who owned land and poor vecinos that farmed. In fact, those indios were as active in politics as their vecino counterparts, and the poor vecinos lived no differently from their indio counterparts (Gabbert 2000, 4-5; Rugeley 2009, 12-15).

Despite the changes in the composition of the caste system and new loopholes created within ever since Mexico's independence, the social categories that placed importance on the overlapping of race and class still prevailed in popular dialect and continued to function as the skeletal foundation of Yucatecan politics and economy. The superficially race-emphasizing system eventually facilitated the view that the Caste War was a racial conflict between Maya indios and vecinos. In reality, the Caste War was an inevitable response to a series of Yucatecan domestic conflicts between federalists and centralists—both comprising ladino elite politicians—that took advantage of the peasant population for military purposes. The federalists pushing for Yucatecan state autonomy within the Mexican nation enlisted the peasant population to the military force against the centralists, with the promise of abolishing the onerous church obventions, relieving state and municipal taxes, and compensating them with a share of land (Reed 1964, 27-31; Rugeley 2009, 53-57). Such promise heightened expectations of the recruited peasants; nonetheless, it was not fulfilled, which in turn incited a rebellion leading to a war. It is here that identifying the subjective agent of the rebellion gets confusing—was it the Maya indios or the peasants that rebelled?

Considering what the so-called “Maya rebels” were comprised of, it is hardly true that the Caste War was strictly of a racial sort. Though the equation

of “Maya = indio = peasant” prevails in contemporary discussions of race and class in rural Latin America, in Yucatán’s case, peasants were generally Maya speakers which included both indios and vecinos (Gabbert 2004, 70). It had been disregarded that the Maya rebels consisted in Maya-speaking indio/vecino peasants and socially advantaged *batabs* and also that the federalists were the ones to arm the Maya for their own purposes in the first place. Furthermore, not all Maya-speaking peasants supported the rebels—either there had been no need to because the rebels did not reach the better controlled northwest of the peninsula or there were more political and material advantages to siding with the *ladino* elites rather than with the rebels (2000, 7). Therefore, it is a slight exaggeration to state that the Caste War had been an attempt at the liberation of Maya indios.¹²⁾ It should be recognized that “Maya” is a comprehensive term that implies biological race, phenotype, family history, language, cultural practices, and/or class—or, again, that race is more of a result of artificial categorization than an ontological standard for categorization. The caste system relied heavily on race, but there were enough loopholes within the system whereby it took more than biological race to describe a caste.

And yet, the *ladino* elites endowed much significance to the definition of race as simplified in biological terms. They attributed the origins of the war to the “traditional hate of the descendants of the Maya for all in whose veins runs a mere drop of white blood” at the same time they enticed the Maya to

12) Racial consciousness as “Maya” did exist among the rebels and therefore their agenda could be labeled “Maya liberation.” However, (a) the rebels’ ethnic consciousness was limited to those in Quintana Roo, a remote region in the southeast of Yucatán; (b) among those rebels were *vecinos* that joined the rebels as peasants, which therefore problematizes the definition of Maya as a race; and (c) the majority of the Maya *indio* peasants were not part of the rebels (Gabbert 2000, 14-15).

fight alongside with them (quoted in 2004, 53).¹³⁾ According to Wolfgang Gabbert, the racial interpretation suited the ladino intellectuals and politicians, because it “divert[ed] attention from the social origins of the rebellion and [from] the demands for political and economic reforms formulated by rebel leaders” earlier in the conflict (2000, 10). In other words, the ladino elites’ racist attitude conveniently belittled the possibility of a socio-political revolution into a racial war. That the war was based on race antagonisms is true only to the extent that it was presented as such, because identifying one’s race and attributing values are artificial practices based on the societal norms of the time. Based on what the common understanding and usage of the term “Maya” was, it seems that historical complication led all parties to conveniently reduce the label’s meaning to biological race. It is not to say that race antagonisms did not exist in Yucatán but that they were conditioned by something more than biological race. The root cause of the rebellion seems to have been more about economic burden and political disadvantage assigned to a certain uni-colorless population that was masked with the race category of “indio.” Then, the Caste War could be described as a vestige of colonial socioeconomic stratification based on race that which also overshadowed class identity.

However, the social and economic aftermath of the war necessitated a reversal of the previous emphasis on race in the race-class dynamics during the war. First, the social factor of this reversal stems from what the term “indio” came to connote towards the end of the war. As the notoriously

13) Not all Maya-speaking lower class in Yucatán supported the rebels, and the Maya-speaking hidalgos and batavs were definitely not lower class. Although prominent figures of the movement were mostly Maya-speaking lower class, dubbing the Caste War as a racial war hardly does justice to the diversity of race and class demonstrated in the rebel population (Gabbert 2000, 7-10).

violent conflict supposedly between the indios and the ladinos marked an end with the latter's victory, the indios—or more correctly, the peasants—were led to continue serving the ladinos by means of forced or disadvantageously contracted labor.¹⁴⁾ By then the racial interpretation and the violent nature of the war antagonized the indio as a race. Again disregarding the fact that not all peasants were indios, the term “indio” had become replaced with the more euphemistic “mestizo” because of the negativity implied in the former term. “Indio” came to symbolize rebel and violence to the ladinos and thus was officially negated by the ladino community in fear of recurrent “indio” rebellions (Joseph 1982, 71). In other words, indio as a social category with clear boundaries had been negated in the official discourse of race within Yucatecan society, although persistent in quotidian practices of verbal race-class distinction.

Secondly, the economic factor of the reversal comes from the change in the labor supply and demand. On one hand, peasant population in Yucatán plummeted due to the Caste War. The exact percentage varies by source, but Yucatecan population had decreased by approximately 40 to 50 percent due to war casualties (Wells 1985, 26). Furthermore, a bulk of the already-reduced peasant population migrated to the safer northwestern region of the peninsula like Campeche and Mérida where the armed conflict did not reach. The violent nature of the war took its toll by drastically decreasing the labor supply for the plantations that were vital to the state economy.

14) The Maya rebels whose presence lasted for more than half a century in Quintana Roo in the course of the War may make the usage of the term “failure” seem exaggerated; however, considering the near decimation of the Maya in the Yucatán region towards the end of the War and the remaining Maya's inevitable inclusion into the plantation economy, it could be said that little had been tangibly gained in part of the rebels, or the Maya-speaking peasants.

On the other hand, hacendados and state officials were incapable of having stable control over the labor force as the state became abound with ex-militant peasants with weapons to fight with but without haciendas to work in. Although not much had changed in terms of labor relations, the decreased availability of labor in a socio-politically insecure period put more emphasis on class in the uniquely complex race-class dynamics of Yucatán more towards the end of the war. Such change in the labor force would meet the rise of the henequen plantations in the later decades of the nineteenth century (Rugeley 2009, 116-118, 126-128; Wells 1985, 156).

The employment of concepts like race and class in characterizing Yucatecan social dynamics as such well demonstrates the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity within the ideology of *mestizaje*. For instance, the caste system prior to the War and to Korean immigration had been an embodiment of inclusive *mestizaje*. Albeit based on a strong correlation between race and class categories that facilitated the economic marginalization of the indios, the caste system places the indios within Mexican society. However, the way in which the Caste War has been characterized is an example of exclusive *mestizaje* that “otherized” the indigenous by antagonizing them as violent rebels for political purposes and blatantly favoring the ladino population. A similar tension is played out in reverse in the case of Korean immigration. As would be proved later on, the Korean immigrants are not endowed a certain social category to be placed within Mexican society, yet are not antagonized as the other.

2. Race-Class Consciousness and Labor Conditions during the Henequen Boom, 1880-1915

Contrary to the effects of the exhausting war, the henequen boom in the

late nineteenth century brought about an unprecedented economic vitality in the state of Yucatán. By 1880, Yucatán had become the richest state in Mexico in less than a decade as the demand for henequen and commerce with Europe continuously increased (Joseph 1982: 33). With such high henequen demand, the particularly labor-intensive nature of henequen plantations in the northwest came to establish the crux of Yucatecan economy. Consequently, absolute control over the labor force and stable labor relations became imperative to the hacendados most of whom were ladino elites.¹⁵⁾ In order to identify the level of race-class consciousness within such effort to gain control over the labor force, it is necessary to note two aspects of the henequen plantations—the hybrid nature of henequen producing infrastructure as hacienda-plantations and the high labor demand in the henequen industry.

