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Taiwan

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Taiwan, Japan's first colony, sat geographically far removed from the European battlefields of the Great War, but closer to the Japanese expeditions to Shandong and Micronesia. Japan's engagement brought the war home to Taiwan in multiple forms: mass mobilization to support the war effort; a substantial economic boom that permanently transformed Taiwan's economy; and manifestations of the military expansion and civilizing missions that characterized the imperialist rivalries that helped provoke war. The global post-war aversion to military conflict led to a shift to civilian administration in Taiwan, which developed strong links to Japan's new South Seas territories.

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Introduction

On the surface, the Great War had a barely discernible impact upon the island of Taiwan, a Japanese colony since 1895. None of the global conflict's battles were fought there, its inhabitants were not drafted to fill armies for battle or provide labor for the maintenance of those armed forces, and, although the island benefited from a wartime boom, it contributed relatively moderate amounts

directly to the war effort. Yet, a deeper inspection reveals that the Great War—broadly conceived to include its roots and immediate results—reached Taiwan’s shores in ways that were more indirect, but nonetheless profoundly influential. It would also reveal that Taiwan was deeply embedded in the global trends that defined this era, which marked the division between the “long 19th” and the “short 20th” centuries. Both the expansion of empire through military means and civilizing missions, characteristic of the high **imperialism** of the pre-war era, and the shift to new imperialist ideologies and more pluralistic civil societies common to the inter-war years, occurred in microcosm on Taiwan. The general arc of Japanese rule in Taiwan was from a highly militarized form toward civilian—though not popular—control, whereas debates over the rate of assimilation that took place around the outbreak of the Great War settled on a policy of maintaining a distinction between Japanese and colonial subjects. Moreover, Japan’s consolidation of its control over Taiwan and its residents facilitated its ongoing rise in global prominence.^[1] New connections forged between Taiwan and Southeast Asia exemplified Japan’s growing stature.

The Violence of the War Years

The bloody **destruction of life** and limb through military combat may have reached an unprecedented nadir in the trench **warfare** across Europe, but those grinding campaigns can also be viewed as the most advanced stage of imperialist conquest, which finally played out on metropolitan soil. The wars of empire had been fought for decades prior to 1914, often on more asymmetric terms, to crush indigenous resistance and force the acceptance of imperialist hegemony. The war in Europe, and especially the Japanese expedition against German forces in Shandong and **Micronesia**, received substantial coverage in Taiwan’s print media, especially the bilingual daily newspaper, the *Taiwan nichinichi shinpō*. The **newspaper** and numerous organizations within Taiwan mobilized popular support, and many residents of Taiwan contributed money and supplies to support both Allied efforts in Europe and the Japanese expedition in **China** against the German-leased territory around Qingdao. Nevertheless, it was certainly the conflicts of imperial expansion that more deeply affected the island.

Most significant in this regard was the Indigenous Suppression Campaign (*seiban tōbatsu*; literally, subjugation of “raw savages”) that Japanese forces waged in parts of Taiwan from 1909 to 1914. When Japan annexed Taiwan as a colony, the government-general at first replicated Qing Dynasty practices of maintaining a boundary between the bulk of the population and indigenous territories, while it also adopted the earlier technique of managing economic and other relations across that boundary through intermarriage.^[2] However, with the consolidation of its control over the coastal populations, and the completion of major infrastructure projects like the Jilong (Keelung) harbor and the trans-island railway, it turned its attention to the indigenous groups that lived in the mountains south and east of the Taipei basin. These campaigns did not approach the comprehensive reach of **total war**, but both Japanese settlers and Taiwanese supported the war effort with care packages and **aid** to the wounded and bereaved, and engaged in **ceremonies** to honor the Japanese dead.^[3]

After five years, the Japanese had crushed the last substantial resistance and brought these indigenous peoples under colonial control, although others continued armed resistance into the 1930s.

