The Picture Brides: Pioneer Japanese Women Immigrants to Canada, 1908-1928

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According to the census of Canada in 2001, there were 85,230 Japanese Canadians in Canada, and about 26,000 of whom are of mixed heritage. This number makes them about the thirtieth largest ethnic group in Canada (Wikipedia, np). However, the census of 1901 recorded only 4,738 Japanese actually living in Canada (Adachi, 13). How did the Japanese community grow from a small number of men to become a significant minority group in Canada? What is the history of the Japanese immigrants in Canada? When answering these questions, it is important to explore the pioneer Japanese emigrants to Canada because they are the foundation of this community. Japanese women emigrants were necessary for the community because they gave birth to many children and worked either in the home or, if necessary, outside the home. Manazo Nagano was known as the first Japanese to land and settle in Canada. He arrived in New Westminster in 1877 (Nikkei Timeline, np). It is not clear when the first Japanese woman arrived in Canada, nor who she

was, but it is said that the arrival of Japanese women occurred ten years after the Japanese men arrived in Canada (Kudo, 19). At the end of the Meiji Era and in the early tear of the Taisho Era, it was difficult for women to go abroad by themselves. Most of them went to Canada through a variation of the Japanese arranged marriage system. These women were referred to as "Picture Brides". They came to Canada with dreams and hopes, but life in Canada was very different from what they had imagined. A harsh reality awaited them. Picture brides could be divided into three main types; successful brides who spent their lifetime with their husbands, unsuccessful brides who left their husbands, and the deceived brides who became prostitutes.

People today may be unfamiliar with the term "Picture Brides". Most Japanese people don't know this term nor would many Japanese Canadians recognize this term. The "Picture Bride" system was a system of marriage in the Meiji and the Taisho Eras. It was similar to the traditional marriage system "Omiai-kekkon" (arranged marriage). In both systems, unattached individuals introduced each other by exchanging personal information and pictures, and then decided whether to marry or not. In the "Omiai", men and women meet several times before deciding on marriage. This point is the crucial difference between the "Picture Bride" and the "Omiai" systems.

In many cases, picture brides had never met their betrothed before marriage. They couldn't meet because Japanese men who became bridegrooms of "Picture Brides" lived overseas as migrant workers and they wanted to marry Japanese women in

their hometown. For women in Japan, photographs and letters from men in Canada were the only method of learning about their future husbands. Therefore, this marriage system was called the "Picture Bride" system and Japanese women who married and emigrated to Canada by this system were called "Picture Brides" (Kudo, 7). Many women went to Canada as picture brides in the early twentieth century. In fact, from 1912 to 1917, 1898 Japanese wives joined Japanese men in Canada, and about 90 percent of them were picture brides (Kudo, 82).

The "Picture Bride" system arose out of the unique circumstances that arose in the Meiji Era Japan. When the Edo Era ended and the Meiji Era started, Japan's social structure changed dramatically because of the Meiji restoration in 1868. Japan became a capitalist country. Before the restoration, agriculture was the center of Japan's industry, but it was changed to industry. In addition, the tax system changed. Farmers and fishermen didn't use cash to pay taxes in the Edo Era, but they had to pay cash after the reform. The tax rate was high and they suffered from the heavy taxes. Many farmers couldn't pay the taxes and had to sell their own lands and become peasants. Some of them had to give up agriculture. People who lost their jobs in the countryside went to the city to get to new jobs. However, in this period, the city had not yet developed enough and therefore could not provide jobs for everyone. Many Japanese had no work and found it difficult to survive. As the result of work shortages caused by industrialization, the Japanese government encouraged their citizens to emigrate (Iino, 9).

Although the Japanese government recognized that emigration was necessary, they were worried about sending Japanese citizens abroad. Therefore they encouraged citizens to emigrate to Hokkaido and Hawaii. There were two main reasons why they hesitated to send their citizens abroad.

The first reason was that the government was apprehensive that prejudice against Japanese emigrants in foreign countries would have a negative affect on Japan's reputation and status in the world. In 1868, about 150 Japanese were sent to Hawaii to work on sugar plantations and another 40 people to Guam by an American businessman. It was the first unofficial migration and the first migration of Japanese overseas. However, Japanese migrants were treated like slaves in Hawaii and this migration failed. Because of this case, the Japanese government didn't permit their citizens to emigrant overseas for the next twenty years. Also, the government heard that Chinese laborers in the sugar plantations in Hawaii were persecuted, so it was afraid that Japanese people would be identified with Chinese migrants and feared this would increase prejudice against Japanese (Iino, 11-12).

