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Feng-Chou Cheng

Mei-Huei Li

Chiao-Wen Wu

Chun-Pin Chiang

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## Correspondence

# The outstanding Taiwanese women studying dentistry during the Japanese colonial period: Analysis based on the membership list of the Taiwan Dental Association published in 1958

### KEYWORDS

Medicine;  
Dentistry;  
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High school girl culture;  
Gifted education

During the Japanese colonial period in Taiwan, it was extremely rare and challenging for the outstanding women to pursue medical or dental education, and most had to travel to Japan to study. Constrained by traditional patriarchal norms, opportunities for girls to study medicine or dentistry in Taiwan were severely limited. Only girls from the wealthy families or those with exceptional talent could break through these barriers and study medicine or dentistry in Japan, becoming a small number of female physicians or dentists who made significant contributions to improve early social health and maternal and child hygiene.<sup>1–4</sup>

The first Taiwanese female physician, Dr. A-Hsin Tsai, studied at the Tokyo Girls' Medical College in Japan. After completing her medical studies, she returned to Taiwan in 1921, becoming the first Taiwanese female physician in Taiwan to receive modern formal medical education. Similarly, the first Taiwanese female dentist, Dr. Hsiu-Yu Kuo, studied at the Toyo Girls' Dental College in Japan. After completing her dental studies, she returned to Taiwan in 1928, becoming the first Taiwanese female dentist in Taiwan to receive modern formal dental education.<sup>1</sup> The research on Taiwanese girls studying dentistry during the

Japanese colonial period is very scarce. For example, our knowledge of the educational institutions and the distribution of the female students studying dentistry at that time is limited. This article attempted to use the historical research method to explore relevant documentary records and conduct a preliminary discussion on this issue.

A membership list of the Taiwan Dental Association, published in 1958, recorded the gender, graduating dental school, and county/city of the practicing dentists at that time. They were mostly dentists who had studied dentistry in Japan during the Japanese colonial period, with only a very small number being dentists who had evacuated from the mainland China to Taiwan. Therefore, this study highlighted the research value of exploring the situation of academically talented Taiwanese women studying dentistry during the Japanese colonial period. We calculated the number of the Taiwanese female dentists based on their graduating schools and county/city of practice, and further calculated the gender ratio of dentists. The results are shown in Table 1.

This membership list included 717 dentists. Of them, 504 (62 women and 442 men) graduated from the dental schools in Japan, representing 70.3 % of the 717 dentists. Among

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**Table 1** The number of the practicing dentists who graduated from Japanese dental schools before 1945 and their gender distribution and practicing places in Taiwan in 1958.

	Number of the female dentists calculated based on their graduating schools				Number of the male dentists	Number of all dentists	Proportion of the female dentists (%)
	A	B	C	Total			
Keelung City	2	2	0	4	11	15	26.7
Taipei City	8	8	0	16	75	91	17.6
Taipei County	1	2	0	3	27	30	10.0
Taoyuan County	0	2	0	2	17	19	10.5
Hsinchu County	0	1	0	1	16	17	5.9
<b>Northern Taiwan</b>	11	15	0	26	146	172	15.1
Miaoli County	0	0	0	0	9	9	0
Taichung City	4	0	0	4	28	32	12.5
Taichung County	0	2	0	2	27	29	6.9
Changhua County	0	3	0	3	31	34	8.8
Nantou County	2	0	1	3	12	15	20.0
Yunlin County	0	0	0	0	15	15	0
<b>Central Taiwan</b>	6	5	1	12	122	134	9.0
Chiayi County	1	0	0	1	37	38	2.6
Tainan City	2	3	0	5	33	38	13.2
Tainan County	5	0	0	5	20	25	20.0
Kaohsiung City	1	3	0	4	26	30	13.3
Kaohsiung County	0	0	1	1	15	16	6.3
Pingtung County	3	2	0	5	24	29	17.2
<b>Southern Taiwan</b>	12	8	1	21	155	176	11.9
Yilan County	0	0	0	0	16	16	0
Hualien County	2	1	0	3	3	6	50.0
<b>Eastern Taiwan</b>	2	1	0	3	19	22	13.6
All regions of Taiwan	31	29	2	62	442	504	12.3

A: Japan Girls' Dental College; B: Toyo Girls' Dental College; C: Tokyo Girls' Dental College.

