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The Transpacific Travel of Theories of Imperialism in the 1900s

Fei Chen 

Institute of Modern Chinese History, Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China

Email: chenfei1313@gmail.com

Abstract

This article provides a comparative discussion of the theories of imperialism developed by three prominent scholars – Paul Samuel Reinsch, Ukita Kazutami, and Liang Qichao – in the 1900s. Such a discussion offers a fresh understanding of imperialism in the East Asian context from three perspectives. First, by revealing inter-textual connections between the three figures' writings, it sheds light on Japan's mediating role in the formation of Chinese knowledge of imperialism in a transpacific exchange of ideas. Second, it examines how the theories of imperialism travelled in the unequal international spaces created by practices of imperialism. Last, it draws attention to the consequences of embracing the Western ideal of national empire in East Asia, highlighting the fact that some Japanese and Chinese elites resisted Western imperialism on the one hand, but, on the other, drew inspiration from the ideal of imperialism to formulate their own expansionist agendas.

In a book published in 1900, Paul Samuel Reinsch (1869–1923), then working as an assistant professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, urged the US government to implement a new type of 'universal imperialism' – 'national imperialism' – by developing industries and expanding trade.¹ One year later, Ukita Kazutami 浮田和民 (1860–1946), who was then teaching at *Tokyo Senmon Gakkō* 東京専門学校 (Tokyo Vocational College, Waseda University today), penned a short book to advocate a similar type of imperialism – what he later termed '*rinri teki teikoku shugi*' 倫理的帝国主義 (ethical imperialism). He implored the Japanese government to extract natural resources and wealth from its Asian neighbours for the Japanese nation on the one hand, and, on the other, unite Asian peoples under Japanese leadership to fight Western imperialism.² In the following year, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), a Chinese scholar sojourning in Yokohama during most

¹ Paul Samuel Reinsch, *World politics at the end of the nineteenth century: as influenced by the Oriental situation* (New York, NY, 1900), p. 14, p. 361.

² For Ukita's discussion of imperialism characterized by '*rinri teki yōso*' (ethical elements), see Ukita Kazutami, 'Teikoku shugi no kyōiku', in *Teikoku shugi to kyōiku* (Tokyo, 1901), pp. 53–4. For his discussion of '*rinri teki teikoku shugi*' (ethical imperialism), see Ukita Kazutami, *Rinri teki teikoku shugi* (Tokyo, 1909).

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of the 1900s, reminded his Chinese compatriots in an article that ‘*minzu diguo zhuyi*’ 民族帝國主義 (national imperialism) was key to revitalizing the Chinese nation.³ It is no coincidence that the three eminent intellectuals all promoted imperialism as a development policy aimed at economic gains. The meeting of the three great minds, this article argues, is a product of the transpacific exchange of ideas in the Age of Imperialism.

The present study scrutinizes the relations between theories of imperialism developed by Reinsch, Ukita, and Liang in the first half of the 1900s. The three figures are singled out because they made some of the earliest and the most influential efforts in the United States, Japan, and China, respectively, to theorize imperialism as a state policy to maximize a nation’s economic gains. The ensuing discussion is focused on these figures’ writings in the first years of the 1900s for two reasons. First, those years constituted the inception period in the development of their theories on imperialism. Second, and more importantly, their writings produced in this period facilitate a better understanding of how a new form of imperialism emerged in response to immediate changes of international relations. Reinsch theorized national imperialism as a strategy to exploit China when the continental expansion of the United States was ended by the close of its Western frontier and when an opportunity for overseas expansion was presented by its acquisition of Pacific and Caribbean colonies from Spain. Ukita formulated his theory of ethical imperialism as a means to develop the Japanese Empire which emerged in the aftermath of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) and the Battle of Beijing (1900). Liang recognized national imperialism as a crucial solution to revitalize China after its multiple defeats by Western powers in the nineteenth century had convinced him of Western knowledge’s critical role in strengthening a state.

By exposing the intellectual connection between Reinsch, Ukita, and Liang, this article provides fresh insight into imperialism from three perspectives. First, it draws on scholarship in the field of Sino-Japanese translations to shed light on Japan’s important role in shaping Chinese theories of imperialism. As indicated by the writings of Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976), who defined Chinese understanding of imperialism during the second half of the twentieth century, Chinese theories of imperialism were undoubtedly indebted to Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924).⁴ Yet recent studies of Sino-Japanese translations have unveiled Japan’s significant role in mediating Chinese elites’ perception of imperialism before they could access Leninist texts. Some studies have revealed the fact that the key terms for Chinese discussions of imperialism, such as empire, imperialism, and colonies, were popularized by Chinese translations of Japanese scholarship in the 1890s and the 1900s.⁵ More importantly, recent research has shown that the writings of Japanese socialist Kōtoku Shūsui 幸徳秋水 (1871–1911) inspired Chinese elites to develop

³Liang Qichao, ‘Lun minzu jingzheng zhi dashi’, in Zhang Pinxing, ed., *Liang Qichao quanji* (Beijing, 1999), p. 899.

⁴Wolfgang Deckers, “Imperialism” and “anti-imperialism” in Mao Zedong: origins and development of a revolutionary strategy’ (PhD thesis, London, 1996), pp. 165–221.

⁵Chen Liwei, “‘Shugi’ no rufu to chūgoku teki juyō – shakai shugi, kyōsan shugi, teikoku shugi o chūshinni’, *Seijō Daigaku Keizai Kenkyū*, 199 (2013), pp. 31–58, at pp. 46–54; Pan Guang-zhe, “‘Zhimindi’ de gainianshi: cong ‘xin minci’ dao ‘guanjianci’”, *Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Jindaishi Yanjiusuo Jikan*, 82 (2013), pp. 55–92.

Marxist critiques of imperialism, condemning it as an evil enterprise that served the interests of 'capitalists', 'industrialists', and 'opportunists' by grabbing overseas market and exporting surplus capital and commodities.⁶ This article pushes further research on Sino-Japanese translations of the theories of imperialism by demonstrating that Japanese elites not only introduced Marxist criticism of imperialism to their Chinese counterparts, but also familiarized them with non-Marxist theories of imperialism that cast this phenomenon in a positive light.