Despite similarities in terms of patriarchal and highly inter-dependent relations between the estate owner and the laborer, haciendas and plantations differ in terms of the scale of market that they take part in and of how property functions as status marker.¹⁶⁾ In the case of Yucatecan

15) Unlike sugar or cotton, henequen requires a permanent labor supply as it can be harvested all year long and needs labor in all phases of its production (Wells 1985, 156). Although the henequen plantation relied much on technology to increase production capabilities in late nineteenth century, this did not quell the high labor demand. The *desfibradora*, a mechanical rasper that separates raw fiber from henequen leaves, accelerated the processing of henequen, which meant that the plantations could work with more henequen harvests by more laborers for more profit. (Brannon 1987, 36-37).

16) According to Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz, “[a hacienda] is an agricultural estate operated by a dominant landowner and a dependent labor force organized to supply a small-scale market by means of scarce capital in which the factors of production are employed not only for capital accumulation but also to support the status aspirations of the owner. [On the other hand, a plantation is] an agricultural estate operated by dominant owners [...] and a dependent labor force organized to supply a large-scale market by means of abundant capital in which the factors of

henequen plantations, the characteristics of haciendas and plantations co-exist. Like haciendas, ownership of henequen estate was a status marker as could be seen from the political and economic prowess that the *divina casta* (divine caste), a handful of oligarchic estate owners, had. Like plantations, henequen estates were major suppliers in the internationally-scaled market of henequen. As was typical of the Porfirian model of modernization, the henequen plantations were a fusion of modern technology, international trade, and Yucatán's past socioeconomic system. In such a hybrid business structure of hacienda-plantation, the socioeconomic stratification intrinsic to the hacienda system was more pronounced due to the scale of the business characteristic of plantation economies.

A prime business for status establishment and capital accumulation as mentioned above, the henequen industry expanded further throughout the end of the century. Yet, such expansion of production was heavily dependent on the relatively low production cost, which meant the industry had a high demand for “cheap” labor. That is, despite in context of the Porfiriato's modernization ideology, the Yucatecan hacendados opted for more human labor than technology as it was more cost-efficient and independently available than the latter. Since the Yucatecan henequen plantations suffered a chronic shortage of domestic labor supply relatively to the high labor demand, hacendados had to search beyond Yucatán for labor sources as early as 1881—for example, they imported Yaqui prisoners-of-war from Sonora, recruited contract laborers and political dissidents from all over Mexico, and actively sought foreign immigrant laborers by sending business envoys to Europe and Asia. As a result, the henequen labor force

production are employed primarily to further capital accumulation without reference to the status needs of the owners (quoted in Wells 1985, 114-115).”

increased from 20,767 to 80,216 between 1880 and 1900—almost four times larger (Brannon 1987, 39). It also was a very valuable labor source due to the shortage of indio labor as a result of the near decimation of the indio-laborer population during the Caste War. Hence, the high labor demand had the ladino hacendados focus on the value of indio and other immigrant populations as a labor source rather than as merely an inferior race. However, perceiving them as laborers more so than as racial others did not change much of the Yucatecan social structure where race played a significant role in positioning one in the relations of production.

The end of the Caste War and the beginning of the henequen boom together had brought forth an emphasis on labor over race as such, which could be seen as a change from the colonial equilibrium in the significance of race and labor and from the superficial emphasis on race over labor during the Caste war. That is, although racial identity and socioeconomic identity still overlapped, the ladino hacendados were interested in indio peasants more as laborers than as of a certain race in the context of post-Caste War henequen plantations. The ladino perspective further obscured the standard of race by emphasizing labor over biological race, while at the same time it concretized the liaison between racial and socioeconomic hierarchies. Nonetheless, the general leverage on laborer identity over racial identity of the indios does not mean that Yucatecan hacendados suddenly turned color-blind. Rather, they were more systematically, though implicitly, race-conscious as could be seen in Porfirio Díaz's nation-wide immigration policy and its effects in Yucatán's race-class dynamics.

3. From Xenophilia to Xenophobia—Porfirio Diaz’s Immigration Policy and the Inflow of Asians, 1876-1910

The Porfiriato’s immigration policy is widely recognized to have intended a “whitening” of Mexico. Encouraging European foreigners to immigrate to Mexico could be seen as a governmental response to a domestic social phenomenon rooted in racial stereotypes vestigial of the colonial times—that the “white” is as superior as to improve the country’s average economic status with the capital and diligence characteristic of the race.¹⁷⁾ In other words, it was a discriminatory policy that enticed a specific population, the white Europeans, rather than a comprehensive, color-blind effort to contribute to the country’s economic development. Some scholars claim that class and cultural distinctions had replaced racial categories in post-independence Latin America as could be inferred from an old Latin American adage, “money whitens.”¹⁸⁾ Yet, even in that adage, whiteness still remains an indicator of a desirable social standing. The significance of social status may have given way to that of socio-economic status where economic capability became a

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17) According to Jürgen Buchenau, such xenophilia in part of Mexico stems from centuries of Spanish colonialism that established Europeans as a social faction to be treated with respect. Apart from the immigration policy itself, another way the Porfiriato’s xenophilic attitude had been demonstrated was through the advertisement of Mexico as (a) a place of abundant, rich soil worthy of investment, (b) populated with “somnolent, lazy, and superstitious Indians” incapable of taking advantage of the natural resources as opposed to the supposedly “diligent” Europeans (Buchenau 2001, 29-34; Reed 1964, 10).

18) Mestizos, in a sense, had been a marginalized population that had difficulty seeking an acceptable socioeconomic status neither within Spanish nor indio societies in colonial Mexico. Along with peasant farmers and plantations workers—the lower strata of the already-lower-class indios—they did not have social mobility as an option. The largely middle-class mestizos became socially mobile after independence from Spain, thereby blurring the racial categories—white and indio—with economic class and cultural background, thus, enabling the conclusion that race categories became less accentuated (Buchenau 2001, 29; Thompson 1974, 147).

powerful means of climbing up the social ladder, but it does not nullify the strong connection between whiteness and money—race and class. The fact that whiteness indicated not only capital but also diligence, a behavioral feature distinct from biological features implied in race, correlates with the Diaz regime's project to "civiliz[e]" the Mexican race that was aimed for the nation to head toward "an eventual cultural and racial fusion of the creole, *mestizo*, and indigenous people" (Buchenau 2001, 32).

It is also important to note that despite the Porfirians' overwhelming preference to white Europeans, Mexico as a whole had an ambivalent attitude toward foreigners in general—a combination of xenophilia and xenophobia. For instance, not everybody supported the importation of European immigrants. The xenophilic immigration policies often met nationalist responses best described by the saying, "Mexico for the Mexicans" (Romero Castilla 2005).

Nonetheless, such mixed response to foreigners became naturalized due to the combination of the Porfiriato's modernizing impulses and the racial stereotype designated to the indios. The combination resulted in identifying certain foreigners as a modernizing force that is apt for Mexico's progress and indios as of an anachronistic race that is not (Francisco G. Cosmes quoted in Romero Castilla 2005). Unlike how the indio peasant's laborer identity was more important than their race identity to Yucatecan elites for very economic reasons at the time, racist rhetoric persisted in Mexico as a whole. The Porfiriato's xenophilia subsumed its xenophobia by directing the antagonism to the indio peasants and away from the foreigners.

Regardless of the degree of the government's zeal to import European immigrants, the xenophilic immigration policy came to have meager effects to the whole of Mexico in terms of "socially civilizing" the general

population and filling the gap in the labor supply despite its influence on Mexican economy.¹⁹⁾ Contrary to having the nation whitened, the Diaz regime's immigration policy resulted in unassimilated European enclaves and in a more ethnically diverse immigrant population, the fastest-growing being Asian. As the following quote from *Economista Mexico* published in 1908 indicates, the case of Yucatán was no different in needing immigrant labor, if not moreso than any other states for its henequen boom:

While the growth of henequen cultivation has been extended, [...] the number of laborers do not correspond to the amount of work that offer the activity and aspirations of our agricultural business. These differences have shown signs of a noticeable unease produced by the plantation owners' anxiety in providing themselves with the labor that they need [...] With the purpose of remedying these troubles, the private enterprise tried to introduce laborers from Italy, Spain, the United States, Jamaica, Cuba, China, and Korea at the expense of great sacrifices. Only from the last two countries were they able to obtain flattering results.²⁰⁾

The article above articulates the intense labor demand in the agricultural, or henequen, industry and the failure of European immigration. By the time

19) The immigration policy had effects on Mexican politics and economy pertaining to the upper class as could be seen in how well represented the European immigrants and their descendants were in the Diaz cabinet, how they married into distinguished creole families of Mexico, and how they appropriated dominant positions in Mexican commerce, for example in the textile and steel industries (Buchenau 2001, 32-33).