The second reason that the government was reluctant to send the citizens to foreign countries was because of domestic problems. After the Meiji restoration, not only the social structure but also the political structure changed. A cabinet system of government was established in 1885. The Meiji Constitution was enacted in 1889. In addition, many new laws and changes to the systems were established at the end of the nineteenth century.

The country was going through significant change and was therefore a lot of instability. Japan was too concerned with domestic problems to implement any plans or laws concerning emigration to foreign countries (Wikipedia, np).

While the government did not want to deal with the issue of emigration to foreign lands, Japanese citizens held a great interest in foreign countries. Many people wanted to emigrate overseas. Their interest was practical- they had no prospects in Japan but also, for some, their interest was fueled by dream of riches, especially in the United States or Canada (Makabe, 6).

"Money grows on trees in America" (Makabe, 161). This rumor was discussed among the Japanese people in this period. This meaning is that people can get money without working and striving abroad. It was not the truth, but many people believed it. They had little knowledge of overseas countries. Surprisingly, some of them couldn't tell the difference between the United States and Canada. Most of their knowledge came from the pioneer emigrants who returned from overseas and the advertisements to recruit emigrants. Both of these sources had reasons to exaggerate the benefits of the United States and Canada. First, pioneers wanted to impress people. The pioneers spent a lot of money in Japan after they came back from overseas. Also, their clothes looked modern for Japanese people in the countryside. Second, recruiters wanted more recruits. The advertisements said that the wages that people could get in Canada were four or five times higher than those in Japan (Iino, 10). Many people who believed these stories emigrated overseas through the

private emigrant companies. Because of the lack of government support for those wanting to emigrate to North America, many private companies were established beginning in 1887. Their business was to recruit people who wanted to emigrate and to aid them in the process of leaving the country. They played a significant part in the increase of emigrants overseas (Iino, 12-13).

The earliest immigrants to Canada had several things in common. Firstly, they came from rural areas of Japan. Secondly, they were all men. The rural areas had common characteristics. They were not poor areas originally, but had been hit hard by the Meiji restoration and their economic conditions fell rapidly. Many of them were small farming or fishing villages of Honshu and Kyushu in Japan; mainly, Shiga, Wakayama, Hiroshima, Fukuoka, Kumamoto and Kagoshima prefectures (See Fig.1; highlighted in Green). About seventy or sixty percentage of all emigrants were farmers or fishermen who came from these areas (Iino, 9-11). The highest number of emigrants to Canada came from Shiga prefecture. One of the reasons why people in Shiga emigrated to Canada was the flood of the shore of Lake Biwa in 1896 (Makabe, 71-72). This disaster caused a decline in agricultural productivity and an increase in emigrants. Following Shiga, Wakayama was the second prefecture where emigrants came from. The well-known pioneer emigrant from Wakayama was Gihei Kuno. He emigrated to Canada in 1888 and recruited young men from his hometown to Canada after he saw possibilities in Canadian fishery. Because of him, the number of

emigrants from Wakayama increased (Sasaki, 77).

In Canada, most Japanese emigrants settled in British Columbia because it was where the shortest distance from Japan (See Fig.2, Fig.3). In addition, British Columbia was the first province where Japanese emigrants landed and it resembled Japan in geography and climate. According to the statistics of 1901, about 97 percentage of the Japanese population in Canada lived in British Columbia (Iino, 8).

Most of the early emigrants were single men, and also, migrant workers. In fact, about 80 percentage of about 8000 Japanese living in Canada in 1908 were single men. Most of them worked as physical laborers at fisheries, in coal mining, or in other fields. They didn't think they would live in Canada permanently. Their purpose was to get jobs and go back to Japan after they made a lot of money (Iino, 15). However, the reality was that life in Canada was not easy. Some of them succeeded in their jobs, but most of them found it was difficult to go back to Japan with a lot of money because they had many problems in Canada. For them, the first problem was language because most emigrants could not speak English, and the biggest problem was prejudice against them by Canadians.

Since the early part of the twenty century, Japanese men began to establish Japanese communities (Iino, 15). Their population was increasing every year. Canadian employers preferred to use Japanese workers rather than Canadians because Japanese were diligent and their wages were cheaper than Canadian's. Therefore, Canadian workers were afraid that they

would lose their jobs. The increase of Japanese immigrants changed their fear into anger. In British Columbia at this time, there were many anti-Asian organizations (Makabe, 22). One of them, the Asiatic Exclusion, which organized in Vancouver, demonstrated on September 1907. Their demonstration became violent and they attacked Chinatown and Japanese town in Powell Street. This became known as the "Vancouver Riot of 1907". Because of the riot, about fifty stores had their windows broken and two people got hurt. Indeed, there was not a lot of serious material damage (Iino, 31). However, it made the Japanese government decided to work on the problems of Japanese immigrants seriously. In consequence, the Japanese and Canadian governments made a "Gentlemen's Agreement" in 1908. This agreement restricted further Japanese immigration to 400 male immigrants and domestic servants per year, plus returning immigrants and their immediate family members (Iino, 47). This agreement became a significant turning point for the history of Japanese Canadians today.