Second, by reading Ukita's and Liang's writings against Reinsch's book, this article probes into a transpacific flow of theories of imperialism. Edward W. Said pioneered the study of theories travelling across borders within Europe, explaining their transnational trajectories with four stages: a theory departs from 'a point of origin', transverses 'a distance' or 'a passage', confronts 'conditions of acceptance' or 'resistance', and is finally 'accommodated' in 'a new time and space' after having been transformed by its new uses.⁷ While known as a paramount postcolonial critic, Said in the early 1980s, however, uses the travel metaphor 'in a somewhat uncritical manner',⁸ and is less interested in the complex conditions of acceptance or/and resistance than the actual transformation and accommodation experienced by a theory on the move.⁹ Six years later, James Clifford took up Said's idea of travelling theory, but called upon efforts to explore 'the ambivalent appropriations and resistance that characterize the travels of theories' in 'unequal spaces of postcolonial confusion and contestation'.¹⁰ Mieke Bal adds to the discussion of travelling theories by compelling a reconsideration of what travels, drawing attention to the movements of concepts, or what she calls 'short-hand theories'.¹¹ Bal's study, as Michael C. Frank points out, suggests that concepts perhaps possess better abilities to transcend boundaries in their travels than theories – a body of interconnected concepts – because 'a single concept can be isolated from its original theoretical environment and ... then be reintegrated into a new context', and 'each individual concept may become part of more than one theory'.¹²

The present study follows and develops the trail laid down by earlier scholarship. It traces the four-stage travel of theories of imperialism, but shifts its focus from Europe in Said's works to the United States, Japan, and China. It draws attention to the unequal international spaces travelled by theories of imperialism, investigating how the international hierarchy in the early twentieth century, as the fundamental

⁶Kōtoku shūsui, *Teikoku shugi* (Tokyo, 1901), p. 98, pp. 113–14; Wang Hanhao, 'Discourses of "imperialism" in the late Qing dynasty', *Cultura: International Journal of Philosophy of Culture and Axiology*, 15 (2018), pp. 104–10; Meng Ruizhu, 'Kōtoku shūsui to chūgoku tengiha no heimin shugi to anakizumu – Kyōsantō sengen no honyaku o tansho ni', *Sōka Hōgaku*, 51 (2022), pp. 97–115, at pp. 92–100.

⁷Edward W. Said, *The world, the text, and the critic* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p. 227.

⁸Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning, 'Travelling concepts as a model for the study of culture', in Doris Bachmann-Medick, Horst Carl, Wolfgang Hellet, and Ansgar Nünning, eds., *Concepts for the study of culture* (Berlin, 2012), p. 6.

⁹Michael C. Frank, 'Imaginative geography as a travelling concept', *European Journal of English Studies*, 13 (2009), pp. 61–77, at p. 63.

¹⁰James Clifford, 'Notes on theory and travel', in James Clifford and Vivek Dhareshwar, eds., *Travelling theories, travelling theorists*, vol. 5: *inscriptions* (Santa Cruz, CA, 1989), p. 179, p. 184.

¹¹Mieke Bal, *Traveling concepts in the humanities: a rough guide* (Toronto, 2002), p. 23.

¹²Frank, 'Imaginative geography as a travelling concept', p. 62.

condition, propelled their acceptance in East Asia. It is focused on the travels of certain key concepts and hypotheses from the theories of imperialism, rather than on any grand systematized theories in their entirety, highlighting how these concepts and hypotheses were reintegrated into new discourses such as ethical imperialism and Chinese imperialism.

Third, this article examines the consequence of embracing the Western ideal of national empire. Earlier scholars of East Asia often place the colonized and the colonizer into a dyad – they treat imperialism as a form of unilateral exploitation, oppression, or enslavement, while reducing the agency of the colonized to mere resistance. Recent scholarship, however, has begun to entertain the possibility that the colonized can mimic the colonizer to pursue expansionism. In their pioneering research along this line of inquiry, Stephan Tanaka and Andre Schmid demonstrate that Japanese and Korean elites could deploy colonial knowledge, which was originally created to repress them, to establish a Japan-centric or Korea-centric order of knowledge that justified their own expansionist ambitions.¹³ Built upon Tanaka's and Schmid's research, this study tells a larger story that connects East Asia to the United States in the global operation of imperialism. It shows that some Japanese and Chinese elites resisted Western imperialism on the one hand, but, on the other, drew inspiration from the ideal of imperialism to formulate their own expansionist agendas.

II

The transpacific travel of the theories of imperialism discussed in the present study originated in the United States. It was set forth by Paul Samuel Reinsch, who attended the University of Wisconsin in 1888 and earned a doctorate in June 1898 under the supervision of the paramount historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932). Reinsch took up the position of assistant professor of political science at his alma mater in the spring of 1899 and rapidly rose to become one of the foremost US political scientists in his generation. With several other scholars, he helped establish the American Political Science Association in 1903 and successively served as its vice-president and president.¹⁴

What secured a professorship for Reinsch at the University of Wisconsin and impressed his readers in Japan and China was a monograph entitled *World politics at the end of the nineteenth century: as influenced by the Oriental situation* (hereafter *World politics*). Owing to its in-depth analysis of various forces shaping imperial powers' foreign policies, *World politics*, after its publication in 1900, won critical acclaim and was reprinted multiple times in the early-twentieth-century United States. The book was translated into Japanese within a year after the publication of its English original by Takata Sanae 高田早苗 (1860–1938), a prominent scholar of law and politics at Tokyo Vocational College. What spurred Takata's eagerness to translate Reinsch's book was the latter's theory of imperialism. This is probably the reason why Takata

¹³Stephan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: rendering past into history* (Berkeley, CA, 1996); Andre Schmid, *Korea between empires, 1895–1919* (New York, NY, 2002).

¹⁴Noel H. Pugach, *Paul S. Reinsch: open door diplomat in action* (Millwood, NY, 1979), pp. 1–14, pp. 50–7.

did not provide a literal translation of the book's title, but invented an entirely new one for it – *Teikoku shugi ron* 帝國主義論 (A treatise on imperialism).