20) “A medida que el desarrollo del cultivo del henequen se ha venido extendiendo, [...] el numero de jornaleros no corresponde a la cantidad de trabajo que ofrecen la actividad y aspiraciones de nuestras empresas agricolas. Estas diferencias han venido acusando un sensible malestar producido por la ansiedad misma de nuestros agricultores para proporcionarse los brazos que necesitan [...] Con el fin de remediar estos males, la iniciativa privada ha procurado, a costa de grandes sacrificios introducir jornaleros procedentes de Italia, Espana, Estados Unidos, Jamaica, Cuba, China y Corea. Solo de estos dos ultimos han podido obtenerse resultados halagadores” (Rafael de Zayas Enriques 1908, quoted in Romero Castilla 1997, 132).

the article was published, not only did the Europeans already settle in enclaves but Yucatán was also not the most favorable destination for European laborers despite the Porfiriato's eagerness to facilitate the settlement process for any white European immigrants. As such, the inflow of Asian immigrants initiated with a partial recognition of the failure of European immigration and of the possible suitability of non-European immigrants to Mexico's needs. The more utilitarian approach to immigration came to focus on the economic value of the immigrants as a necessary labor supply rather than on their social value as a civilizing racial force.

4. Asian Immigration to Yucatán, Mexico

1) Chinese Immigration

The history of diplomatic exchange between Mexico and Asian countries like China and Japan can be traced back to as far as 2250 B.C.; yet, what is more pertinent to the discussed complications in Mexican race-class dynamics starts in the nineteenth century (Cott 1987, 64; 이자경 2006, 355-357). In Mexico, the view that non-European immigrants are more suitable to its need for both agricultural and industrial labor became conspicuous with the efforts of Matias Romero, a diplomat and finance minister of Mexico from 1856 to 1882. As a strong supporter of importing Asian immigrants to work the Mexican soil, Romero published many articles and governmental requests, one of which proceeds as the following:

It seems to me that the only colonists who could establish themselves or work on our coasts are Asians, coming from climates similar to ours, primarily China. The great population of that vast empire, the fact that they are agriculturalists, the relatively low wages they earn, and the proximity of our coast to Asia, mean that Chinese immigration would be the easiest and most convenient for both our coasts. [...] Chinese

immigration has been going on for years [...] the results have been favorable.²¹⁾

As such, Chinese immigration and trade were deemed necessary as a stimulant to economic development in Mexico. The influx of Chinese immigrants was most notable in the northern states of Mexico like Baja California, Sonora, and Chihuahua, but soon spread south and reached Yucatán's henequen plantations. By 1910, 18 percent of the Chinese population in Mexico resided in Yucatán, which became the second most Chinese-populated state in Mexico (Cott 1987, 70). Chinese immigrants in Yucatán were hired in railroad construction sites and henequen plantations. As soon as the labor contracts ended, they were able to self-employ as small-business entrepreneurs such as grocery shop owners, Chinese labor contractors, and bankers, most of which functioned to serve their own ethnic communities and/or mediate between their own ethnic communities and Yucatecan society (이자경 2006, 365). During and after the contract, Chinese labor made an immense contribution to Yucatecan economy as such.

However, Chinese immigrants were also perceived as an economic threat to Mexicans in a national scale. For instance, the Chinese were publicly condemned as “contribut[ing] nothing to local commerce or industry,” and stealing jobs from Mexicans. Not only the low wages the Chinese laborers

21) Excerpt from Romero, Matias. *Revista Universal*. Mexico City. Aug 20, 1875: “Me parece que los únicos colonos que podrían venir a establecerse o a trabajar en nuestras costas, son los asiáticos, procedentes de climas semejantes á los nuestros, y principalmente de China. La numerosa población que hay en ese vastísimo imperio, la circunstancia de haber entre ella muchos agricultores, la de ser relativamente bajos los jornales que se les pagan y la misma proximidad al Asia de nuestras costas del Pacífico, harían que la inmigración china fuese la más fácil y al mismo tiempo la más conveniente para nuestro litoral de ambos mares” (quoted in Romero Castilla 2005).

would work for but also the transformation of many Chinese laborers into petite bourgeois had induced an economically motivated and socially influential campaign against the Chinese within Mexico. The economic concern regarding the growth of the Chinese population developed into a public discourse of Chinese hygiene and morality. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Mexican media and politicians started to antagonize the Chinese as el *peligro amarillo* that was “causing all evils of a hunger epidemic and a social cancer of immorality” (quoted in Hu-DeHart 1982, 3-4).

The heated debate on Chinese immigration either as an economic contribution or as *peligro amarillo* is well substantiated by written records on the issue.²²⁾ For example, in December 1904, Porfirio Diaz delegated Jose Covarrubias and Mario Romeo to research the impacts/prospects of Chinese immigration to Mexico. As a supporter of Chinese immigration, Covarrubias defended the Chinese population in Mexico by stating that their labor is a necessary economic force and that they do not intend to take over the country since they are incapable of essentially influencing or integrating into Mexico. Romeo, on the other hand, argued against Chinese immigration by stating that they are “immoral” people and that indios are much better workers. The opposing views on Chinese immigration demonstrate a tug-of-war between groups of different economic concerns. There are those that emphasize the labor necessities for Mexico’s economic development and those that view the rising socioeconomic status of foreigners as domestic competition and thus economic threat to Mexicans.

22) Apart from the quoted reports by Covarrubias and Romeo, there are letters by Ignacio Romero Vargas asking for more Chinese immigration, articles in *Economista Mexico* and *Revista de Mérida* opposing and/or criticizing Chinese presence in Mexico, and more.

Here, two points should be noticed regardless of the positivity or negativity in the opinion on Chinese immigration. First, the debate is engendered by a change in the dominant class identity among the Chinese. Secondly, the debate suggests the inferiority of Chinese immigrants as a complete other. That is, they are either “barely noticeable” and “incapable of influence” or “physically inept,” “lazy,” and “immoral” unlike Mexicans (Cott 1987, 367; Hu-DeHart 1982, 4-6). As the ethnic inferiority of the Chinese had been a constant upon which Mexican officials and intellectuals implicitly agreed, the change in the Chinese immigrants’ class from contract laborer to small entrepreneurs became the variant that influenced the Mexico’s response to Chinese immigration. The element of class had been determinant in molding the Mexican reception of Asian immigrants.

2) Japanese Immigration

As for the Japanese immigrants, they faced situations quite different from the Chinese immigrants’. From the 1880’s, Japan during its Meiji era needed a way to manage their surplus population and Mexico was suffering from a lack of labor source. Thus, immigration made sense to both countries that happened to have centuries of on-and-off diplomatic history. Under favorable conditions, the first Japanese immigration took a form of invitational colonization based on Japan’s thorough investigation prior to any immigration-related treaties and business transactions (Ota Mishima 1997, 35). The Japanese government went so far as to purchase a considerable area of land in Chiapas for the purposes of encouraging Japanese settlement. Like the friendly diplomatic terms between Mexico and Japan, the general reception of Japanese was favorable as well. For instance, Covarrubias, who referred to the Chinese as “degraded beings,” insisted in differentiating the Japanese

from the Chinese. He recognizes Japan as one of the “military powers which maintain international equilibrium” whose people adopted western civilization, and thus superior to the Chinese (quoted in Hu-DeHart 1982, 5).

