Imperialism and Japan: “The White Man’s Burden” vs “Asia for the Asiatic”

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Introduction

Our task at hand is to answer the following question: “Japan was both a relative latecomer and the only non-Western actor on the late 19th – early 20th century imperialist and colonialist scene. In what way was Japanese imperialism/colonialism different from the forms implemented by Western empires and why?”

We would like to show this by first giving a brief introduction on recent theories on modern imperialism and then discussing how the case of Japan fit into all of this with examples of different implementation of colonial institutions, before summing up with a concise comparison of Western and Japanese imperialism. Keep in mind that this is a very shortened and simplified run through the above-mentioned terms, so there is bound to be a multitude of historical inaccuracies. It is, somehow, a part of the problem that historians and academics don’t seem to quite agree about the details the closer to modern history we get.

Wolfgang J. Mommsen describes imperialism like this:

“Only in later years did the notion of imperialism acquire the comparatively objective meaning which it now bears. It lost the connotation of a system based on the pre-eminence of an imperial ruler and came to be generally understood as signifying the expansion of a nation state beyond its own borders for the purpose of acquiring overseas dependencies and if possible uniting them in a world-wide empire.” (Mommsen, 1977:4)

For the sake of argument, the period of modern Western imperialism from the partition of Africa in the 1880s and onwards will be our starting point since it is more easily comparative to Japan’s own colonization and expansionism. Imperialism, the word itself, as we have seen, has undergone a change in meaning since it was first introduces, but various practiced forms of it has existed ever since and before the Inca-, the Roman- and, more recently, the Mongolian Empire.

Orthodox theories

Was this modern imperialism economical, political or social? Orthodox theories focused perhaps a bit too much on the economical side of the event, prioritizing its affinity with Western capitalism.

The British economist John Hobson’s point, that the tap-root of imperialism is that of being overproduction, thus creating a surplus of capital wanting to be invested overseas, is partly true. But in the case of, say, Britain, the bulk of the investments did not go to the
formal colonies (nor the informal ones) acquired after the 1870s-80s but first and foremost to the independent countries of Europe and the Americas, including the white settlement colonies of Australia and Canada. Capital surplus did not necessarily spur expansionism, and in the instance of late developers like Germany and Japan where capital was scarce for most of the period, this was simply not the case.

The Marxist-Leninist theory, which was put into framework by Lenin in 1916, stated that capitalism in its later (or last) stage was no longer dynamic. Imperialism in this stage was past mercantilist- and free trade or informal imperialism. The overproduction of goods made it impossible for the domestic market to absorb, thus the need for overseas markets arises. To secure a steady income, different nations sought predatory monopolistic rights in different regions and the easiest way to pertain this was to acquire formal colonies. Thus the scramble for colonies began. But the problem is that this theory has the tendency of mono-causality, which is hardly sufficient to explain complex historical phenomena. Stage theories run into problems when it finds historical data, like perhaps that of Japan, which do not fit into its scheme or periodization of history. Its notion of ‘normal’ mode of development is also problematic. Secondly, this also did not accord with financial facts – the military and bureaucratic cost of colonisation nearly always surpassed the financial return. And thirdly, elastic as capitalism is, it didn’t go under and break down, at least not in the way the Marxists predicted.

Recent theories

Though we can agree that economic determinism plays it part in the explanation of imperialism, it does not suffice alone. Recent theories, incorporating elements from the older economical and political ones, represent six ‘different’ takes on modern imperialism (Mommsen 1977), but it is possible that any number of these could be true at the same point, since they more often than not spill into each other.
1. Imperialism as extreme nationalism and as a phenomenon of power politics (Langer Fieldhouse)
This is a pretty self-explanatory interpretation, though what’s slightly new here is that nationalism is not dictated by the reason of the state, but more by the popular mass movements created by the democratization of these self same states. In this view, imperialism is a form of national mass hysteria pushing the state’s scourge for domination, reaching so far as to perhaps in the end creating the quagmire that is Fascism.

2. Objectivist theories (Lüthy)
The second group sees imperialism possibly as chance. It is the unavoidable clash between the more modern Western civilizations and the more backward native cultures of Africa, Asia and America. Imperialism is the final phase in the spread of this civilization. The theories’ ‘objectiveness’ comes from the unavoidability of the clash – the world is round – and no leverage of guilt is visibly distributed. As for why it’s a spread of Western civilization and not a Chinese or Arabic, the invention of gunpowder as a conventional weapon might suggest an answer.

3. Socio-economic theories (Schumpeter and Weber)
In the socio-economic theories imperialism is only marginal in the creation of modern industrial societies. Feudalistic and militaristic residues of Western society creates groups and individuals allied with heavy industries and the likes, which sees the possibility of imperialist exploitation in overseas regions. Imperialism is thus a remnant, anachronistic form of domination, representing an ‘atavistic’ tendency the creation of democratic civilization. This view too, in a way, seems partly to absolve capitalism, and in the case of Japan, gives weight to explain its imperialism through its shogunal past, but at the same time missing its target since Japanese imperialism first and foremost was not economical.

