

# ON THE CENTENNIAL OF THE ARRIVAL OF *Mexico's First Japanese Immigrants*

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**T**he last five years of the twentieth century are of special significance for the historical relationship between Japan and Latin America. Regardless of Japan's extraordinary industrial and economic boom since the end of World War II that has made its economic model practically a symbol for many developing countries, its relations with Latin America, although scant, have been intense. The historical ties that already existed bring the Japanese and Latin American cultures even closer together. In 1995, Brazil and Japan celebrated 100 years of diplomatic relations. In 1997 the centennial of Japanese-Chilean relations and of the first Japanese migration to Mexico are commemorated. In 1998, Argentina will celebrate its centennial of diplomatic

relations with Japan, and Peru that of its first Japanese immigrants in 1999. Six generations later, there are approximately one and a half million Latin Americans of Japanese descent.

Japanese emigration was the most important feature of Japanese-Latin American relations until the 1960s when the explosion of world trade and foreign investment began to change them. However, the Japanese communities in Latin America have played an important role by often serving as intermediaries for Japanese companies and contributing to the establishment of greater affinity between Japan and Latin America.

## MEXICO'S JAPANESE COMMUNITY

At the end of the nineteenth century, Mexico had a population deficit and so needed to recruit workers to begin modernization. Under the Porfirio Díaz government, development was based on Mexico's "unlimited natural

resources" and the workers needed to exploit them. Given the urgency of availing itself of enough labor to continue agricultural production, mining and many other activities linked to the international economy, the government fostered the entry of migrants from both China and Japan.

In addition to Díaz government policy, other external factors and circumstances spurred emigration to Mexico. The most important are the series of wars Japan fought at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The armed clashes with China in 1894 and 1895 and with Tzarist Russia from 1904 to 1905 were an indirect reason for many Japanese to seek new opportunities in other lands. Also, the Japanese government fostered emigration<sup>1</sup> as a

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<sup>1</sup>The creation of the Migration Department in 1891 and the passage of the 1894 Law for the Protection of Migrants are only two examples of the Japanese government's fostering of migration. It also instituted direct subsidies to migration; among them was paid passage for emigrants, especially those who went to Hawaii or Brazil.





A Japanese immigrant family at the end of the nineteenth century.

solution for two basic problems: first, to finance domestic industrialization, for which it needed hard currency it hoped would be sent home by Japanese emigrants; second, to ameliorate demographic pressure in rural areas.

Another factor which contributed enormously to migration to Mexico was the U.S. ban of Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the early twentieth century. A limit on the number of migrants had already been set in 1874 and 1888 when the U.S. also totally prohibited the entry of Japanese and Chinese immigrants. With the limit set in the early twentieth century by the 1907 so-called "Gentlemen's

Agreement,"<sup>2</sup> emigrants were diverted from their original destination, the United States, to alternative, secondary destinations: Mexico and other Latin American countries. In the first years of the century, then, Brazil, Chile, Peru, Argentina and Mexico became targets for much of this migration.

<sup>2</sup> With this accord, Japan agreed to stop sending Japanese citizens to the United States. After this restrictive legislation went into force and some anti-Japanese actions were carried out in the United States, Mexico became an intermediate point between the United States and other countries of South America. Kenneth B. McCullough, *America's Back Door: Indirect International Immigration via Mexico to the United States from 1875 to 1940*, Ph D. thesis, University of Texas A&M, 1992.

In Mexico, aside from the economic needs which fostered immigration, a whole body of legislation was created to regulate it. In 1888, Mexico became the first "Western" country with which Emperor Meiji of Japan established consular relations and legal reciprocity. Undoubtedly the most transcendental step in the relations between the two countries, this also had an impact on the motivation of Japanese migration to Mexico. In 1891, Japan established its consulate in Mexico, headed by Fujito Toshiro, and three years later, in 1894, passed the Law on Colonization which, among other things, favored the legal entry





Japanese immigrants and their descendants in Tijuana, Baja California, 1996.

of Japanese immigrants. Mexico, for its part, named Mauricio Wollheim its first plenipotentiary ambassador to Japan.