The favorable conditions prove that the immigration process had been a diplomatic agreement between Japan and Mexico on equal terms, and therefore that the Japanese immigrants were less fettered in terms of social and economic discrimination. In a sense, though, they were secluded from mainstream Mexican society in a way different from how the Chinese were—as a racial other albeit not inferior to Mexicans. Later on into the 1900s, the Mexican government recruited Japanese immigrant laborers along with the Chinese to be injected into the railroad constructions sites, sugar cane plantations, and the mining industry. By 1910, the number of Japanese immigrant laborers in Mexico amounted to 10,964 (52). What is curious, though, is that there had merely been 96 Japanese immigrants in Yucatán, which had already been notorious for its poor labor conditions.²³ It seems as though the Japanese immigrants were to a certain extent able to avoid the race-class complications faced by Chinese and Korean immigrants.

III. The First Korean Immigrants in Yucatán, Mexico, 1905-

1. Overview

The aftermath of the Caste War, the rise of the henequen industry, the Porfiriato's modernizing impulses and immigration policies together begot an increase of Asian immigration, a small part of which had been Korean. The first Korean immigrants arrived at Yucatán, Mexico in 1905 when the region

23) 1900-1910 census reports on Japanese population in Mexico (Ota Mishima 1997, 54; Yi 2006, 292-293).

had been going through a constant juggling between race and class as dominant social categories that drove the country's economy. With such historical context, the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity within the ideology of *mestizaje* is apparent in the case of the first wave of Korean immigration as is in the case of the Caste War.

The Mexican government and Yucatecan hacendados had economic interest in Koreans as a labor source that was disproportionate to the sociopolitical motivation in looking after immigrant settlement. On one hand, the aftermath of the Caste War and the Porfiriato's agenda of modernization demonstrate the economic reason to welcome Koreans. The economic value of Korean labor can be further inferred from reference to Koreans in official documents and Yucatecan print media during labor recruitment in Korea. On the other hand, the illegal aspect of the immigration process itself suggests Mexico's disregard for legal and political responsibilities, a consistent attitude that correlates with the Mexican treatment of Korean henequeneros. That is, they were economically motivated to welcome Korean labor but not politically motivated to protect or aid Korean settlement in Yucatán.

2. The Korean Perspective and Current State of Research— Implications of the Lack of Primary Sources

The dominant view among Korean scholars on the first wave of Korean immigration in 1905 thus far is that it had been a form of virtual slavery illegally put to practice by the Asociación de hacendados de Yucatán (Association of plantation owners of Yucatán) and John G. Meyers, the immigrant broker hired by the hacendados. Working long hours, receiving wages half the amount of those of Chinese laborers, and having their passports confiscated by hacendados, Koreans did indeed face poor material

conditions in Yucatán unlike what they had been promised prior to their travel to Mexico. Victimized the Korean immigrant laborers as having been duped into ruthless slavery and unilaterally antagonizing Mexico, however, decontextualizes Korean immigration by ignoring the pre-existing race-class dynamics in Mexico. It easily leads to dismissing the epistemological challenge in the race-class dynamics that Yucatán faced after the Caste War and at the heat of *peligro amarillo*. The simplified reading of the Mexican treatment of Korean immigrants induces an erasure of Mexico's historically contradictory attitude towards racial and ethnic mixing. Hence, refraining from referring to Korean labor conditions as slavery by no means denies the terrible material conditions that the Korean immigrants faced in Yucatán but rather intends to shift the focus from the Korean perspective to the Mexican perspective on Korean integration into Mexican society. The removal of emphasis on the victim status of the Korean immigrants intends to clarify how Mexico's economic and political interests aligned with their treatment of a different racial/ethnic group in the course of Korean immigration.

Often beautified as a tragic but patriotic history, the first wave of Korean immigration to Mexico is a fairly recent subject of study. Most of the already scarce literatures pertaining to Korean immigration are written from a Korean perspective and are heavily dependent on Korean, Japanese, and English sources. The sources with records of the immigration process and numerical data on the Korean population are limited to articles from Korean newspapers, diplomatic correspondences between Yucatecan hacendados, Japanese diplomats, and Korean officials, and census reports within Yucatán.²⁴⁾ Furthermore, there are not many sources recording Korean

24) All immigrants who arrived at Mexico prior to 1908 were not subject to Mexico's revised immigration law of 1908, which stipulated an official record of entrance and

immigrant life in Yucatán. Those depicting Korean life in Mexico are limited to Japanese reports on Korean populations abroad and several articles written by American reporters and Korean and Chinese businessmen from California that were featured in Korean newspapers. There is also a memoir by José Sánchez Pac, a second generation Korean-Mexican, that presents an account of the Korean odyssey based on the descendant community's collective memory.²⁵⁾ However, the problem remains that it is difficult to extrapolate a Mexican perspective in any of them.

In order to further analyze the significance of Korean immigrants in the changing race-class dynamics of Yucatán, Mexico, the study necessitates more sources containing Mexican representations of Korean laborers. There is no doubt that Korean immigrants faced not only poor labor conditions but also difficulties in socially integrating into its host society like any other immigration population would have. Yet, the insufficient primary sources in Mexico render it difficult to make a definite statement on the process of their integration especially from a Mexican perspective. Mexican sources are limited to inconsistent census reports and a meager amount of news articles with reference to the Korean immigrant laborers and their descendants.

Nonetheless, the vacuum of information suggests Mexico's attitude

identification of all immigrants. Hence, there is not much documentation regarding the Koreans that arrived in 1905 as recorded by the Mexican or Yucatecan government (Ota Mishima 1997, 12; 이자경 2006, 72-73).

25) José Sánchez Pac was born on the steamship *Ilford* in the way to Mexico in 1905. Considering that Sánchez Pac was still an infant during the first four years of the labor contract, the factual accuracy of his memoir, *Memoria de la vida y obra de los Coreanos en México* that starts narrating from the point of departure from Korea, is questionable. The memoir is significant as the one and only primary source written by one of the first Korean immigrants in Mexico that depict major events and general lifestyle of the immigrants but is less relevant to the Mexican perspective that this essay intends to focus on.

regarding Korean immigration—a passive exclusion of Koreans. As would be demonstrated in the following sections, the Mexican immigration policies and the Yucatecan hacendados themselves seem to have created the foundation for the racial shock in the first place. Koreans were a labor source valuable enough to illegally consume. Yet, once in Mexico, the unique combination of their ethnicity and economic status proved to be different from that of Chinese immigrants and indigenous laborers, which made it difficult for Yucatecan society to find Koreans a distinguishable place in its race-class dynamics. The lack of Mexican reference to Koreans implies a level of disinterest in part of the host society, a lack of political and economic motivation to resolve the racial shock initially received.

3. Economic Value of Korean Labor in the Immigration Process, 1904-1905

1) As Demonstrated in Korea

John G. Meyers, an international immigration broker hired by henequen plantation owners of Yucatán initially attempted to recruit immigrant laborers in China and Japan. However, he failed to recruit any, as the henequen plantations were already notorious for their deplorable labor conditions among the Chinese and Japanese (Romero Castilla 1997, 133; 이자경 2006, 76). He then traveled to Korea in 1904 in order to advertise the recruitment in collaboration with Oda Kanichi, the head of the Seoul-based Continental Migration Company with intentions of manipulating Korean migrant population based on Japanese interests. Meyers succeeded in recruiting a total of 1,033 Koreans via advertisements on local newspapers like *Daehan Ilbo* and *Hwangseong Shinmun*.²⁶⁾ The advertisements depicted Mexico as a promising destination of wealth with a history of welcoming Asians:

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.²⁷⁾

The advertisements also listed the conditions of the labor contract that would turn out to be different from the reality that the Koreans had to face at the henequen plantations. The following excerpt from the advertisements highlights sections of the contract that would be proved false in the next chapter:

- [Workmen] receive wages of from \$1.30 in Mexican silver to \$1.50 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 to \$2. Actually, many Chinese workmen earn \$3 per day.
- The wages of the workmen are calculated every week and are paid without the traveling costs being subtracted from them.
- The living cost for one person per day is approximately \$0.20 in Mexican silver to \$0.25 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 \$100

26) In fear of worsening anti-Japanese sentiment and of a more competitive job market for the Japanese in the U.S. due to Korean emigration, Japan wanted the Korean government to extend its prohibition of emigration to Hawaii and California. News of appalling working conditions in Yucatán eventually made the Korean government prohibit all emigration in 1905. By directing Korean emigration to Yucatán instead of Hawaii, Japanese authorities accomplished its goal without seeming to pressure the Korean government (Park 2006, 139-140; Patterson 2005).