Japanese emigrants started to immigrate to Canada and make families. People who left their wives in Japan brought them over to Canada. Single men desired to marry, but there were few Japanese women in Canada. They had to find their future wives in Japan. Some of them went back to Japan to find wives by themselves. However, most of them didn't go back to Japan because of the agreement. It was possible that people who went back to Japan could never come back to Canada again. Besides, men had to prepare the passage for their future wives, but which

it was expensive at that time. Most of them couldn't afford to prepare their own passage as well as that of a wife. People who couldn't go back to Japan sent letters and their pictures to their family or relatives asking to find future wives. This was the beginning of the "Picture Bride" marriage (Makabe, 99-100).

The agreement closed the door for some Japanese men but allowed Japanese women to immigrate. In fact, after 1908, the rate of women immigrants increased rapidly (See Fig.4). Unfortunately, there was no documentation of who the first Japanese picture bride to Canada was. However, it is said that the "Picture Bride" marriage system had became more common since 1908 (Kudo, 17). By 1924, 6,240 picture brides had arrived at Canada (Ayukawa, 178).

From the past, in Japan, women were chained to their house and family. They were expected to obey men because men were considered to be superior to women. After the Meiji restoration, the education system changed and it became possible that women took higher education and worked outside of home. However, only a few women could find jobs and independent as "progressive" women (Makabe, 6). Even if women in the countryside found the jobs, they were limited to certain occupations, such as maids and mill-girls. Most women were expected to marry men chosen by their parents and were expected to be good wives and mothers. In fact, in the schools, home economics was more important for women than other subjects, so they were educated to be good wives (Makabe,130). For many Japanese women, immigration was the only way to escape these narrow

opportunities and be free from their life in Japan. Therefore, many women immigrated abroad as "Picture Brides".

In the early twentieth century, the matrimonial average age of women was around twenty years old, and many picture brides were in their late teens to early twenties. Some women were over the average age, or were divorced. "Once you get married, then you have to put up with it till the end, whether you like it or not" (Makabe, 107). This was public opinion in Japan during the Meiji and Taisho Eras. Because of the opinion, it was difficult for women who divorced to remarry in Japan, so they decided to immigrate. Besides, there were many different reasons why Japanese women became picture brides; to seek adventure, to earn a lot of money, and more. Also, some women immigrated to Canada because of their looks. As an example of this reason, there was a woman in a book of Tomoko Makabe, *Picture Brides* . Ms. Nakamura was one of five picture brides who were introduced in the book. She told her reason to immigrate to Canada in her interview;

> It's because I wasn't good-looking. Besides my face, there's my frizzy hair, and it's dreadful. When I was a young girl in Japan, the fashion was smooth upswept hair; they had different pompadour styles, and my hair wasn't right for any of them. I suffered so much, I got to feel that I couldn't get married, and that's why I started wanting to go overseas. (Makabe, 131)

Every woman had different reason, but few women immigrated to Canada reluctantly. As an exception, some women immigrated because of the financial problem of their families. Everyone had the hope or ambition of starting a new life in Canada. Most of them immigrated of their own motion. Most picture bride couples celebrated their wedding without bridegrooms, because women couldn't get the passports until six months after being married in Japan (Makabe, 48).

For some picture bides, the reality in Canada set in eventually, but for others, it was apparent as soon as they arrived because many women regretted immigrating to Canada when they meet their husband. Some of them refused to disembark and went back to Japan. However, most of them couldn't go back to Japan because they came there with one-way tickets (Kudo, 60). The reason why they regretted was because there was a world of difference between dreams and reality.

> He was good-looking, just like his picture. But he didn't have any brains at all. I was very sad; there was a lump in my throat. We met, and right away I got depressed, wondering how on earth I was going to spend a whole lifetime with him. (Makabe, 106)

This was the feeling of Ms. Ishikawa, one of picture brides in the book, when she met her husband for the first time. In many picture bride couples, the husbands were about ten years older than their wives, so the education that they received in Japan

was different. Because of it, the education of men was lower than that of women.