The government-general also faced opposition from the Taiwanese population in 1915. That spring, members of a temple in Tainan, the Xilai'an, launched what became the largest uprising against the colonial state, after local police caught wind of plotting that had been underway since the previous fall. The plotters opposed Japanese domination of the sugar and forestry industries, chafed against the limitations of the colonial regime, and held millenarian beliefs that favored violent efforts to overturn the system. Some were arrested in May, but others eluded the police and began to attack outposts of the colonial administration in June. After some initial successes, they marched on the town of Jiabonian (Tapani). There, the colonial army defeated the main uprising, and then continued to wipe out the resistance over the next few weeks. Following this clash, the Japanese regime enhanced its mechanisms of control over Taiwan's people and resources, and stepped up its efforts to study local societies and customs.^[4] The suppression of this uprising—commonly known as the Xilai'an Incident—and the pacification of the indigenous were firmly in line with the military imperial expansion of the European powers during the pre-1914 era.

The Question of Assimilation

A central part of the colonial project was the transformation of native populations according to standards set by the colonizing nation-state. Some colonial regimes openly framed it in terms of civilizing and modernizing, while others went further and established policies to assimilate the natives into their national populations. Japanese colonialism in Taiwan was of the latter variety, yet both Japanese officials and settlers debated among themselves over how—and especially how fast—assimilation should occur. Two camps formed within the government-general in the process of creating Taiwan's colonial education system, with one advocating for rapid assimilation through a common curriculum, and the other for a slower process that preserved separate schools for Japanese and Taiwanese children. The latter, favored by Governor-General Kodama Gentarō (1852-1906) and Civil Administrator Gotō Shinpei (1857-1929), won out and set the tone for several decades.

However, in 1914 a group of Japanese and Taiwanese intellectuals and activists briefly came together around the goal of rapid assimilation. Japanese settlers, as well as metropolitan figures such as Itagaki Taisuke (1837-1919), saw assimilation as the fulfillment of the Meiji-era pan-Asianism that informed Japan's imperial expansion. Itagaki's involvement substantially raised the profile of this effort, due to his prominence in the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement (*jiyū minken*) of the 1870s-1880s, his involvement in Japan's early [party politics](#) through the founding of the Liberal Party in 1881, and his position in the party-led Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838-1922) cabinet in 1898. Meanwhile, many educated Taiwanese realized that the inequities inherent in the dual-track education system served mostly to lock them into a second-class status vis-à-vis the Japanese,

permanently barred from gaining political rights. After some initial organizing in Japan and a visit by Itagaki to Taiwan to meet with local leaders such as [Lin Xiantang \(1881-1956\)](#), they combined to establish the Assimilation Society (*Dōka kai*) in Taipei that November. It quickly formed branches in other parts of Taiwan, and the members called for the fusion of Japanese and Taiwanese in order to create a more egalitarian, less stratified society within the empire. However, the Taiwan government-general viewed such private efforts to push assimilation unfavorably, and most officials and private settlers feared losing their status. Therefore, within a few months, the government-general disbanded the Assimilation Society and put an end to its program. As a result, slow assimilation remained the norm, and Taiwanese turned to the direct pursuit of political rights within the limits of Japan's empire.^[5]

The debate emerged once more in the wake of World War I, when a combination of global trends and domestic movements in Japan promoted a new manifestation of Japanese imperialism. In Japan, over a decade's worth of popular agitation for greater political participation exploded in the post-war [Rice Riots](#), a series of uprisings that led to the party cabinets and the extension of democracy that characterized Japan's inter-war period. Elsewhere, in 1919, [Korean](#) and Chinese nationalist pioneers seized upon the [Wilsonian rhetoric](#) of national self-determination and opposition to the diplomacy of secret treaties to strengthen popular movements for political, social, and cultural change.^[6] These themes were displayed in many public discussions of cultural reforms and popular movements for political rights and socio-economic equality in Taiwan. Over the next decade, a journal called *Taiwan Youth* (*Taiwan Qingnian*), the *Taiwan People's Press* (*Taiwan Minbao*) newspaper, and the Taiwan People's Party (*Taiwan minzhong dang*) were launched, all of which promoted Taiwanese consciousness and, in some cases, national independence for Taiwan.^[7] As these developments got underway around 1920, Governor-General [Den Kenjiro \(1855-1930\)](#) at first advanced a rapid assimilation policy by opening the Japanese-only schools to all students and ordering that all schools adopt essentially the same curriculum.^[8] Nevertheless, opposition from Japanese settlers and officials prevented this policy from reaching fruition, and soon it was apparent that the government-general was doing little to transform Taiwanese into Japanese. In fact, the post-war "cultural rule" (*bunka seiji*) in Taiwan closely resembled the French policy of associationism: both favored the continuation of local customs rather than cultural assimilation.^[9]