Reinsch's theory of imperialism, which intrigued Takata, was built upon a hypothesis about the change of the ideals about the state. According to Reinsch, the ideal state pursued by people across the globe was first 'world-state', then 'nation-state', and finally 'national empire', though he based his claim entirely on his observation of European history.¹⁵ Historical development since the Renaissance, he contended, followed the principle of nationalism that no one could not counter-vail. A political leader and military commander as powerful as Napoleon (1769–1821) would be frustrated 'whenever his policy opposed the innate strength of nationalism'; by contrast, Louis XI (1423–83), Thomas Wolsey (1475–1530), Elizabeth I (1533–1603), Cardinal Richelieu (1585–1642), Henry IV (1367–1413), Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540), William Pitt (1708–78), Cavour (1810–61), and Otto von Bismarck (1815–98) all rose to prominence because they 'aided a national state in realizing its independence and developing its character'.¹⁶ The post-Renaissance world, Reinsch continued, started to embrace 'national imperialism' during the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Yet he emphasized that national imperialism was not tantamount to Roman imperialism. Although both resort to expansionism, the latter seeks to place 'all civilized nations under the sway of a world empire', whereas the former 'recognizes the separate existence of national states'.¹⁸ Meanwhile, national imperialism

takes as its basis a national state and is not inconsistent with respect for the political existence of other nationalities; it endeavors to increase the resources of the national state through the absorption or exploitation of undeveloped regions and inferior races, but does not attempt to impose political control upon highly civilized nations.¹⁹

These differences, Reinsch believed, are structured by divergent motivations underlying national imperialism and Roman imperialism. Roman imperialism is driven by rulers' personal ambitions, whereas national imperialism is dictated by the 'expansion in population', which 'necessitates expansion in territory'.²⁰ In other words, national imperialism grows out of strategic calculation that seeks to maximize a nation's interest rather than a personal impulse for territorial aggrandization.

While Reinsch viewed states' move towards national imperialism as an irreversible global trend, he was, at once, worried by the transition of nationalism into national imperialism. He feared that the resultant intensification of international rivalry for overseas colonies might lead to a revival of Roman imperialism and thus defeat an important principle of nationalism – the respect for the independence of

¹⁵Reinsch, *World politics*, p. 9, p. 17.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

civilized nations.²¹ The solution to this conundrum, he believed, was to establish an international order through international agreements that could regulate competition between national empires. He especially admired the Peace Conference at The Hague: despite its failure to forge a consensus over disarmament among attending parties, he appreciated it as an honest and humane means to settle international disputes and conflict.²²

Reinsch's somewhat ambivalent view of national imperialism is worth discussing. Certainly, he was not an opponent of expansionism, though he opposed outright seizure of territories. Like his contemporaries, he was excited by the opportunity to control the Philippines at the turn of the nineteenth century, viewing it as a base for the United States to develop trade with China.²³ What distinguished Reinsch from many European colonizers was his perception of the goal of overseas expansion. As shown by his definition of national imperialism and his explanation of its difference from Roman imperialism, Reinsch believed the fundamental purpose of overseas expansion was to maximize a nation's interests. National interest, in his eyes, cannot be obtained through territorial expansion alone, as 'many of the colonies hastily acquired by European nations will never make a material return to the people as a whole, for the outlay involved in their administration'.²⁴ He therefore dismissed all kinds of overseas expansion whose sole purpose was to seize territories, criticizing them as presumptuous moves driven by a purely sentimental motive that only 'appeals to the unthinking'.²⁵ He instead argued that 'modern imperialism is more vitally interested in commercial expansion than in territorial expansion' and that territorial acquisition was more a means to the protection of trade than an end in its own right.²⁶

In line with his view of national imperialism, Reinsch spoke highly of the new expansionist policy towards China, which was formulated in 1899 by the US Secretary of State John Milton Hay (1838–1905). Reinsch realized that it was difficult for a single imperial power to colonize a country as big as China. Yet at the same time, he feared that if China was partitioned by multiple imperial powers, these states 'would be forced to fight for their civilization, and a century of terrible conflicts would be imminent'.²⁷ Along this line of logic, he supported Hay's Open-Door Policy, which sought to build among imperial powers a consensus that would prevent each of them from controlling the entirety of China, on the one hand, and, on the other, enable each of them to trade with China on an equal basis.²⁸ Such a policy, for Reinsch, was a wise solution, as it could secure for the United States an equal share of interest in China while preventing 'the breakdown of the friendly commercial relations of the civilized powers'.²⁹

²¹Ibid., p. 13.

²²Ibid., pp. 22–3.

²³Paul Samuel Reinsch, 'The Philippines in its national aspects', *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 17 Dec. 1899; Reinsch, *World politics*, pp. 252–3, pp. 318–24.

²⁴Reinsch, *World politics*, p. 10.

²⁵Ibid., p. 10, p. 312.

²⁶Ibid., p. 31.

²⁷Ibid., p. 245.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 176–7.

²⁹Ibid., p. 313, p. 325.

To understand Reinsch's theory of national imperialism and his assessment of the new China policy of the United States, it is useful to consider their context. The expansionist impulse underlying his ideas was stimulated by the immediate change of the international environment wherein the United States was situated. Until 1899, US politicians had followed the Monroe Doctrine, spelled out by James Monroe (1758–1831) in 1823. The doctrine sought to prevent European states, especially Spain, from colonizing independent states in the Americas by promising that the United States would not interfere in European colonies or the internal affairs of European states. It produced what William Appleman Williams calls 'imperial anti-colonialism', a grand strategy that defended independent states in the Americas against European powers while, at the same time, placing these independent states in the US sphere of influence.³⁰ The Spanish–American War in 1898, however, eroded the foundation of the Monroe Doctrine, which had built an informal continental US empire. Although elites in the United States were mobilized to fight the Spanish by their interest in Cuba and their sympathy for Cubans, they ended up annexing the Philippines in the aftermath of the war. The acquisition of the former Spanish colony in the Pacific and the resultant 'unexpected' 'insular' empire cracked the confines set by the Monroe Doctrine and fanned Reinsch's enthusiasm for further overseas expansion beyond the North American continent.³¹

If we stretch our sight to place Reinsch's expansionist desire in a longer time frame, we will find that it was not only an exigent response to an immediate change of international environment, but also the result of a time-honoured fascination with expansion among the US elites. As Williams reminds us, the US expansionism was a legacy inherited by British colonists from their motherland: 'having matured in an age of empires as part of an empire, the colonists naturally saw themselves in the same light once they joined issue with the mother country'.³² As a result, the colonists were running away from the British Empire on the one hand, and appropriating the British colonial practices to build their state on the other. In particular, the US expansionists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries targeted the North American continent and the island of Cuba for territorial acquisition and settler colonialism.³³ While these expansionists failed to incorporate Canada in the north and Mexico in the south, they managed to aggrandize their country through a westward movement, transforming it from a union of thirteen colonies along the Atlantic coast into an empire with a long Pacific coastline. The continental expansion of the United States, however, came to a close in the last decade of the nineteenth century, when there was no longer any 'free' land on the North American continent available for annexation. The end of westward movement triggered anxiety among the US elites, which was perhaps best illustrated by the influential frontier thesis formulated by Frederick Jackson Turner, Reinsch's mentor at the University of Wisconsin. In a paper delivered to the American Historical Association in 1893, Turner praised

³⁰William Appleman Williams, *The tragedy of American diplomacy*, second revised and enlarged edition (New York, NY, 1978), pp. 21–2.