For Japanese men in Canada, it was not easy to take picture brides to Canada, so they tried to get brides desperately. Some men tried to make themselves look better by various ways, for example, asking others to write letters. The common way was pictures. When they took a picture to send women, they wore their best clothes, and also, stood in front of a hotel or other houses, implying that they lived in. Some of them sent pictures taken when they were young. Therefore, many women were shocked upon seeing their husband for the first time. One woman, who was introduced in the book, *Shakonsai*, said in her interview;

> If there was no Pacific ocean between Japan and Canada, I would go back to Japan on foot. (Kudo, 60)

The reason why she said was because her husband sent her the picture that he took ten years ago. She was deceived, but she couldn't go back to Japan because she didn't have a ticket to go back to Japan.

As the result of these happenings, many women left their husbands. Some of them ran away with other men. An article about runaway of picture bride of the newspaper on July 31, 1908 is the oldest article which now exists. Nineteen-year-old picture bride ran away with other man, but they were found a month after. Until the early of Showa Era, this kind of articles had often

appeared in the newspaper. In brief, there were many runaways in this period. Japanese people in Canada, as in Japan, were cold against runaway and divorce, especially, against women. In the article, women were criticized more than men. For women who divorced or ran away, it was difficult to survive in Canada. Some of them remarried, but some others were forced to become prostitutes. Because some women became prostitutes, although they were only a few among many picture brides, all picture brides were regarded as prostitutes (Kudo, 95-102).

There were, in fact, Japanese prostitutes in Canada. They can be divided into three types. Firstly, women who recognized themselves as prostitutes, secondly, women were deceived into working as prostitutes and finally, women who divorced women who turned to prostitution to survive. For women of the second type, it was tragedy. They came to Canada to study or to join their husbands, but they found that they had been deceived after arriving in Canada. They didn't have any other way to survive except by becoming prostitutes (Kudo, 140).

Naturally, there were many successful picture brides' couples. At first, most wives regretted their decision to immigrate and wished to go back. However, lots of tasks in the home, family life and work outside the home, made them too busy to worry, and finally, they accepted their lives. After picture brides entered the Japanese community, their life was harder than in Japan. As in Japan, they were expected to be good wives and to have many children. Also, in Canada, they were, like Japanese men, valuable workers. Throughout their lives, they kept working and

made the foundation of their community. However, Ms.Nakamura also said in her interview;

> If I were reborn, I'd probably come to Canada and be a farmer. (Makabe, 149)

For both successful and unsuccessful brides, the prejudice against Japanese was always a part of their lives. During the war, Japanese Canadians were treated as enemies of Canada and were sent to internment camps. Their money, homes and property were taken from them. Until the end of war, they lived in internment camps. Moreover, these restraints continued to affect them after the war until they finally got full rights of citizenship in 1949 (Makabe, 24-28). The pioneers spent the hardest times of their lives in Canada. Japanese immigrants had a close knit community and lived separately from other Canadians. Their community was like Japan in Canada, so their identities were Japanese, not Canadian.

The "Picture Bride" marriage system was over in 1928 because of revision of "Gentlemen's Agreement". The creation of this system is connected to many social, economic and political events in Japan, and also, in Canada. For women in Japan, it was like an adventure to become a picture bride. For Japanese men in Canada, it was desire to meet picture brides. For both of them, it was necessary to survive their survival. Picture brides came to Canada with dream and hopes, but few of them could realize their dream. For most brides, their life in Canada was full of

difficulties, but their history has seldom been told. Whenever people discussed the history of Japanese Canadians, men were at the center of the history. However, women were always next to men. They played a significant part, as well as men, in the history of the Japanese in Canada.

Fig.1: Honshu and Kyushu Prefectures

Fig.2: Japan and Canada in world map

Fig.3: Province of British Columbia

Year	No. of Female Immigrants	Total No. of Immigrants	Rate of Female Immigrant
1907	242	7,601	3%
1908	566	858	66%
1909	153	244	63%
1910	134	420	32%
1911	217	727	30%
1912	362	675	54%
1913	424	887	48%
1914	447	681	66%
1915	338	380	89%
1916	233	553	42%
1917	310	887	35%
1918	370	1,036	36%
1919	530	892	59%
1920	389	525	74%
1921	338	481	70%
1922	300	395	76%
1923	197	404	49%
1924	233	510	46%
1925	269	424	63%
1926	214	443	48%
1927	—	511	
1928	—	535	

(Source: Ayukawa, 236)

Fig.4: The Number of Immigrates 1907-1928

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