On Mexico's Pacific Coast, specifically in Chiapas, were the first lands colonized by Japanese immigrants. By 1892, the municipality of Escuintla in the Soconusco area had been selected for colonization. Not until May 10, 1897, however, did Kusakado Toraji lead the first group of colonists on a 47-day crossing from the Japanese port of Yokohama to what is today Puerto Madero. On May 18 of the same year, the Japanese

colonists took possession of their lands, setting the date of the founding of the colony, which they called Enomoto Takeaki, as May 19, 1897.

For many reasons, the economic results of the Enomoto colony left much to be desired in terms of its initial objective of supporting the community and repatriating profits to Japan. However, they did have an impact on the later—though ephemeral—Mexican-Japanese joint ventures. The Japanese-Mexican Company and the Nichiboku Kyodo Gaisha Cooperative sought to continue the work of the original colonists in agricul-

ture, pharmaceuticals and textiles, but they did not have much luck, greatly due to the 1910 Mexican Revolution. However, the experience did encourage many of the first Japanese immigrants (*issei*, or first generation) to settle permanently in Mexico's Southeast.

The Japanese immigrants, although they suffered certain limitations upon entering the country, which were sharpened with the 1926 Immigration Law, were able to bring their parents, children and close and distant relatives of all kinds to Mexico. The only requirement was that they be able to legally prove their family tie. Immigration took on a whole other dimension with the popularization of the *yobiyose* system, a mechanism whereby to enter the country, immigrants required only an express invitation from someone already legally residing in Mexico.

With the *yobiyose* system, the flow of immigrants increased somewhat

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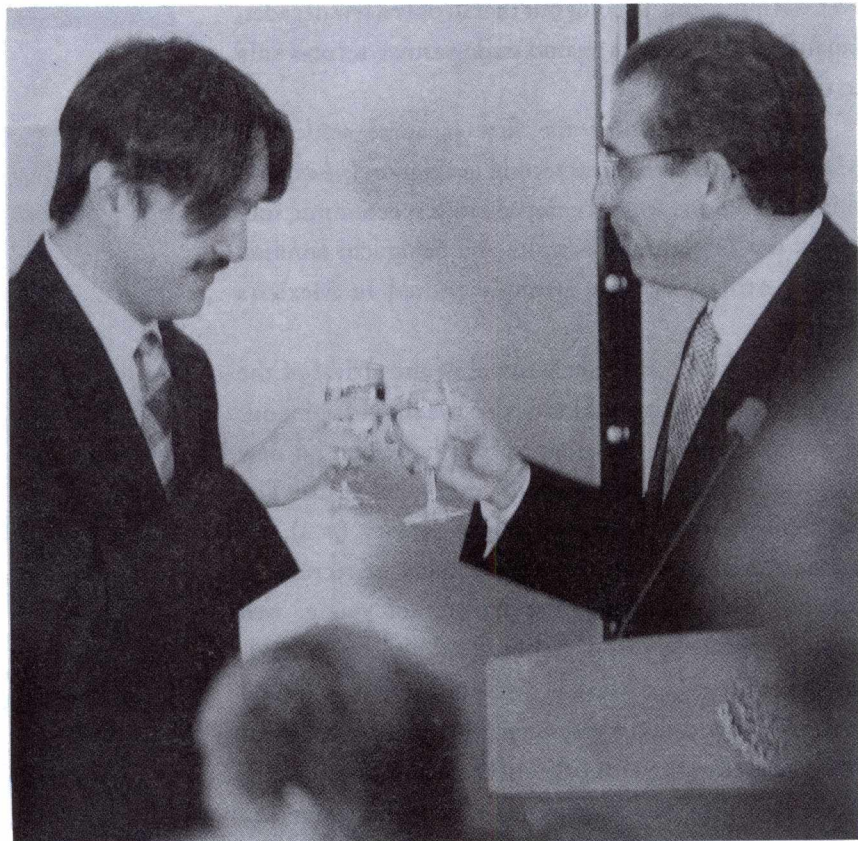
and they also began settling in other parts of the country and integrating themselves into more and more diverse sectors of the economy. It is not an exaggeration to say that even before this kind of extremely-extended family migratory system began to operate, the basis for the future stability of the colony had already been assured. At the beginning of the century, the immigrants had already gone into mining, construction and sugar cane processing and, with Mexican government encouragement, had also begun to move to other centers of development. Emigration to northern Mexico made it possible to set up new communities all along the Mexico-U.S. border. The small groups of Japanese in Mexicali, Ensenada, Sinaloa, Ciudad Juárez, Coahuila, Chihuahua and Sonora showed the beginnings of a longer term settlement, particularly since, with the outbreak of World War II, both legal and illegal access to the United States had become not only difficult, but also excessively risky.<sup>3</sup>