³¹A. G. Hopkins, *American Empire: a global history* (Princeton, NJ, 2018), p. 337.

³²Williams, *The tragedy of American diplomacy*, p. 21.

³³Hopkins, *American Empire*, p. 192; Daniel Burge, *A failed vision of empire: the collapse of manifest destiny* (Lincoln, NB, 2022), p. 6.

'the colonization of the Great West' for moulding the exceptional character of the United States and its people, but, at the same time, mourned the demise of the westward movement due to the closure of the frontier, as announced by the bulletin of the Superintendent of the Census for 1890. 'The frontier', he lamented, 'has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of US history'.³⁴ While Turner's theory looked at the past, its contemporary implication was clear and unmistakable: in order to maintain democracy and prosperity, expansion was a must; when there was no continental frontier available for the United States to annex, it needed to shift its focus overseas. Standing on Turner's shoulders, Reinsch articulated in *World politics* the critical imperial strategy that his mentors had not yet clearly spelled out in 1893.

Just as Reinsch's expansionist desire was animated by the immediate change of international environment and nurtured in a set of time-honoured practices, his specific expression of such desire was similarly structured by both external change and internal factors. Julian Go argues that, since 1947, the United States during its heyday chose not to seize new territories and relied exclusively on informal imperialism, not because it possessed 'democratic and anti-imperial features' but because the international stage did not provide a favourable environment for formal imperialism.³⁵ Go's theory can also explain Reinsch's disinterest in territorial expansion and settler colonialism in Asia at the turn of the twentieth century. When the United States was offered an opportunity to pursue overseas expansion in Asia through the acquisition of the Philippines, it entered a crowded arena wherein other European powers and Japan had firmly established their presence – they either built up colonial regimes or carved out their spheres of influence. If the United States pursued territorial expansion or settler colonialism, it could easily trigger wars with other powers, as it had little choice but to annex other powers' colonies or encroach on their spheres of influence. The high risk of war made the establishment of a formal empire through territorial acquisition a less appealing option for Reinsch.

If lateness to the international colonial game inhibited the transferring of the traditional practices of the United States to Asia, its economic transformation during the nineteenth century rendered commercial profit a higher priority than territorial gains. Over the course of a century, the US economy transformed from a basically agrarian one during the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods into an industrial one.³⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States had overtaken Britain as the largest exporter of manufactured goods.³⁷ Machinery, iron, and steel now replaced wheat, corn, rice, flour, and tobacco as the primary and the most lucrative US exports. Parallel to the industrialization of the United States and the structural change of its economy and trade during the nineteenth century was the frequent occurrence of economic recessions. These recessions stemmed from

³⁴Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The significance of the frontier in American history', in John Mack Faragher, ed., *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: 'The significance of the frontier in American history' and other essays* (New Haven, CT, 1994), p. 31, p. 60.

³⁵Julian Go, *Patterns of empire: the British and American empires, 1688 to the present* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 135–6.

³⁶Edwin Perkins, *The economy of colonial America* (New York, NY, 1988), p. 31.

³⁷Zakaria Fareed, *From wealth to power: the unusual origins of America's world role* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), p. 46.

divergent contexts, but many elites in the United States construed them as a result of underconsumption. For Karl Marx and Marxists following in his footsteps, the essential solution to underconsumption was a more equal distribution of income. Yet Reinsch, along with his many contemporaries in the United States, attempted to solve this problem by expanding the overseas market for domestic industrial products through imperialism.

One can better appreciate Reinsch's important yet overlooked role in the development of theories of imperialism by comparing *World politics* with some better-known texts on imperialism. When scholars today think about imperialism's relations with nationalism and capitalism, John Atkinson Hobson (1858–1940) may be the first scholar they look to. The influence of Hobson, particularly that of his underconsumption thesis and his systematic criticism of imperialism, can never be exaggerated. Yet Hobson's aura perhaps overshadowed the contribution of contemporary theorists of imperialism like Reinsch. The two key ideas put forth by Reinsch in *World politics* – the economic drive underlying national imperialism and the intimate relations between nationalism and imperialism – bore a resemblance to what Hobson outlined in *Physiology of industry* (1889) and *Imperialism: a study* (1902), respectively. As Reinsch did not cite Hobson, it is difficult to determine whether the former drew cues from the latter's theory of underconsumption when trying to find a capitalist purpose for national imperialism. Yet *World politics*, which was published two years before *Imperialism: a study*, did make it clear that Reinsch not only theorized the intimate relations between nationalism and imperialism earlier than Hobson, but also had a more insightful understanding of their relations. Unlike Hobson, who regarded imperialism as a 'perversion' of nationalism,³⁸ Reinsch considered imperialism a natural outgrowth of nationalism in the evolution of political ideals. While Hobson's theory was widely embraced by scholars during most of the twentieth century, many returned to the stance of Reinsch after they had been disillusioned with nationalism. These scholars, such as Christopher Alan Bayly, now considered 'imperialism and nationalism' as 'part of the same phenomenon'.³⁹ A similar exercise with Vladimir Lenin's (1870–1924) theory of imperialism can equally help one appreciate Reinsch's less recognized contribution to the study of imperialism. Drawing on inspiration from Hobson and Rudolf Hilferding (1877–1941), Lenin formulated in 1917 his highly influential thesis, which defined imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism.⁴⁰ Although Lenin was widely credited for capturing the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing global expansion of capitalism and imperialism, Reinsch in fact had articulated a similar thesis sixteen years earlier – though he emphasized the export of surplus commodities instead of capital and looked at imperialism in a positive light.