4. The theory of free-trade (informal) imperialism (Robinson and Gallagher)
The dubious named theory of free-trade or informal imperialism is actually also pretty self-explanatory. This theory discusses the ways in which the Western Powers was in an informal colonial (as opposed to formal) relation to non-colonial (but at the same time semi-colonial) states of, say, China and Japan. Rule was only necessitated when the trade got tough.
5. *Socio-imperialist theories* (Williams, LaFeber and Wheler)

If the theories of free-trade would be fittingly on a world society before the 1880s, these theories seem to be a renewed focus on the field of world economic development, especially considering the underlying unbalance following the industrial revolution. Incorporating bits from the already mentioned theories, the socio-imperialist theories proves perhaps in the end only to be socio-psychological in that economical periodic crisis originated ‘ideological consensus’ on which the acquisition of overseas market was socially approved (Wehler in Mommsen, 1977:94). Which perhaps stand to explain why the Japanese populace so easily accepted the militaristic acquisition of Manchuria in 1931.

6. *Peripheral theories of imperialism* (Fieldhouse, Robinson and Gallagher)

The last of the recent imperialist theories stands in stark opposition to all the others and is the only non-Eurocentric one. These critics stated that imperialism did not necessarily originate within the industrial states them selves, but possibly from crisis or change in development in the overseas ‘periphery’ that the Western powers, and – later among them – Japan, operated. This is supposedly the true the reason for formal acquisition of colonies after 1880. And that might certainly be true in the case of Japan and Korea, looking at the reasons behind the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese war.

**Colonial forms and institutions**

Here is a quick assessment of differences and similarities in the colonial forms of British model of India and Japanese model Korea, focusing briefly on governing system, territorial acquisition, language, infrastructure building and economy. This is actually not a fair assessment, since the British colonial institution was more mature than the Japanese, and India and Korea wasn’t in any way a ‘tabula rasa’. But from it we can see certain tendencies:

The British rule in India, originating with the English East India Company, took over the mismanagement of the Mughals, and except for a little supported Mutiny in 1857, most Indians preferred the British rule than any Indian alternative. In 1877 Queen Victoria assumed the title ‘empress of India’. The British ruled through the he prestigious colonial civil service (the ICS), which for the most part Britons themselves staffed, at least up until the twentieth century. The British was careful not to take over any more dominions than they already had, a policy that lasted till the independence in 1947.

Korea, a two thousand yearlong independent region, was annexed not through economical or military conquest but from treaty agreements. An unusual large number of
Koreans were hired in all levels of the colonial government; still the colonial military governor-general was of course Japanese. From 1919 there was introduced a system of civilian government, though the leadership continued to be militaristic only now in civilian clothes. Korea became a ‘sphere of the Japanese influence’, necessitating an illogical mainland expansionism to gather defence posts for the colony itself.

In India, though the English society was riddled with racism and arrogance towards Indians, most intellectual Indians volunteered to a British-style education in English. The result speaks for itself: it is hard today to say what are really Indian or English in institutions, ideology, discourses and language.

The Japanese tried actively to assimilate the Koreans with Japanese culture by making Koreans take Japanese names and outlawed the Korean language, giving the little education there was in Japanese. The result fared poorly: by 1943, only 20 percent of the Koreans could comprehend Japanese.

Infrastructure wise, the Indians, with English help, built irrigation projects and railways, and industrialisation of the country based on the continental experience helped commercializing the agriculture. Japan, on the other hand, though it did it with its own welfare in mind and not the Koreans’, provided capital and technology in return for investment opportunities, raw material and supplies of products and food. It is a legitimate issue to raise that the economic boom in (southern) Korea in the second half of the twentieth century perhaps could not have been achieved without the ‘help’ of colonisation.

In India, The British saw themselves as bringers of order and civilization. The major criticism of colonial rule in India is that it did not do enough. In Korea, the colonial ‘success’ came at the cost of harsh treatment of the native population. As I-te Chen puts it: “few Koreans thought Japanese rule was enlightened; most thought it was destructive and barbaric” (I-te Chen in Wray and Conroy 1983:207).

As an after thought, bear in mind that forms of colonisation also differed within each colonizing state, not only from time period to time period but from region to region as well. The difference between the British colonization of Asia and Africa is a good example at that - the Japanese colonization of Korea and, say, Taiwan differs greatly too.

**Literature**


Supplementary


Discusses theories by Jansen, Beasley, Duus, Peattie and Gallagher & Robinson.


For a more thorough study of the Manchurian incident. Her thesis is also interesting, which claims that Japanese empire-building was part of its modernisation process.