Immediately after World War II and later, the atmosphere of security that Mexico offered foreign investment contributed to its increase. The United States was the largest investor

<sup>3</sup> Many of the immigrants even lost what they had been able to accumulate: property, position and social ties. During and after World War II, most of them decided to stay permanently where they were, abandoning the idea of entering the United States or returning to Japan. Kunimoto Iyo, "La emigración japonesa a América Latina," *Japón, los Estados Unidos y la América Latina*, Barbara Stallings and Gabriel Székely (comps.), Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico City, 1994.



Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune with the musical group Los Panchos.



President Ernesto Zedillo and Japan's Imperial Highness, Prince Akishino, toast the 100-year anniversary of Japanese emigration to Mexico.

Photo: The President's Press Office



until the 1990s. Japan successfully reinitiated its economic development and rekindled its interest in trade and financial links with Latin America. Its most ambitious projects centered on countries which had taken in the most Japanese immigrants, like Brazil, Argentina and Peru, followed by Paraguay, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic which had accepted immigrants after the war. But there was also interest in countries like Mexico which offered the advantage of geographical proximity to the U.S. market.

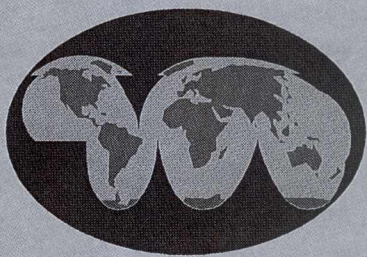
In the post-war period, Mexico and Japan began to recover an over half-a-century-long relationship, when Mexico was one of the first countries to ratify the 1952 Treaty of San Francisco. The arrival of Japanese companies to Mexico, beginning with Toyota in 1957 during the administration of President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, and Datsun Motor Company in 1966, increased modestly but gradually the number of investors in different branches of the economy. It would not be very practical to try to list here the flow of Japanese investments in Mexico. However, it is interesting to point out that in only a few decades, Japan became Mexico's second trade partner, second only to the United States.

The descendants of the first Japanese settlers in Mexico, born in Mexico as second generation (*nissei*) and third generation (*sansei*), enjoyed modest economic successes: the Matsumoto, Kimura and Sekiguchi families, among others, became strongly rooted in Mexico's economy.

To conclude, on the centennial of the arrival of the first Japanese immigrants in Mexico, we should point out that migration has not stopped, but has taken on new characteristics and dimensions over the years. The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), for example, has taken on the responsibility of recruiting, training and subsidizing the transfer of young, well trained Japanese as part of technical aid projects in developing countries like Mexico. Technological and cultural exchange, in addition to personal dealings, have been and will continue to be yet another of the many kinds of contact between the two countries, in tune with the international nature of today's world. ❧


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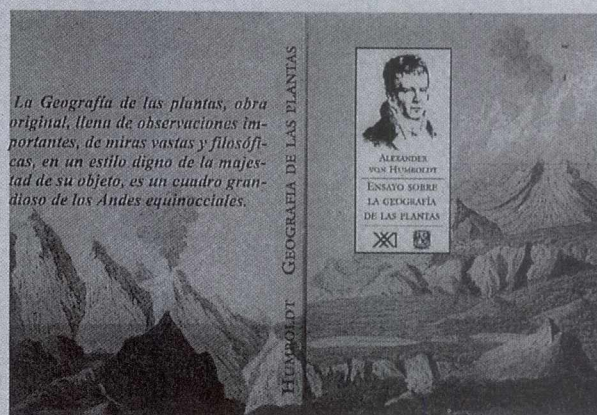
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