

# Research Report

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Title of Research: The Imperial Trilemma: Popular Sovereignty and the Rebirth of Colonial Authority

Purpose of Research: 400 words

This project seeks to investigate the determinants of Japanese and American colonial policy in early twentieth-century Taiwan and the Philippines. In particular, I began my research by focusing on two empirical questions: (i) Why was assimilation policy, while popular among most Japanese policymakers, initially rejected in Taiwan? (ii) Why was assimilation policy pursued in the Philippines by American policymakers when they had little intention of permanently retaining the islands? To address these questions, I began my investigation by asking whether ideologies—in particular, ideologies regarding sovereignty, democracy, and nationality—affected the type of colonial policy chosen by American and Japanese colonial policymakers.

As I conducted my research to answer the above questions, a second set of questions started to emerge as an important research topic: What were the consequences of the choices the Japanese and the Americans made as they fashioned their colonial policy? In the short-term, how “successful” were they in implementing the intended policy through institutional design and imposition? In the long-term, what was the legacy of their strategies on post-colonial economic and political development? I came to realize that I could not ignore these questions if I were to sufficiently address my initial questions regarding the origins of colonial policy. Colonial policymaking was not a one-shot game, but was something that evolved over time, as colonizers reacted to the short-term consequences of their decisions. Therefore, to understand the origin of a policy, it was necessary to understand the consequences of the policy.

Moreover, these questions emerged as important research areas as I engaged the literature on colonialism and modern-day nation-building projects. Scholars have often compared contemporary “colonialism,” such as American and/or European efforts to occupy and “reform” Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan to historic instances of colonialism and state-building in places such as the Philippines, Egypt, Germany, and Japan. However, existing studies often take the colonial legacy as a given. Missing is a story of institutional origin that explains why certain institutional forms were used to govern a territory. This question of origin, however, is critically important if we are to use history as a guide for contemporary

policymaking. If the selection of “bad” institutions were predetermined or unavoidable, then there is little we can learn from history from the perspective of contemporary policymaking. However, if policymakers of the past had considerable agency, then by understanding why they made “good” or “bad” choices, we may be able to avoid the mistakes of the past.

### Content/Methodology of Research: \_800 words\_

My research began by isolating the role of agency in colonial policymaking in both Japan and the United States. I did this by investigating the extent to which the choices made by the Japanese and the Americans were (or were not) a function of the background conditions found in the colonies. In particular, I focused on the following background conditions: (i) the strength of armed resistance, (ii) the degree of ethnic conflict within the colonized territory, and (iii) the level of economic development. All of these factors could have determined whether a country choose assimilation policy or not. For example, if initial armed resistance was strong, colonizers may have been compelled to accommodate the demands of the colonial subjects, thus making rapid assimilation difficult. On the other hand, strong initial resistance may have motivated the colonizer to forcefully implement an assimilation policy.

In investigating the effects of these background conditions on colonial policymaking, what I sought to understand was the degree of agency the colonizers. If it were the case that strong resistance necessitated a certain response, then one may conclude that the colonizing power could exhibit little agency in choosing a colonial policy. On the other hand, if strong resistance by the colonized people invited different responses in different regions, then the colonizers had to have exhibited agency. In the case of Taiwan and the Philippines, the critical background conditions were very similar: initial armed resistance was strong, ethnic tensions were present, and the economy was underdeveloped. However, the policy choice of the Americans and the Japanese were very different. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that both the Americans and the Japanese exhibited considerable agency in their selection of strategies. Background conditions were of course important, but how the colonizers interpreted the meaning of these conditions were starkly different. Thus, I rejected my null hypothesis that colonial policy choice was strongly determined by the conditions found on the ground.

Rejecting this null hypothesis allowed me to squarely focus my project on the issue of choice in the founding of colonial institutions. Even if it were the case that policymakers who failed to take into account the conditions on the ground were “punished,” we are still left with the question of why policymakers ignored pertinent background conditions and made bad choices. Moreover, why were they unable to, or chose not to, adjust their policy once they saw that their initial policy was failing? As stated earlier, colonial policymaking was not a one-shot game. For example, the Japanese policymakers in Taiwan considerably adjusted their colonial policy in 1898 (after occupying Taiwan for three years), as they found their previous strategy to have been ineffective.