³⁸John Atkinson Hobson, *Imperialism: a study* (New York, NY, 1902), p. 9.

³⁹Christopher Alan Bayly, *The birth of the modern world, 1780–1914* (Oxford, 2004), p. 230.

⁴⁰Vladimir Lenin, *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism*, Marxists Internet Archive, available at: www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ (accessed 25 Oct. 2023).

III

During the same year when Reinsch's book was translated into Japanese, Ukita Kazutami declared his vision of the Japanese Empire. Ukita was born in what is Kumamoto Prefecture today. He was baptized as a Protestant at the age of seventeen and then attended a Christian school named *Dōshisha eigakko* 同志社英学校 (Doshisha English School) from 1876 to 1879. He started preaching at school and served as a pastor at the Tenma Church in Osaka from 1880 to 1881. While maintaining his faith and continuing to preach Christianity, he relieved himself of his pastorship to pursue a career in journalism in 1881. Five years later, he was recruited by the principal of his alma mater to teach history and political science. While teaching at Doshisha English School, he seized an opportunity to pursue further study of history and political science at Yale University under the supervision of George Trumbull Ladd (1842–1921), a prominent psychologist and philosopher. After returning to Japan from the United States, Ukita taught at Tokyo Vocational College for half a century until 1941 and co-edited the influential journal *Taiyō* 太陽 (The Sun) with several eminent scholars in Japan.⁴¹

Ukita's theory of imperialism was crystalized in *Rinri teki teikoku shugi* 倫理的帝国主義 (Ethical imperialism), a book published in 1909, but its core idea had already taken shape in a shorter book published in 1901, entitled *Teikoku shugi to kyōiku* 帝国主義と教育 (Imperialism and education). The 1901 book is composed of two long essays serialized in *Kokumin shimbun* 國民新聞 (National news) during the same year: one was '*Nihon no teikoku shugi*' 日本の帝国主義 (Japanese imperialism), published in April 1901, and the other was '*Teikoku shugi no kyōiku*' 帝国主義の教育 (Imperialistic education), published in June and July 1901.⁴²

In 'Japanese imperialism', Ukita promoted a specific type of imperialism that he urged Japan to adopt. According to him,

Japanese imperialism should, domestically, educate Japanese nationals with the spirit of imperialism, and, internationally, enable Japanese nationals to freely gain industrial profits in every corner of the world. In international politics, Japan should, as its capability allows, maintain the independence of Far Eastern states and foster their reform.⁴³

Underlying the above text were two interconnected international missions of a Japanese Empire as envisioned by Ukita. One was to maximize Japanese people's economic interest; the other was to serve as the messiah of other Asian nations or, as he mentioned elsewhere in the same book, '*ajia shokoku no shihan*' アジア諸国の師範

⁴¹Matsuda Yoshio, ed., 'Ukita Kazutami ryakunenpu chosaku mokuroku', 12 July 2024, pp. 2–15, available at: <https://ymatsuda.kill.jp/Ukita-mokuroku.pdf> (accessed 08 May 2025); Takeda Kiyoko, 'Ukita Kazutami no "teikoku shugi" ron to kokumin kyōiku – Meiji jiyū shugi no keifu', *Kokusai Kirisutokyō Daigaku Gakuho* 1–A *Kyōiku Kenkyū*, 21 (1978), pp. 1–27, at pp. 10–11; Takeda Kiyoko, *Nihon riberarizumu no ryōsen* (Tokyo, 1987), p. 139; Jiang Keshi, *Ukita Kazutami no shisōshi teki kenkyū – rinri teki teikoku shugi no keisei* (Tokyo, 2003), p. 124.

⁴²Ishii Tomoaki, 'Ukita Kazutami to Rinri teki teikoku shugi ron', *Ajia Taiheiyō Kenkyū*, 19 (2013), pp. 89–102, at p. 92.

⁴³Ukita Kazutami, 'Nihon no teikoku shugi', in *Teikoku shugi to kyōiku* (Tokyo, 1901), pp. 38–9.

(the teacher of Asian states) that would help them resist Western colonialism and institute reforms.⁴⁴

In Ukita's eyes, this type of Japanese imperialism was ethical. Unlike old-style imperialism, it was no longer driven by the ambition to build a world-state espoused by a single individual, such as Alexander the Great (356BC–323BC), Charles the Great (748–814), Genghis Khan (1162–1227), Toyotomi Hideyoshi 豊臣秀吉 (1537–98), or Napoleon.⁴⁵ It was instead animated by a goal of strengthening the nation, leading 'nationals to acquire territories and other kinds of interests all over the world'.⁴⁶ While admitting that 'today's imperialism often became invasive', he stressed that 'it was a natural result of nations' competition for survival'. The elimination of barbaric nations and the annexation of weak states by imperial powers, in his eyes, were only collateral incidents accompanying imperialism rather than its ultimate purpose.⁴⁷ The real pursuit of today's imperialism, for him, was economic interest: it aimed to meet nations' 'natural' and 'economic' needs; even if it had political demands, they were derivative of its economic demands and could be morally justified by nations' needs.⁴⁸ Thus, he recommended that Japan should pursue 'peaceful', 'economic', and 'commercial' expansion towards Eurasia, the American continent, and Southeast Asia.⁴⁹

By incorporating nationalist ethics, Social Darwinism, and hedonistic utilitarianism into his discourse, Ukita justified his new imperialism as ethical on the grounds that it enables a nation to survive and advance in a presumed zero-sum international competition. For students of modern Japanese history, such a claim may immediately remind them of Japanese Pan-Asianism, an innovative ideology that cloaked Japanese expansionism and legitimized Japanese hegemony in Asia as anti-West leadership.⁵⁰ Yet if we compare Ukita's idea with the claims made by elites in the United States during his time, we can also find intriguing similarities between them.

Ukita's proposal to place Asian states under Japanese mentorship to maintain independence and pursue reform was not so different from a messianic belief held by US elites about the 'providentially assigned role of the United States to lead the world to new and better things'.⁵¹ One of these elites who had a profound influence on Ukita was George Trumbull Ladd, his mentor at Yale University. Ladd not only was an exceptional scholar but also served as a pastor for ten years in Ohio and Wisconsin before starting his academic career and acted as a diplomatic adviser

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 36.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 65.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 53–4.