The relatively light-handed approach to Taiwanese customs must be viewed in light of two major research projects that the government-general launched during and after the war years. The first was a comprehensive study of Taiwan's religions, which it initiated in the wake of the 1915 Xilai'an uprising. That event's affiliation with a popular temple and practices that the Japanese had initially dismissed as superstitions of limited consequence forced the colonial regime to reconsider its approach. The first step was a massive effort, carried out through schools and local police offices, to catalog, locate, describe, and categorize the local temples and forms of religious celebration and veneration that existed in Taiwan. The second was a conscious attempt to highlight the accomplishments of Japanese rule in Taiwan by compiling and publishing materials from the

historical records of the Qing Dynasty, the Dutch East India Company, historical sources in Taiwan, and their own archives. The project began in 1922, and was not completed until 1930, but it nonetheless expressed the same interest in achieving a better understanding of Taiwan and its peoples as the survey of Taiwan's religions. That concern reflected a broader ambivalence towards the operation of colonial rule that emerged among the imperial powers after the war. Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) had spoken most forcefully—if not always consistently—about the need for self-determination, but the post-war anxiety also appeared in the creation of mandates, rather than formal colonies, out of the former German possessions and the [French](#) and Japanese shift from assimilationist to associationist ideology. Once again, developments in Taiwan encapsulated the world in microcosm.

Taiwan and the Wartime Boom

While the conflict of World War I devastated the populations and [economies](#) of the European combatants, Japan experienced a short but transformative [economic boom](#). Its [shipping](#) vessels became essential to the Allied war effort, as well as sustaining the populations at home, and its industries were called upon to increase production of items for military and civilian usage around the globe. That boom was not merely in the economic realm, for it also extended across the breadth of Japan's global connections, which included the diplomatic, [scientific](#), and academic realms.^[10] Although economic contraction set in by 1920, the productive capacity and urbanization of the war years could not be reversed. Taiwan, too, experienced this multi-faceted surge in ways that changed its internal conditions and links to Southeast Asia in particular. According to Yanaihara Tadao (1893-1961)'s early research, from 1912 to 1925, Taiwan's (mostly agrarian) total production quadrupled, its exports tripled, and its imports almost quintupled.^[11] Such growth had long-lasting effects.

One aspect of Japan's project in Taiwan, from the very beginning, had been to turn it into a model colony that would surpass European efforts in its modernization and elevation of the island and its people. The economic fruits of Japan's membership among the victors promised to bring the achievement of that goal even closer. Even before the war was over, the government-general proposed, and received the promise of funding for, major new infrastructure projects. Perhaps most significant among these were a new phase in the expansion of Jilong's harbor and port facilities, and the long-delayed development of the port of Gaoxiong (Kaohsiung). Jilong had been Taiwan's main port since around 1900, and between 1915 and 1920 the total volume of trade tripled, from 53 million yen to 157 million yen.^[12] Gaoxiong had not yet emerged as a significant port, but Japan's new interest in Southeast Asia made it essential for accessing that region, and thus, even after the boom ended, the Japanese government preserved funding for its construction, while Jilong's was suspended.^[13]

The government-general was not alone in its efforts to seize the moment and make use of the substantial economic expansion, for private citizens also took it upon themselves to use the perceived windfall to shape their environments. For example, in 1918 a group of Jilong's business

and social elites, both Japanese and Taiwanese, published their views on developing the city in the new context. They agreed with the government-general's plans for port construction, although several felt that the colonial administration had not been ambitious enough and should devote more resources to expanding the harbor and installing port facilities. Others also looked inland, to Jilong's hinterland, where deposits of coal and other minerals offered possibilities for both expanded mining operations and new industries, or across the Taiwan Straits to Southeast China as a place for greater economic engagement. Some insisted that the city also needed to build housing, cultural institutions, and tourist facilities. In short, private citizens displayed a strong civic consciousness as they advocated on behalf of themselves, their cities, and their fellow citizens.^[14] The government-general picked up on at least one of these ideas: during the war years and afterwards it actively promoted investment from Taiwan in Fujian and Guangdong, as well as a range of other linkages, including Japanese and Taiwanese-funded or owned newspapers, schools, and medical institutions, and its own administrative and quasi-official outposts.^[15]