27) Excerpt from “Agricultural Recruitment Advertisement” published in *Hwangshung Shinmun*, Dec 24, 1904 (quoted in Patterson 1993, 90).

in bonuses,²⁸⁾

In addition to the exaggerated depiction of Mexico and the superficially favorable labor contract, Meyer's collaboration with Kanichi had another illegal aspect. They had ignored the royal edict by King Kojong that prohibited Korean emigration unless approved by David W. Deshler, an American entrepreneur. Korean overseas emigration matters carried out by anybody other than Deshler were considered illegal by Korean law at the time. Since Meyers and Kanichi did not collaborate with Deshler, they were unable to have Korean passports issued directly by the Korean government. Hence, they opted to have the passports issued via the French minister, Victor Collin de Plancy, with the aid of various other foreign embassies stationed in Seoul. Whether the Korean government had been aware of the transactions and condoned it due to Japanese affiliations or not is still in dispute (Park 2006, 142-3; Patterson 1993; Romero Castilla 1997). Regardless of the Korean government's awareness of the business transaction, however, Meyer's conscious commitment to the illegal immigration highlights the desperation in part of Meyers and, in turn, the hacendados in procuring Korean labor. For Meyers and the Yucatecan plantation owners, the economic necessities outweighed political integrity to the extent that they had actively arranged an "illegal" immigration.

2) As Demonstrated in Mexico

Apart from the economic zeal demonstrated in part of Meyers and the Yucatecan hacendados, the frequent reports on the progress of Korean

28) Excerpt from advertisement appeared as an enclosure with Ariyoshi Akira, Consul in Pusan, to Baron Komura Jutarō, Foreign Minister of Japan, March 14, 1905 (quoted in Patterson 1993, 90).

immigration to Mexico in Yucatecan media also indicate the region's high level of interest in Koreans as a labor source. For instance, as early as January 1905, Yucatecan print media starts to mention the possibility of Korean immigration albeit in a pessimistic manner:

I don't believe the Koreans would turn out as well as the Chinese. Koreans come from a cold latitude and the climate of Yucatán is too hot for them. Even the Chinese suffer from the temperature, but they endure much better than the Koreans will be able to. There are certain conditions in Yucatán to which Koreans will never be able to overcome [...] The Chinese are much more adequate [for labor in Yucatán] than Koreans.²⁹⁾

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The article above featuring a letter by Lian Hsun, a Chinese business director in Yucatán, compares Koreans and the Chinese in specific terms of labor—whether one is more capable than the other in adapting to Yucatecan climate. “The Chinese are much more adequate than Koreans” for reasons no other than being physically compatible to the environmental labor conditions in Yucatán. The article does not compare the two populations in terms of behavioral and moral attributes like how the Porfirians did to rationalize the racial superiority of White Europeans over indios. In addition, although Hsun discourages Korean immigration with the attempt to have Yucatán maintain its demand for Chinese labor, the fact that his letter had been featured in *La Revista de Mérida* in its entirety is significant.

29) “[N]o creo que los coreanos vayan a resultar tan buenos como los chinos. Los coreanos vienen de una latitud fría y el clima de Yucatán es demasiado calido para ellos. Hasta los mismos chinos sufren [...] de la temperature, pero la soportan mucho mejor de lo que podran hacerlo los coreanos. Hay ciertas condiciones en Yucatán a las que los coreanos nunca podran avenirse. [Los chinos] estan mucho mejor adecuados que aquellos” (“Palabras del Encargado de Negocios de China: La inmigracion coreana no dara resultados en Yucatán.” *La Revista de Merida*. Jan 31, 1905.)

Considering the nature of this article as a lengthy special feature article, the Korean labor must have been of some interest to the region.

Newspapers like *La Revista de Mérida*, *La Revista de Yucatán*, *El Peninsular*, and *El Eco del Comercio* continue to mention Korean immigration for the following four months. Since February of 1905, the newspapers follow Meyer's progress in recruiting labor in Northeast Asia, contracting Korean laborers, then traveling to Mexico with them. In a span of four months, the newspapers trace the whereabouts of Meyers and *Ilford* that carried the Korean immigrants from Seoul to Salinas Cruz, Coatzacoalcos, Progreso, and Mérida.³⁰⁾ Furthermore, the articles well reflect Mexico's economic interest in Koreans by continuing to specifically concentrate on their laborer identity. On the day of the Korean arrival, for instance, *La Revista de Mérida* provides a description of the Koreans that facilitate their image as "people of labor." On one hand, Koreans are "robust," "of good color," and "with a Herculean build," which make them physically apt for labor. On the other hand, they are "frugal" and dilligent, which make them behaviorally apt for labor.³¹⁾

As demonstrated in Yucatecan print media till May 15, 1905, Mexico viewed and described Korean immigrants primarily, and perhaps only, as a

30) *El Eco del Comercio*. May 15, 1905;

El Peninsular. May 15, 1905;

La Revista de Mérida. Jan 31, Feb 21, April 4, May 13, and May 15, 1905;

La Revista de Yucatán. May 16, 1905.

31) "Los mas son gente robusto y de buen color habiendo no pocos de constitucion verdaderamente herculea. La proporcion en favor del numero de jovenes es notable y muchachos de diferentes edades, y con el rostro flacido, corrian jugando y comian o conversaban alegremente. Vinieron tambien mujeres [...] La Junta de Inmigracion se muestra satisfecha, y asi, como es de esperarse, los coreanos que son frugales y tienen aspecto de ser gente de trabajo, Llenan las necesidades que reclama la agricultura yucateca, se habra resuelto el grave problema de ocasiona la falta de brazos para el campo" ("La llegada de los Coreanos, son robustos y con aspecto de buena salud." *La Revista de Mérida*, May 15, 1905)

source of labor. That is, regardless of the economic prospects being bright or not, Korean immigration had been worthy of media attention specifically as laborers that would comprise the working, lower class of Mexican society.

4. Life in Yucatán during the Four-Year Contract, 1905-1909

1) General Labor Conditions in the Henequen Plantations

Life for the Korean immigrants during the four-year labor contract, however, failed to be of equivalent interest to Mexico as the immigration process had. Based on the primary sources available thus far, there seems to have been no media coverage within Mexico with reference to the Korean immigrant laborers ever since they were assigned to the 22 henequen plantations around Mérida on the day of their arrival. What is available in terms of providing a glimpse of Korean life during the contract are *Barbarous Mexico* by Kenneth Turner and *Memoria de la vida y obra de los Coreanos en México* by Jose Sánchez Pac, both of which depict working conditions in the henequen plantations as “slavery.”³²⁾

With the intention of preventing U.S. intervention that would support the Diaz regime, *Barbarous Mexico* accounts Turner’s observation of “virtual slavery” in the henequen plantations of Yucatán as a way of demonstrating the cruelty of the Diaz regime. Turner describes the transaction of laborers and their working conditions and argues their likeness to slavery. The following excerpt sums up his impression of the working conditions of the

32) Just like in the case of Pac’s *Memoria de la vida y obra de los Coreanos en México*, the factual accuracy of Turner’s *Barbarous Mexico* is questionable. There is a high possibility of biased analysis on the *hacendado-haciento* relation due to Turner’s anti-Diaz American perspective; therefore, it is difficult to elicit a Mexican perspective from Turner’s account. Nevertheless, both sources are valuable as two of the few available firsthand observations on working conditions in Yucatecan plantations.

henequeneros:

The slaves of Yucatán get no money. They are half starved. A large percentage of them are locked up every night in a house resembling a jail. If they are sick they must still work, and if they are so sick that it is impossible for them to work, they are seldom permitted the services of a physician. The women are compelled to marry men of their own plantation only, and sometimes are compelled to marry certain men not of their choice. There are no schools for the children. Indeed, the entire lives of these people are ordered at the whim of a master, and if the master wishes to ill them, he may do so with impunity (Turner 1910, 16).

He also mentions the physical abuse of the laborers in graphic detail and further emphasizes the inhumanity of virtual slavery that the henequen industry strived to maintain (24).

Memoria by Sánchez Pac also testifies to the physical abuse of henequeneros in terms of work overload and beating. According to Sánchez Pac, Korean laborers were required to fulfill a daily quota of harvesting 30 bundles of henequen leaves (3,000 leaves) per person.³³ If they did not meet the quota, they were required to work overtime even on Sundays (Sánchez Pac 2005, 10).