⁴⁸For Ukita's discussion of imperialism characterized by '*rinri teki yōso*' 倫理の要素 (ethical elements), see Ukita Kazutami, 'Teikoku shugi no kyōiku', in *Teikoku shugi to kyōiku* (Tokyo, 1901), pp. 53–4.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 68–9.

⁵⁰Miwa Kimitada, 'Pan-Asianism in modern Japan: nationalism, regionalism, and universalism', in Sven Saaler and J. Victor Koschmann, eds., *Pan-Asianism in modern Japanese history: colonialism, regionalism and borders* (London, 2007), pp. 24–32.

⁵¹Anders Stephanson, *Manifest destiny: American expansion and the empire of right* (New York, NY, 1995), p. xii.

to the Japanese government from 1892 to 1899.⁵² His extensive experience outside academia may have played an important role in turning him into a champion of messianic imperialism. His stance was clearly illustrated by *In Korea with Marquis Ito*, a book that accounts for his three-month visit to Korea in 1907 at the invitation of Itō Hirobumi 伊藤博文 (1841–1909), the then Resident-General of Korea. In this travel book, Ladd disdained Koreans as ‘ignorant’, ‘habitually negligent’, and ‘corrupt’ ‘devil-and spirit-worshippers’.⁵³ He asserted that Christianity was needed to redeem Koreans.⁵⁴ Yet unlike his contemporaries in the United States, he believed the missionary alone was insufficient for the redemption of Korea and the United States was not the messiah for Koreans.⁵⁵ The true messiah for Korea, he believed, was Japan – ‘the most sacred obligations, not only of self-interest, but also of a truly wise regard for the Emperor and his subjects, bound the Japanese Government to establish and maintain its protectorate over Korea’.⁵⁶

Although it is not until the publication of *In Korea with Marquis Ito* in 1908 when his articulation of messianic imperialism and his Japanophile stance were made known to a larger audience beyond academia and his circle of colleagues and friends, his belief in messianic imperialism and his sympathy for Japanese imperialism took shape much earlier in his life. Decades before he met his Japanese protégé, his experience as a pastor from 1869 to 1879 perhaps already sowed the seeds of his belief in redemption through imperialism. His sympathy towards Japanese expansionism likely grew during his interaction with Ukita and the Japanese government since 1892. Thus, before penning his first major work on imperialism, Ukita was probably already familiar with his mentor’s view of messianic imperialism and sympathy for Japanese expansionism.

While Ukita’s vision of Japan as an anti-colonial Asian empire was comparable to his mentor’s belief in messianic imperialism, his idea of ethical imperialism – the pursuit of a nation’s economic interest through imperialism – bore a resemblance to Reinsch’s theory of national imperialism. Like Reinsch, Ukita considered a nation’s interests, particularly its economic interests, as the ultimate pursuit of new imperialism emerging in the late nineteenth century, and as the justification for the cruelty of imperialist policies.

How do we understand the resemblance between Ukita’s theory of imperialism and what was advocated by Reinsch during the same period? Earlier scholars tend to view Ukita’s theory of ethical imperialism as his original invention that grew out of the intellectual atmosphere in the Meiji era. Takeda Kiyoko provided an insightful discussion of the relation between Ukita’s idea of ethical imperialism and Japanese liberalism, which criticized military conquest while promoting economic expansionism.⁵⁷ Takeda draws our attention to Ukita’s argument that an ‘ethics of liberalism’, rather than an ‘ethics of obedience’, was critical to the cultivation of

⁵²Andre Schmid, ‘Two Americans in Seoul: evaluating an oriental empire’, *Korean Histories*, 2 (2010), pp. 7–23, at p. 9.

⁵³George Trumbull Ladd, *In Korea with Marquis Ito* (London, 1908), p. 66.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 455.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 149, p. 297.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 149; Schmid, ‘Two Americans in Seoul’, p. 15.

⁵⁷Takeda, ‘Ukita Kazutami no “teikoku shugi” ron’, pp. 15–9.

people for a Japanese Empire.⁵⁸ She wisely points out that the Japanese Empire in Ukita's blueprint anchored itself in constitutionalism at the domestic dimension and pursued an imperialism of free trade at the external dimension.

While the influence of Japanese liberalism on Ukita is clear, the resemblance between his theory of ethical imperialism and Reinsch's theory reminds us of a link that has escaped earlier scholars' scrutiny. Admittedly, Ukita may not have read Takata's translation of *World politics* when he was writing his two long essays, later republished as *Teikoku shugi to kyōiku*. After all, the first of the two essays was published eight months earlier than Takata's translation. Yet it is quite likely that Ukita consulted Reinsch's original – one of the celebrated works on imperialism in the 1900s – when he was writing on a topic on which he was not yet an expert. He could gain access to Reinsch's original manuscript through his friends in the United States, like Ladd, or, more likely, through Takata, his colleague at Tokyo Vocational College who was translating Reinsch's book.

Ukita's efforts to appropriate Reinsch's discourse to formulate his own theory of ethical imperialism was deeply intertwined with Japanese elites' efforts to develop the Meiji state into an empire, inspired by the practices of the Western imperial powers. Ever since Matthew Calbraith Perry (1794–1858) led a fleet of warships to force Japan's opening to American trade, Japanese elites had become concerned by the possibility that Japan would become a Western colony. Their fear mobilized them to import what was viewed as 'civilization' from the West to reform Japan. The success of West-inspired reform was often deployed by Japanese imperialists to justify their colonial enterprise in Asia as exportation of Japan's successful experience of domestic development. Yet, as Andre Schmid has pointed out, the Japanese experience of reform, civilizing, and modernization preceding the First Sino-Japanese War was not merely a domestic achievement isolated from its interaction with other states.⁵⁹ Few fields of domestic development were possible without Japan's expansionist enterprise. The success of the Meiji state, as Oguma Eiji has observed, was in tandem with the forced conversion of Okinawans, Ainus, and Taiwanese into Japanese.⁶⁰ It is no coincidence that the simultaneity and interdependence of Japan's domestic development and outward expansion mirrored that of Western modernization and colonialism. As Robert Eskildsen argues, Japan's overseas expansion at its very early stage already mimicked Western imperialism.⁶¹ The Japanese expedition to Taiwan in 1874 was claimed to be a campaign launched to punish Taiwanese aborigines who had murdered fifty-four people from Okinawa and were not punished by the Qing government, but it was in fact the first attempt made by Japan to establish overseas colonies under the rubric of civilizing savage inhabitants in southern Taiwan. Japanese ambition to civilize and colonize southern Taiwan was sparked by Charles LeGendre (1830–99), a US diplomat who served first as the US consul in Amoy from

⁵⁸Ukita, 'Teikoku shugi no kyōiku', p. 86.