Furthermore, if we are able to reject the null hypothesis that the background condition strongly determined the shape of the colonial policy, we can begin to ask the question of “how.” How did the Americans or the Japanese construct their colonial state and construct new institutions in their colonies? This question, which is vitally important if we are to understand the issue of short-term effects and long-term legacy of colonial policymaking, were addressed in this project by examining two specific issue areas: (i) education and (ii) health and hygiene. In particular, I focused on the issue of policy enforcement when

examining how the Japanese and the Americans constructed institutions to pursue their agenda in these policy areas. Were the Japanese/Americans able to get students to attend schools they built? Were the Japanese/Americans able to get the colonized people to follow rules and regulations regarding health and hygiene?

Finally, because of the similarities in background conditions between Taiwan and the Philippines, its comparison presents an intriguing empirical puzzle. Despite similarities in background conditions between the two cases, as early as 1905 the island of Taiwan was internationally recognized as a functioning and modern colonial-state. On the other hand, the notion of an effective Philippine state existed only in the writings of American propagandists. What emerged after decades of intensive American state-building efforts in the Philippines was a “Potemkin state,” where the well-governed city of Manila was a world apart from the unruly countryside. Meanwhile, the Japanese were able to construct a police state that reached far into the Taiwanese hinterlands. Japan’s comparative “success” was particularly surprising given that Japan, in the early twentieth century, was still a developing country that had itself barely escaped Western imperialism. Therefore, although most studies on state-building routinely stress the importance of resourcefulness on the part of the occupying power, in the case of the Japan-America comparison, the country with fewer resources and capabilities fared significantly better. It was not just that the Japanese seemed to have made the kind of choices that were conducive to state-building. Importantly, the country with the less resources, and therefore with less choices, were the ones ultimately able to lay the foundations of an effective state. This project explores why this was the case.

#### Conclusion/Observation\_400 words\_

The starting point of the dissertation was my hypothesis that ideas regarding sovereignty, democracy, and nationality played a critical role in determining colonial policy in Japan and the United States. However, contrary to my initial expectations, I found that this was not the case. Meanwhile, I found that existing Japanese historiography, which focused on the conflict between party politicians and bureaucrats, were also unable to explain sufficiently why assimilation policy was not chosen in Taiwan before 1919, while it was chosen in Korea in 1910. Therefore, as I conducted my research, I developed new hypotheses to address my research question.

What I found was that assimilation, in particular institutional assimilation, was avoided in Taiwan because the Taiwanese Government-General (GGT) understood that despite its overwhelming power, it was powerless to collect taxes, implement needed reforms in education and health, and engage in infrastructural investment, unless it depended on traditional Taiwanese institutions to carry out these tasks in the localities. Had the Japanese authorities tried to assimilate the Taiwanese by ignoring (or destroying) these traditional institutions, then the GGT would have lost its ability to govern. No matter how powerful a regime may be, it cannot compel people to do as it pleases unless it is able to extend its power deep into society. Given that the Japanese regime in Taiwan was new, its reach into society was shallow; the only way for the regime to change the behavior of the Taiwanese was to depend on native elites, and make full use of existing local institutions and networks to mobilize the population.

This conclusion challenges not only existing understandings about the origin of colonial policies, but provides important insights into why certain colonial policies seemed to have “succeeded,” while others failed. Much of the literature, both on Japanese and the American

policies, focuses on the importance of the legacy of a rational bureaucracy. Those that contend that the Japanese left behind a pro-growth legacy in Taiwan point to how Japanese policymakers were able to construct a well-functioning (albeit authoritarian) bureaucracy in Taiwan. Similarly, those that have criticized American colonial efforts in the Philippines largely point to the lack of progress made in the construction of an efficient bureaucracy. I challenge both of these perspectives. The Japanese did in fact leave behind an institutional legacy enabling the mobilization of latent resources for the sake of economic development. This legacy, however, was that of integrating traditional and societal institutions into the formal and rational structures of the colonial state.