2) Comparison with the *Indios*

Although the works by Turner and Sánchez Pac do not provide much of a Mexican perspective, their comparison of Korean and indigenous henequeneros is note-worthy in that they highlight how race had been the basis of differentiation within the class of henequeneros. Turner, for example, makes a conscious effort to emphasize the hardships of the Maya and Yaqui indios while merely mentioning the existence of Chinese and Korean laborers (Turner 1910, 15-26). Here, the implication is that the indigenous

³³) A single leaf of henequen is approximately 3 to 6 feet long, whose edges are thomed.

populations suffered more from the systematic social oppression than did the Asian populations due to Mexico's history of conflict with the indigenous—the Caste War characterized as a conflict between the Maya and ladinos in Yucatán and the Yaqui rebellion in Sonora. As for Sánchez Pac, he directly mentions how Koreans were treated differently from the indigenous albeit sharing the same deplorable working conditions. For instance, “Koreans were not whipped if they didn't complete the minimum amount [of work],” but the indigenous were corporally punished for the same occasion. That is, within the class of henequeneros, racial categories seem to have been crucial in identifying social status and differentiating general treatment.

3) Comparison with Other Asian Populations

What reveals more of the Mexican perspective on the issue, though, is the political attitude/understanding in part of the Mexican government and Yucatecan hacendados regarding the difference between Korean and other Asian populations. The preceding Chinese and Japanese immigrants either came in large amounts or with protection from their home countries in the form of carefully reviewed labor contracts and embassies on Mexican soil. As both countries had established a diplomatic relationship with Mexico, the Chinese and Japanese governments had been actively involved in the process of Chinese and Japanese immigration. Such seems to have made possible for the two countries to deter their citizens from signing labor contracts to work in the notorious henequen plantations in 1904. However, the political, economic, and social unrest within Korea at the time would result in a different scenario for the Korean immigrants—with no embassy nor practically practiceable sovereignty, the Korean government was in fact oblivious (or feigned oblivion) to the illegal transaction of Korean labor

(Patterson 1993, 97).³⁴⁾

Furthermore, unlike Chinese and Japanese immigrants, once Koreans arrived and settled in Mexico, they were in no position to compete with or threaten the members of the host society in terms of economic prowess under guaranteed socio-political protection provided by their home country. From the very beginning of the immigrant laborer recruitment process till the end of the four-year labor contract in Yucatán, the Korean government proved incompetent in providing protection to its own people.

There indeed had been efforts in part of the Korean government to reach its citizens in Mexico after news of the appalling working conditions spread throughout California and then to Korea. The Korean Ministry of Foreign Relations attempted several times to ask for verification of the “slavery” in Yucatán and an assurance of protection for the Korean immigrants.³⁵⁾ In

34) The Korean government had been caught in an international political turmoil in which the country was a geo-politically strategic region to the then world powers of the eastern hemisphere like China, Russia, and Japan. By November 1905 when the Korean immigrants were half a year into fulfilling the four-year contract in the henequen plantations of Yucatán, Korea was forced to sign the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty, the harbinger to formalizing Japanese colonization of the Korean peninsula. Signed on November 17, 1905, the Japan-Korea Protectorate Treaty (*Eulsa* Treaty) deprived the Korean Empire of its diplomatic sovereignty and functioned as a precursor to the Japan-Korea Annexation Treaty of 1907 and the subsequent annexation of the Korean Empire to the Empire of Japan in 1910. Yet, ever since the invasion of the Empire of Japan in 1902, the Korean peninsula functioned as a military base for the Empire of Japan which socially conditioned the economic/social/political unrest that triggered the Korean immigrants-to-be to voluntarily travel half-way around the globe in desire of economic stability. Considering that the recruitment advertisements were run on major Korean newspapers for an extended period, it is less likely that the Korean government was not aware of the illegal transaction; however, with Korean officials under Japanese political restraint, it seems even less likely that the situation would have been different even if the Korean government was aware of the illegal transaction.

response, the Yucatecan government sent several telegrams noting that claims of slavery is “entirely unfounded” and how the Japanese Legation in Yucatán can confirm this.³⁶⁾ Furthermore, in defense of the Yucatecan hacendados, Olegario Molinas and Meyers claim legitimacy in the immigrant transaction and deny all charges of slavery in the henequen plantations. The underlying logic is that it is impossible to maltreat Korean immigrants since their labor is of considerable economic significance to Yucatán. The following excerpt from a letter by Meyers that addresses the Korean government demonstrates how the Yucatecan hacendados viewed Korean immigrants purely as an economic asset.

We have brought European laborers but all has been a failure; the only ones that have adapted to the climate are the Chinese and the Koreans. In this perspective, the Koreans are the most qualified to work in

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35) Excerpt from Telegram n. Ga 6, sent by Mexican Telegraph Company, Aug 13, 1905: “Recientemente hemos sabido que mas de mil subditos coreanos emigraron a Yucatán en el entendido de que era uma operacion auspiciada por vuestro gobierno y haciendo caso omiso de la ausencia de relaciones diplomaticas hemos recibido el periodico *mun hung* [en el original] y cartas de coreanos y chinos y nos hemos enterado con pena de que han sido sometidos a esclavitud y privados de su libertad solicitamos a vuestro Gobierno garantias de que se preservaran y protejeran sus vidas y libertades impidiendo con ello cualquier calamidad hasta que nuestro Gobierno los proteja. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Corea” (quoted in Romero Castilla 1997, 150-151).

36) Excerpt from Oficio n. 3062. Section of Justice and Public Instruction of the Government of the state of Yucatán and note from Secretary of Foreign Relations, Sep 13, 1905: “[M]e es grato manifestarle que indudablemente son falsos los informes que se han recibido en el mencionado reino, tanto en lo referente a la esclavitud como en lo que concierne a la alimentacion, pudiendo asegurarse que los coreanos residentes en Yucatán estan mejor alimentados que los que, en su pais, prestan servicios en las labores agricolas”; “Your telegram concerning Korean labourers received. I assure than 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 Yucatán. Japanese Legation here can also inform you” (quoted in Romero Castilla 1997, 152).

Yucatán. It is important for us to remember that we have invested a considerable amount of money for which we should acquire corporate benefit. These immigrants should be treated well so that at the end of the 4 or 5 years, they can voluntarily return to their country.³⁷⁾

Here, Koreans are described as an economic asset to be protected, which is a stance consistent with that of the Mexican government and Yucatecan hacendados during the immigration process. However, the political initiative of guaranteeing Korean safety did not keep up with the economic motivation. Korean diplomats were deterred by Japanese officials to visit Yucatán and the Korean *benequeneros* did not acknowledge the Japanese Legation as being a representative of them. Hence, there simply was no way for Korea to demonstrate their concerns for the Korean henequeneros in practice by way of political pressure.

The Korean immigrants were no longer with a country to represent them and protect their rights on foreign soil due to the lack of an internationally acknowledged national identity and their then diplomatically defunct government. As a consequence, they were no political pressure to the Yucatecan or Mexican government by 1905. That is, there had been no political reason for the Mexican government to honor the contract and guarantee the safety of the Korean immigrants. The lack of national representation and of political power in part of the Koreans reduced their identity as foreign citizens to mere agricultural labor force in the eyes of the

37) “Se han traído trabajadores europeos pero todo ha sido un fracaso, los únicos que se han adaptado al clima son los chinos y los coreanos. Se ha visto que, en esa perspectiva, los coreanos son los más calificados para trabajar en Yucatán. Es importante para nosotros recordar que hemos invertido una cantidad considerable de dinero por lo que debemos adquirir beneficio corporativo. Para ellos estos inmigrantes deben ser tratados bien para que al cabo de 4 o 5 años puedan regresar a su país por voluntad propia” (Meyers quoted in Jo 2006, 63).

Mexican government unlike in the case of Chinese and Japanese immigrations.³⁸⁾

Asians as a whole were racialized as the other, represented as either a tool of positive use for Mexico (“*motores de sangre*,” “*berramientas*,” and “*bracero*”) or a socioeconomic threat to Mexicans (“*peligro amarillo*”) (이자경 2006). Nonetheless, Korean immigrants were yet to be defined or even recognized as the others in Yucatán and Mexico at large during their first four years. There had been no need to systematically racialize Koreans because they were not threatening to the host society in any significant way. Koreans may have inadvertently been categorized as Chinese due to the two ethnicities’ physical likeness, but *peligro amarillo* does not actively nor directly point to Koreans as subject to racialization. That is, though the adjective “yellow” may imply Asian in general, the agents of the “Yellow Peril” were actively referred to as the Chinese population in Mexico, not Korean. Least resistance, nonetheless, does not imply that there had not been discrimination against the Koreans. Race and class discrimination existed in terms of labor conditions, though not as an act of active exclusion.