This particular type of public engagement was not simply the purview of elite men, for elite **women** also assumed a higher profile in public affairs during the war era. The most prominent women's organization in Taiwan, and across Japan's empire, was the Patriotic Ladies Association (*Aikoku Fujinkai*), which had been founded in the wake of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) to encourage middle and upper class Japanese women to play a more direct role in empire-building by supporting Japanese soldiers in ways both moral and material. The Taiwan branch, in fact, took responsibility for collecting and organizing much of the assistance that private individuals donated to support the Indigenous Suppression Campaign and Japanese forces in World War I. In the mid-1910s, it expanded its activities in Taiwan beyond military support to include social welfare, in particular the education of Japanese and Taiwanese girls. The Taiwan branch established numerous vocational schools, training centers, and language instruction programs, all of which adopted the goal of enhancing the ways in which women could contribute to building a modern society in Taiwan.^[16] Although these women in Taiwan did not push for political emancipation, their civic involvement nevertheless connected them to global movements for **women's rights**. More significantly for the local context, their evolution in focus from supporting military campaigns to promoting education and social reform paralleled one of the most significant developments in Taiwan in the years after the Great War.

That shift was the change from military to civilian leadership of the Taiwan government-general. When Prime Minister Hara Takashi (1856-1921) appointed Den Kenjirō to the post of governor-general in 1919, he broke the line of military figures (one admiral and six generals or lieutenant-generals) who had filled that post. It remained in civilian hands until late 1936, in contrast to Korea, where the military always held sway. The advent of civilian leadership promoted a larger effort to better integrate Taiwan into Japan that also involved changing the administrative hierarchies of the colony to match the home islands, legal measures that better correlated Taiwan's laws to Japan's, and Den's educational reforms. These processes displayed Taiwan's greater significance as a result of the wartime boom and, in theory at least, promoted its bureaucratic and juridical assimilation into

Japan.

That prominence had much to do with Japan's increased attention to Southeast Asia, which began just before the war and further developed out of both its acquisition of [Germany's](#) possessions in Micronesia and the temporary vacuum left in the region when European attention and resources shifted homewards. With the "South Seas" (*Nan'yō*) looming larger in the Japanese imagination, Taiwan became the center for Japanese studies of, and economic engagement with, that region. Pre-war studies advanced Pan-Asianist ideas of genetic connections between Southeast Asia and Japan, as well as long-standing historic ties, and the government-general began to subsidize trade with the region, which provided a foundation for subsequent developments. The Bank of Taiwan established three branches in the Dutch East Indies after 1914, trade subsidies were increased and the pursuit of investment intensified, and the newly-formed Southeast Asia Association (*Nan'yō kyōka*) used Taiwan as its main base of operations for a remarkable array of research projects and exhibitions on the peoples and products of the South Seas. Taiwan came to be seen as deeply intertwined with Southeast Asia, and thus it was the jumping-off point for Japan's commercial and intellectual advance into that area during and after World War I.^[17]

Conclusion

Although Taiwan and its residents spent the years of the Great War physically separated from the worst horrors of the conflict, the expanding mass media kept Japanese and Taiwanese elites well-informed about global events. These social leaders were deeply engaged with the war itself and the larger processes that went into and emerged out of it. Direct connections to the military aspects of the war were limited to media exposure and material and moral support for Japan's efforts therein, but Taiwan experienced its own conflicts of empire in the more limited Indigenous Suppression Campaign and the Xilai'an Incident. In terms of ideology, the resolution of debates around assimilation in favor of maintaining the distinction between the Japanese and their colonized subjects and preserving the customs of the latter meant that Taiwan contained an ambivalence toward empire that was similar to that which emerged elsewhere in the wake of the war. It also held desires for popular involvement in the political process that matched the socio-political movements within Japan and other nation-states during the late 1910s and 1920s. Finally, Taiwan benefited from Japan's improving economic fortunes and global stature in both trade and diplomacy, which allowed for transformative infrastructure and new intellectual projects that made the island colony a gateway to Southeast Asia. The trends of the era of the Great War, more than the conflict itself, made these years pivotal for the island colony.

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Notes

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