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## Correspondence

# The exploration of dental careers among high school girls in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period

## KEYWORDS

Taiwan;  
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During the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945), medical institutions in Taiwan focused solely on training male medical practitioners. Although women were not absent from the medical profession, they were excluded from recognized professional medical roles. The patriarchal values of early society left girls feeling uncertain about life paths outside of marriage, or unsure whether it was possible to pursue their passions confidently and professionally. However, the right to pursue medical education was not completely denied to girls at that time. Fortunately, education ultimately saved girls' lives, allowing them to develop their own ideas and create opportunities through learning.<sup>1,2</sup>

Even in those days, it was still difficult for girls to receive higher education, and the opportunity was available only to those girls from families with sufficient financial resources. With the increasing access to basic education, more and more girls in Taiwan continued to attend high school. After graduation, in addition to marriage and family formation or employment, they finally had the career option of continuing their studies and receiving higher education. The first female Taiwanese physician (Dr. A-Hsin Tsai) and dentists (Dr. Hsiu-Yu Kuo and Dr. Hisayo Suzuki) who studied medicine and dentistry in Japan returned to Taiwan to practice in 1921 and 1928, respectively. They graduated from the Tokyo Girls Medical College and the Tokyo Girls Dental College, respectively, and were good role models for

women studying medicine and dentistry at that time, demonstrating that women could engage in medical and dental professional work besides the housework.<sup>3,4</sup>

In the past, research on the history of women studying medicine was mostly limited to accounts of female medical figures who returned to Taiwan after completing their medical studies. However, the career stage before they became medical personnel was relatively less discussed.<sup>1</sup> This study, through the excavation of historical materials, provided a glimpse into the opportunities for high school girls to pursue a career in dentistry during the Japanese colonial period. A commemorative collection of graduation memoirs from the Taipei Second Girls' High School (published in Tokyo, Japan in 1994) included a photograph of the school's dental treatment room, documenting the girls' learning and observation activities in the dental clinic (Fig. 1).

This is a photograph with rich and lively content, showing the oral examination (or dental treatment) and the students' learning and observation activities in the dental treatment room of the Taipei Second Girls' High School during the Japanese colonial period. In this photograph, a dentist performed an oral examination or dental treatment on a student, while four other students appeared to be observing, assisting the dentist, or preparing dental materials. During the Japanese colonial period, the dental care system did not clearly define the duties and responsibilities

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**Figure 1** The photograph of the dental treatment room in the Taipei Second Girls High School (taken in 1934), recording the girls' learning and observation activities in this dental treatment room.

of dental assistants. In addition to the provision of nurses in hospital dental departments, dentists in general dental clinics and school dental treatment rooms would inevitably need someone to assist them when performing dental treatment-related procedures. In the school dental treatment room, the dentist invited the students to observe the process of the oral examination (or dental treatment) and gave them some basic training, asking them to assist in the process of the oral examination (or dental treatment). Although the students only observed and assisted the dentist, this process allowed them to understand the scope and nature of a dentist's work and provided them with the opportunity to explore a career in dentistry.

The Taipei Second Girls' High School was established in 1919 and closed after World War II in 1945. Its dental treatment room was established in 1933 with support from dentists from the Red Cross Hospital. The photograph in this article was taken in 1934. We believed that this dental treatment room served not only as a place for dental treatment but also as a place for girls to explore the dental profession. They sat at the dental unit, experiencing the feeling of being a dental patient and the dentist's movements during oral examination or dental treatment. They observed and took notes, perhaps capturing the key points in performing the oral hygiene procedure. Hands-on experience in preparing dental materials helped them become familiar with and understand dental materials. The act of assisting the dentist helped them realize the dentist's work and the dental clinic environment. Perhaps during the learning and observation activities in the dental treatment room, those girls had already planted the seeds of wanting to become dentists in the future.

Although the primary goal of girls' education during the Japanese colonial period was to train women to be good wives and mothers, as the popularity of education increased,

the number of women pursuing higher education also increased. This also fostered a trend for girls to aspire to pursue specialized training, and dentistry was no exception.<sup>1,2</sup> By 1939, there were 40 female practicing dentists in Taiwan, located in Taipei, Hsinchu, Taichung, Tainan, and Kaohsiung Prefectures. Taipei Prefecture had eight female practicing dentists.<sup>5</sup> By at least the 1930s, the image of a female dentist existed throughout Taiwan, becoming a reference point for high school girls in their career exploration. The increase in the number of female practicing dentists in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period may be related to the learning activities in high school dental clinics.

## Declaration of competing interest

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

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