In this study, Japanese dental schools referred to those located in the mainland Japan and Choson before the end of World War II. There were no records of the practicing dentists in Taitung County and Penghu County, Taiwan, in 1958.

these dentists who studied in Japan, women comprised only 12.3 % (62/504). The largest group of the female dentists graduated from the Japan Girls' Dental College (31), followed by the Toyo Girls' Dental College (29) and the Tokyo Girls' Dental College (2). Taipei City had the largest number of dentists (including both men and women), accounting for 18.1 % (91/504). Proportionally, the female dentists (25.8 %, 16/62) were more concentrated in Taipei City than the male dentists (17.0 %, 75/442). Although Hualien County had only 6 dentists, it had the highest proportion of the female dentists (50 %, 3/6), followed by Keelung City (26.7 %, 4/15), Nantou County (20.0 %, 3/15), and Tainan County (20.0 %, 5/25). Geographically, the practicing dentists were concentrated in the northern and southern regions of Taiwan, accounting for 34.1 % (172/504) and 34.9 % (176/504) of all dentists, respectively. This was also true among the female dentists, accounting for 41.9 % (26/62) and 33.9 % (21/62) of all female dentists in the northern and southern regions of Taiwan, respectively. Proportionally, the female dentists (41.9 %, 26/62) were more concentrated than the male dentists (33.0 %, 146/442) in the northern region of Taiwan. The northern region also had the higher proportion of the female dentists (15.1 %, 26/172) than each of the other three regions in Taiwan.

Taiwan did not have its first batch of dental graduates trained locally until 1961. Based on the findings of this study, the main challenges for women studying dentistry during the

Japanese colonial period were the scarcity and difficulty of access to the dental education. At that time, there were no dental education institutions on the island of Taiwan, and the only medical education institution only trained men, leaving women without opportunities to study medicine or dentistry. Women aspiring to study medicine or dentistry had to travel to the mainland Japan, defying societal pressures and applying to medical or dental schools.<sup>1</sup> Due to the societal norms and the prevailing view of women caring for women, their medical careers often fell into obstetrics and gynecology or dentistry. During the Japanese colonial period, the female physicians and dentists were often considered exceptional. They were highly respected for their professional expertise, and as female clinicians, they encouraged more women to seek medical care, thereby contributing to improvements in household hygiene. Women's entry into the medical profession was a result of breaking down numerous restrictions in a conservative society. However, in the immediate post-World War II period, the proportion of the female dentists in Taiwan was extremely low. This indicated that the changing post-war political environment and social atmosphere further suppressed opportunities for women's professional development. Even so, they continued to contribute to improve oral health throughout Taiwan, in both urban and rural areas.

Furthermore, the academic performance of these female dentists in their learning process indicated that they

were all gifted students graduating from girls' high schools. However, during the Japanese colonial period, Taiwan lacked a specific system for the gifted education, let alone resources specifically for girls. These few female high school students at the top of the educational ladder became a unique group, creating a distinct "high school girl culture" in terms of cultural upbringing, scholarship, thought, and social movements. This also fostered a trend of the outstanding students choosing to study abroad for specialized education. After returning to Taiwan, many of them continued to shine in the workplace, with many of them performing no less than men.<sup>2,5</sup> For example, Dr. A-Hsin Tsai, the first Taiwanese female physician, and Dr. Hsiu-Yu Kuo, the first Taiwanese female dentist, can be said to be the pioneers of modern gifted female students in Taiwan.

### Declaration of competing interest

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

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Feng-Chou Cheng<sup>††</sup>

*Chia-Te Dental Clinic, New Taipei City, Taiwan  
School of Life Science, College of Science, National Taiwan  
Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan*

Mei-Huei Li<sup>††</sup>

Chiao-Wen Wu<sup>\*\*</sup>

*Department of Special Education, College of Education,  
National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan*

Chun-Pin Chiang<sup>\*</sup>

*Department of Dentistry, National Taiwan University  
Hospital, College of Medicine, National Taiwan University,  
Taipei, Taiwan*

*Graduate Institute of Oral Biology, School of Dentistry,  
National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan*

*Department of Dentistry, Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital,  
Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, Hualien, Taiwan*

*Institute of Oral Medicine and Materials, College of  
Medicine, Tzu Chi University, Hualien, Taiwan*

*School of Dentistry, College of Dental Medicine, Kaohsiung  
Medical University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan*

<sup>\*\*</sup> Corresponding author. Department of Special Education,  
College of Education, National Taiwan Normal University,  
No. 162, Section 1, Heping East Road, Taipei 10610, Taiwan.  
*E-mail address: joywustar@gmail.com* (C.-W. Wu)

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author. Department of Dentistry, Hualien  
Tzu Chi Hospital, Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, and  
Institute of Oral Medicine and Materials, College of Medi-  
cine, Tzu Chi University, No. 707, Section 3, Chung-Yang  
Road, Hualien 970, Taiwan.  
*E-mail address: cpchiang@ntu.edu.tw* (C.-P. Chiang)

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<sup>†</sup> These two authors contributed equally to this work.