⁵⁹Andre Schmid, 'Colonialism and the "Korea Problem" in the historiography of modern Japan: a review article', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 59 (2000), pp. 951–976, at p. 957.

⁶⁰Oguma Eiji, *Nihonjin no kyōkai: Okinawa, Ainu, Taiwan, Chōsen, shokuminchi shihai kara fukki undo made* (Tokyo, 1998).

⁶¹Robert Eskildsen, 'Of civilization and savages: the mimetic imperialism of Japan's 1874 expedition to Taiwan', *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 388–418, at pp. 394–8.

1866 to 1872 and then as an advisor to the Japanese government from 1872 to 1875. During his stay in Japan, LeGendre made several proposals to colonize southern Taiwan in the name of punishing the aborigines. In order to justify his proposals, he formulated a legal argument with Western ideas of civilization and sovereignty to deny China's right to southern Taiwan. According to his account, China did not possess sovereignty over southern Taiwan because it refused to either exercise legal jurisdiction over aboriginal territory or civilize the barbaric aborigines. The Meiji government adopted LeGendre's argument in its negotiation with the Qing government, though it eventually aborted his annexation proposals due to the concern that Japan could not afford a war with China. Yet as history has shown, Japan's ambition to annex Taiwan did not die out and ultimately mobilized the Japanese to acquire the island in 1895 through the First Sino-Japanese War.

The Meiji mode of state development, which mirrored the parallel process of domestic modernization and overseas expansion in the West, spurred Ukita's interest in the theories of imperialism. His writings perhaps did not introduce to his readers any unknown practice, as the enterprises to civilize external barbarians (Ainu, Okinawans, and the Taiwanese) had been developing in tandem with the efforts to civilize the Japanese nation for nearly three decades before 1901. Despite that, his efforts to theorize these practices marked something new in the process of appropriating imperialism in Japan. Imperialism was no longer a secret scheme that needed to be disguised as it had been in the 1870s. Instead, it became a strategy that was justified as ethical by its nationalist goal and could be openly promoted and pursued. Also, imperialism no longer confined itself within the expansionist strategies formulated by elites in the government, but entered the minds of people outside the government as a sublime pursuit for the sake of the nation.

IV

Soon after their publication, Takata's translation of Reinsch's work and Ukita's book captured the attention of Liang Qichao, one of the most prominent and productive Chinese scholars in the early twentieth century. Liang, a native of Guangdong Province, received a solid training in Confucian classics during his childhood and teen years, but later developed a strong interest in Western learning and became a disciple of prominent scholar Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) in 1890. Liang began his lifelong career as a journalist in 1895 and later supported the Hundred Days' Reform in 1898, which was modelled after the Meiji Restoration.⁶² The Chinese reform, just like its Japanese exemplar, sought to strengthen the state to resist external challenges by learning from its Western rivals. Unfortunately, it led to a fierce competition for power in the imperial court between the Guangxu Emperor's faction and Empress Dowager Cixi's faction. As a result of the rapid escalation of the competition, the empress dowager launched a coup to remove the emperor from power, terminate the reform, and persecute reformers in the emperor's faction.⁶³ Liang, an enthusiastic supporter of the reform, was thus forced to flee China and take shelter

⁶²Ding Wenjiang and Zhao Fengtian, *Liang Qichao nianpu changbian* (Shanghai, 1983), pp. 12–608.

⁶³Huang Zhangjian, *Wuxu bianfa shi yanjiu (xia)* (Shanghai, 2007), p. 929; Kong Xiangji, 'Wuxu zougao de gaicuan ji qiyuanyin', *Jinyang Xuekan*, 2 (1982), pp. 2–9.

in Japan. During his exile, Liang again devoted himself to journalism and established two tremendously influential journals – *Qingyi bao* 清議報 (The China Discussion) and *Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報 (The New People's Journal).

In an article published in *The China Discussion* in 1901, Liang used the term '*minzu diguo zhuyi*' 民族帝國主義, a Chinese translation of 'national imperialism', for the first time.⁶⁴ In this article, he mapped various ideals of the state in Europe onto a linear progression, evolving from '*jiazu zhuyi*' 家族主義 (tribalism), '*qizhang zhuyi*' 酋長主義 (chieftainism), and '*diguo zhuyi*' 帝國主義 (imperialism) in the past to '*minzu zhuyi*' 民族主義 (nationalism) and '*minzu diguo zhuyi*' 民族帝國主義 (national imperialism) in the present, and then to '*wanguo datong zhuyi*' 萬國大同主義 (cosmopolitanism) in the future.⁶⁵ According to his account, when nationalism reaches its extreme, it will naturally transition into imperialism, as a state will seek external expansion to fulfil its unceasing mission of increasing its nationals' happiness.⁶⁶ He further emphasized that national imperialism in the nineteenth century was different from the old imperialism in the pre-eighteenth century – the former served the nation by building a '*minzu diguo*' 民族帝國 (national empire), whereas the latter served the despot who controlled an empire.⁶⁷ Liang's hypothesis about the linear progression of the ideals of the state in Europe and his idea of national imperialism as an offshoot of nationalism perhaps easily remind us of similar claims made by Reinsch and Ukita. Yet Liang's discussion of national imperialism was brief and did not disclose the source of inspiration for his ideas. Indeed, when discussing the differences between medieval and modern ideas of the state in Europe, he referenced *Deutsche Statslehre für Gebildete* [sic], a book authored by Swiss jurist and politician Johann Kaspar Bluntschli (1808–81). Yet the ideas of national imperialism and its relationship with nationalism were not present in Bluntschli's original, its Japanese translation by Hirata Tōsuke 平田東助 (1849–1925) and Hiratsuka Teijirō 平塚定二郎, or, most importantly, its Chinese translation by Azuma Hyōji 吾妻兵治, through which Liang understood Bluntschli's ideas.⁶⁸

Another article, published in 1902 in *The New People's Journal*, shows us that the resemblance between Reinsch's, Ukita's, and Liang's ideas was not a result of the accidental meeting of three great minds. In this article, entitled '*Lun minzu jingzheng zhi dashi*' 論民族競爭之大勢 (On the general trend of national competition), Liang provided an elaborate discussion of imperialism. He began his article by laying down its foundation – a theory on the evolution of the ideals of the state in Europe. According to Liang, the dominant ideal of the state has evolved from world-state in the medieval era, to nation-state in the past four hundred years, and finally to national empire during his lifetime. This evolutionary trajectory was irresistible. Prominent kings and wise chancellors like Louis XI, Henry IV, Elizabeth I, Thomas

⁶⁴Wang, 'Discourses of "imperialism"', p. 99.