5) Life after the Four-Year Contract, 1909-

There not only may have been a difference in general treatment of the Korean and indigenous laborers within the henequen plantation, but there also was a difference between the slavery-like system of *peonaje* applied to indio laborers and slavery-like condition that the Korean immigrant

38) In a domestic level, the absence of a Korean embassy and the Korean immigrants’ refusal/denial of Japanese officials as their representatives on Mexican soil contributed to their lack of national and cultural representation. In an international level, the status of Korea as a Commonwealth to Japan made the Korean government’s effort overshadowed by Japan’s interest.

laborers suffered during the contract. That the Korean immigrants were able to choose to discontinue the contract highlights the difference between the Koreans and indios regarding their position within the Yucatecan social structure. For instance, Koreans were able to negotiate their working conditions after the end of the first contract because there came to exist labor brokers who were Korean. Since 1909, Korean brokers mediated between hacendados and Korean laborers under diverse conditions—whether wooden beds or rice would be provided, how that would configure into the wage, etc. The possibility of negotiation and partial agency in part of the Koreans implies a more advantageous status for Koreans compared to the indigenous.

In addition, though lacking support from both Korea and Mexico, Korean immigrants were not entirely at lost without a country to return to after completing the four-year labor contract they signed via Meyers. Several Koreans—mostly ex-soldiers of the Korean Empire—who paid a ransom of 80 to 100 pesos were released from the contract almost a year earlier in July 1908 and went on to found a Korean community that was soon to become the *Asociación Coreana de Mérida* (Korean Association of Mérida).³⁹⁾ Officially registered as the first and only Korean organization of Mexico in May 1909, the Korean Association became the center of the post-contract settlement, religious and cultural activities, and the Korean independence movement in

39) It is important to note that majority of the founders of *Asociación Coreana* were ex-soldiers of the Korean Empire because of their influence on forming a Korea-centric identity of the organization. The ex-soldiers organized a semi-military school as a branch of the *Asociación* for the purposes of preparing for their possible participation in the Korean independence movement and of representing their patriotism and loyalty to their home country (이자경 2006). Such influence not only suggests the first-generation Koreans' expectation to return to Korea but also highlights the resistance in part of the immigrants to integrate into Mexican society.

Mexico in collaboration with other Korean Associations in California (이자경 2006, 500-501, 514-517). Here, the fact that the Yucatecan government registered the *Asociación Coreana* as an official organization representative of the Korean immigrants may suggest the government's acknowledgement of Korean presence in the Mexico. However, the dearth of any other documents regarding the Korean immigrants with the exception of the registration of the association counterbalances such suggestion.⁴⁰⁾ The absence of the Korean communities in Mexico's official records and the media again indicate the Mexican and Yucatecan governments' lukewarm response towards a Korean identity.

Mexican perception of Korean immigrants changed at pace with the economic performance of the state of Yucatán as well. That is, the initial economic motivation in welcoming Korean immigrant laborers eventually dissipated with the end of the henequen boom. The end of the four-year contract eventually ruptured the Yucatecan understanding of Koreans based on class identity, as Koreans were no longer limited to be legally bound to the class of henequen laborers.

Regardless of the Mexican reception of Koreans, however, the Korean community persisted in maintaining connections with its home country. Since 1910, the Korean Association in Mérida expanded into Mexico City and other cities of Yucatán, then later on into other states like Campeche, Veracruz, and Baja California. Up until Korea's independence from Japan in 1945, the Korean Associations spread throughout Mexico supported and financially contributed to the Korean independence movement from afar.⁴¹⁾ With the

40) References to the activities of *Asociación Coreana* are yet to be found apart from the registration record in the Archivo General del Estado de Yucatán.

41) The history of Korean immigration to Mexico became of academic interest in Korea

Korean Association of Mérida and Mexico City as the hub of a fairly vibrant independence movement, the first generation Korean immigrants in Mexico were able to hold onto Korea as their home country and identify themselves as Koreans—all of which seemed to be of no particular importance to Mexican society at the time.

6) The Descendants of First-Generation Korean Immigrants

Despite the abandonment by their home country, the first and mostly second generation Korean immigrants in Mexico continued to financially support the international movement for Korean independence with the Korean Associations as a locomotive. However, as soon as Korea gained its independence from Japan at the end of World War II, it would split in two and embark on a war that still continues today—the Korean War between the North and the South. Korea, which by then was an imagined homeland for the second and third generations, was no longer Korea as the first immigrants had known and been part of, to their dismay. The idea of Korea as the common denominator for the imagined Korean community had eventually lost its cohesive strength due to a series of political unrest in the Korean peninsula during the first half of the twentieth century. As a testimony to the crumbling imagined community, the Korean Association in Mérida founded near the end of the labor contract in 1909 was virtually shut down by 1962. After more than half a century since the first immigrants' arrival at Yucatán, the Korean immigrant communities gradually lost in touch with their

starting the late 1990s mainly for their participation in the Korean independence movement. The recent studies seem to have shed new light on Korean-Mexicans as primarily and originally “Korean” that remained patriotic and loyal to their home country—a point that complicates the first Korean immigrants' process of integration into the host country.

imagined Korea.

The disconnection between Korea and the Korean descendants in Mexico seems to have deepened over the years as evident in the change of cultural practices today. For example, 90% of second generation Korean-Mexicans and 99% of third generation Korean Mexicans do not know how to speak the Korean language as of 2005; the majority of them are multiracial because many first and second generation Koreans in Mexico married with Mexicans as could be inferred from the change in surnames and phenotype; and most importantly, they do not identify themselves as Koreans (이자경 2006, 693).⁴²⁾ There also seems to have been changes in terms of profession that contribute most to the establishment of a class identity, which eventually shed the lower-class henequenero identity off the Korean population in Mexico. When comparing surveys conducted and published in 1927, 1965, and 2004, many Koreans worked as self-employed businessmen or in the service sector.

The drastic change in self-identification of the Korean descendants as a certain race and/or class as such seems to suggest a successful racial and cultural integration especially over the past half century. The Korean immigrants and their descendants seem to have had no particular resistance from Mexican society as opposed to how the Chinese were publicly antagonized and inferiorized.

42) For example, 74% of the second generation Korean-Mexicans had multiracial parents; 93% of the third generation Korean-Mexicans had multiracial parents according to a survey conducted at Mérida in 2005 (정경원 2005, 162).

IV. Conclusion

In previous research conducted by Korean scholars, the first Korean immigrants in Mexico are often referred to as *kimin*, translated as “abandoned people or immigrants” (Park 2006, 147). Although the word is intended to imply the Korean government’s disregard for its people on Mexican soil throughout the past century, the Korean immigrants have been, in a sense, abandoned by not only Korea but also Mexico. Korean immigration and immigrant settlement did not cause much social conflict as Chinese immigration did through the Yellow Peril; and, therefore, it would seem like Koreans were well received compared to other Asian populations.⁴³⁾ However, lacking in political and later in economic motivation to take active interest in the Korean immigrant community, the Mexican government has ultimately failed to integrate Korean immigrants into Yucatecan and, in turn, Mexican society.

The idea that the Korean government abandoned the immigrants in Mexico highlights a possible explanation for the eventually lukewarm response to Korean immigration in part of Mexican society. At a time during which Japan’s rising power in the Pacific threatened Korean sovereignty and which Korea had no diplomatic relations with Mexico, the Korean immigrants were unable to receive due protection from their home country, let alone from the host country, Mexico. Since Korea and Mexico were not engaged in a political rapport that could have implicitly obliged the

43) Moises González Navarro argues that Korean laborers may have been less exploited than the Chinese laborers in the plantations. His logic is that the Japanese government would have endorsed the Korean laborers who by then would be categorized as Japanese because of Japan’s colonization of Korea (286). However, the antagonism strongly expressed by the Koreans against the Japanese embassy in Mexico deterred Japan’s administrative influence on the Korean population.

Mexican government to honor the norms of the immigration law, Mexico lacked political motivation to legally protect the Korean immigrants. Abandoned by both Korea and Mexico as such, the Korean immigrants could be said to have been virtually country-less. In fact, most of the first-generation Korean immigrants literally did not have a country in a sense that they did not have any document to prove their identity as pertaining to a particular nation.⁴⁴⁾ The lack of official documentation for and about the Korean immigrants especially within and by Mexico indicates the host country's general indifference, which implies Mexico's passive exclusion of Korean identity from the discourse of *mestizaje*.

In combination with the lack of political motivation to look after the Korean immigrants, their partial removal from the context of Yucatecan race-class dynamics seems to have affected the Mexican reception of Koreans. Most of the Koreans left the plantations after the four years of contract and therefore were no longer bound to a class of henequen laborers, which had been the one and only kind of identity that the Mexican government and Yucatecan elites were concerned for when regarding Koreans. That is, there seems to have been no special need to resolve the previous racial shock since

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44) The Koreans came to Yucatán with Korean passports, which had been confiscated by the hacendados upon their arrival at the henequen plantations. As most hacendados destroyed the passports in fear of having to send their new Korea laborers back to their country and as the Mexican government did not grant citizenship or special immigrant status, the Koreans were left with nothing to prove their identity and thus did not have any property rights (이자경 1997). By the time several Korean immigrants requested Mexican documents for proof of identity in pursuit of property rights after the contract, the Korean Empire had already been annexed to the Empire of Japan. As a result, Korean immigrants with identification documents were officially Japanese, but neither Korean nor Mexican. Many Koreans were adamant not to be classified as Japanese and therefore were without any documents to prove their identity, which eventually worked to their disadvantage in terms of lacking political and economic rights.

Koreans were no longer seen as a labor source—their singular value to Yucatán. The lack of interest in Korean labor continued on to the next decade as the economic value of remaining Korean laborers dwindled along with the price of henequen after World War I, and Korean immigration was no longer discussed in public media nor in diplomatic correspondences.

As such, Mexico gradually grew indifferent towards its Korean population whose place in Mexican society as Koreans became precarious. Forgotten by Korea due to a political turmoil in East Asia that ended up in its colonization and disregarded by Mexico due to their diminishing economic value and small size, the Korean immigrants were indeed without a place. Yet, despite such non-place in the discourse of national/cultural identity, they did not have a choice in terms of deciding the physical place in which they were located. Their physical reality was Mexico and material survival preceded ideological survival in importance. In other words, while Korean as an ethnicity was unable to become a part of what constitutes *Mexicanidad*, Koreans as physical individuals inevitably mixed into Mexican society both biologically and culturally. The lack of official documentation and public discussion regarding Koreans indicates Mexico's passive exclusion of Korean identity at the same time it indicates a passive inclusion of Koreans by both Mexico and the Koreans.

By the Law of Alienage and Naturalization, most of the first generation Korean immigrants that requested documents of identification must have gained Mexican nationality in their later years. By the principle of *jus solis*, the following generations born on Mexican soil came to have Mexican nationality and no other since their parents most likely did not have Korean nationality as approved by paper (Fitzgerald 2005, 176, 179). In other words, all official documentation would identify the first Korean immigrants and their

descendants as Mexicans but not Koreans.⁴⁵⁾ Such is partly due to the precarious status of Korea as a nation in the first half of the twentieth century, but it is also attributable to the ambiguous position of the Korean *henequeneros* in Mexico's race-class dynamics at the start of the twentieth century. Their identity as laborers that are not indigenous and as asians that are not Chinese may have facilitated their integration into Mexican society, as it had not been subject to active discrimination and exclusion as much as the indigenous or Chinese population. That is, aided by Mexico's lack of concern for Korean immigration, there seems to have been a legal and social loophole whereby the Korean people were able to racially mix into Mexican society.

The previously mentioned comment by Sahagun, then, functions to highlight the contradiction within the Mexican reception of Korean immigrants—a silent denial of Korean identity and yet a silent absorption of Korean ethnicity. Labeled as either Korean or Mexican according to necessity, not only the Korean *henequeneros* of 1905 but also the Korean descendants in Mexico today may have been lacking a place in the discourse of *mestizaje*. Such indicates that the ideology of *mestizaje* is a fragmented and contradictory imagination that fails to recognize and embrace the multitudinous ethnicities within its boundaries, one of which is Korean.

In conclusion, the analysis of Mexican reception of Korean immigrants not only reveals the contradictory nature of *mestizaje* but also serves as an invitation for further research on the matter of the first Korean immigration to Mexico. By highlighting the previously overlooked aspect in the history of Korean immigration, this essay opens up a new approach to understanding

45) Nonetheless, the first generation immigrants' document of identification issued by the Mexican federal government addresses the "origin," which was filled in as either Japanese or Japanese/Korean.

the process of Korean integration in Mexico. Although the analysis is based on the lack of articles and official government documents produced in Mexico, the non-Mexican sources indicate a strong sign of Mexican disinterest in immigrant communities if not for the reason of economic development. Hence, further investigation on the subject is imperative, as it may clarify the Mexican perspective that at this point is based on the dearth of available primary sources.

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초 록 19세기가 끝나갈 무렵 멕시코는 카스트 전쟁, 에네켄 산업의 팽창, 그리고 빠르피리오 정권을 겪으며 사회 전반에 걸쳐 격동의 시기를 보내고 있었다. 그에 더불어 위의 사건들이 당시의 이민 정책과 맞물려 동아시아 이민이 증가했고 이는 특별히 유까탄 주의 인종-계급 역학을 복잡하게 만들었다. 이민 초기 노동자로서의 정체성에도 불구하고 동아시아인들은 멕시코에서의 장기 거주를 통해 새로운 사회계급을 형성하였고 결과적으로 그들을 기존의 사회역학관계에 위치하는 것에 어려움을 불러일으켰기 때문이다. 이 와중에 주목할 것은 멕시코가 해외 이민자들을 받아들이는데 있어 모순적인 태도를 보인다는 것이다. 초기에는 동아시아인들을 반겼을지 모르나 그들은 궁극적으로 메스띠사헤 담론에서 배제된 것으로 보이기 때문이다. 위의 동아시아 이민자들 중에는 1905년 5월 15일에 유까탄 주 메리다에 도착하여 에네켄 농장에서 일하게 된 1,033명의 계약 노동자들로 이루어진 한국인들이 있었다. 그들의 이야기는 멕시코의 모순적 태도와 더불어 당시 인종-계급 역학의 복잡성을 드러내는 경우로 주목할 만 하다. 동아시아의 정치적 혼란 속에서 한국 정부에 의해 잊힌, 시간이 갈수록 줄어드는 경제적 가치와 적은 인구수로 인해 멕시코 정부의 무관심에 묻힌 한인 이민자들은 확실히 국가적, 문화적 정체성의 면에서 멕시코에서 자리할 곳이 없었던 것이다. 즉, 물리적 개인들로서는 불가피하게 멕시코 사회에 혼합되었을지 모르나 한인이라는 민족성에 있어서는 메히까나다드를 구성하는 일부가 되지 못한 것이다. 본 논문은 1904년에서 1909년 까지의 한-일-멕시코 정부 서신들과 유까탄 반도 내 신문 기사들의 부재를 조사함으로써 멕시코 정부와 지배계급의 관점에서 한인 이민의 의의를 재해석한다. 한인 이민자들의 삶을 노예 생활로, 한인 이민사를 한국만의 역사로 단순화하는 경향이 짙은 한국 아카데미아의 관점은 달리 한인 이민과 정착 과정을 멕시코 역사의 맥락에서 바라본다. 그런 과정에서 멕시코 정부와 유까탄 농장 소유주들이 한인 이민자들에 관련하여 어떤 경제적 정치적 이해관계를 가지는지를 짚어내고, 어떻게 둘의 불균형이 멕시코가 한인 개개인의 신체를 수동적이게나마 생물학적으로 수용하는 동시에 한인 정체성을 수동적으로 배제하는 지를 시사한다.

핵심어 계급, 메스띠사헤, 멕시코, 유까탄, 인종, 에네켄, 인종, 카스트 전쟁, 빠르피리오 정권, 한인이민