⁶⁵Liang Qichao, 'Guojia sixiang bianqian yitong lun', in Zhang Pinxing, ed., *Liang Qichao quanji* (Beijing, 1999), p. 458.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 459.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 460.

⁶⁸Basidi (Marianne Bastid-Bruguier), 'Zhongguo jindai guojia guannian suyuan – guanyu bolun zhili "Guojialun" de fanyi', *Jindaishi Yanjiu*, 4 (1997), pp. 218–29.

Cromwell, William Pitt, Cavour, and Otto von Bismarck all earned their fame by following this trend to build nation-states. If one countered this trend and attempted to forge an empire by integrating different nations, one was destined to fail like Napoleon, no matter how extraordinary one was. The fierce competition between nation-states later converted them into ‘*minzu diguo*’ 民族帝國 (national empires) by fuelling their ambition to expand outward. Liang emphasized that a national empire was different from the Roman Empire in the sense that the former did not aspire to be a ‘*shijie de guojia*’ 世界的國家 (world-state) by annexing territories as the latter did.⁶⁹ After having outlined his fundamental theory on the evolution of political ideals, he then discussed the practice of national imperialism in terms of realpolitik, with the expansionist strategies of four empires – the British, German, Russian, and American – that he admired as ‘the first-class states in the contemporary world’ and ‘the representatives of imperialism’.⁷⁰ He focused his discussion on their economic strategies – the establishment of maritime shipping routes, the construction of railways, and the development of trade, though he was also well aware of the navy’s importance for overseas expansion. The reason, he explained, was that ‘today’s competition was not through muscle but through brain’, and ‘was located not in the battlefield but in the market’.⁷¹

Liang’s discourse on imperialism bore a resemblance to the views that were advocated by Reinsch and Ukita. Like the two professors, Liang saw the transition from nationalism to national imperialism as an irreversible progress, and distinguished national imperialism from Roman imperialism by emphasizing the differences between the former’s goal of pursuing economic interest and the latter’s impulse to annex states. Such resemblance between Liang’s 1902 article and Reinsch’s and Ukita’s discourses on imperialism was a result of intellectual borrowing. At the beginning of his article, Liang confessed that it was not his own creation, but that he was indebted to four sources: Reinsch’s *World politics*, Franklin Henry Giddings’s (1855–1931) *Democracy and empire* (1900), and Ukita Kazutami’s two serial articles – ‘*Nihon no teikoku shugi*’ (Japanese imperialism) (1901) and ‘*Teikoku shugi no risō*’ (The ideal of imperialism) (1902).⁷²

Standing on the shoulders of Reinsch and Ukita, Liang presented a proposal to help China compete with foreign powers. He wrote: ‘economic competition stems from national expansion; national expansion derives from nationalism and statism ... Therefore, there is no other way to save China except building a nation-state’.⁷³ Undoubtedly, Liang was suggesting that China had to mimic its Western rivals in order to survive, just as he did in his many other writings. Nevertheless, what has often been overlooked by earlier scholars is that the transformation of China into

⁶⁹Liang Qichao, ‘Lun minzu jingzheng zhi dashi’, in Zhang Pinxing, ed., *Liang Qichao quanji* (Beijing, 1999), pp. 887–8.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, p. 893.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 895.

⁷²Liang, ‘Lun minzu jingzheng zhi dashi’, p. 887. See also Ishikawa Yoshihiro, ‘Ryō Keichō to bunmei no shiza’, in Hazama Naoki, ed., *Ryō Keichō: sei-yō kindai sisō juyō to meiji nihon: kyōdō kenkyū* (Tokyo, 1999), p. 121, pp. 129–30.

⁷³Liang Qichao, ‘Lun minzu jingzheng zhi dashi’, p. 899.

a nation-state was not his ultimate goal. As Chenchen Zhang argues, his conviction about the progress from nationalism to imperialism as an irreversible historical course naturally led to his belief that China would and should transform itself into a national empire.⁷⁴ Liang confidently wrote: 'if the largest nation in the world constructs a state suitable for evolution, who can take away from China its title of the Number One Empire in the world?'⁷⁵ As his words indicated, the purpose of transforming China into a nation-state was not to disintegrate the declining empire but to secure and strengthen it. Yet he did not want to maintain the empire as it had been. Rather, he wanted to reconstruct it as a national empire modelled after successful Western paragons – Britain, Russia, Germany, and the United States. Nation-state, for him, was thus less a goal than a means of establishing a national empire.

While Liang Qichao has long been known for the fluidity of his thoughts, which adapted quickly to the change of circumstances, his interest in national imperialism could not be dismissed as a fleeting phenomenon that, as Hanhao Wang assumes, receded after he returned to Japan from the United States in 1903.⁷⁶ On the contrary, the same advocacy for transforming China into a national empire was even more clearly spelled out in an article published by Liang in 1905, which was entitled '*Zhongguo zhimin bada weiren zhuan*' 中國殖民八大偉人傳 (The eight great Chinese colonizers). In this article, he presents brief biographical accounts of eight rulers and leaders in Southeast Asia who were all of Chinese descent. If we measure the eight figures' activities against Western practices of colonialism, few of them can perfectly fit into the category of colonizer, as none of them were ever commissioned by Chinese rulers to acquire overseas colonies or ever viewed Chinese empires as the mother state that their own regimes were subject to. Despite the gaps between Chinese settlers in Southeast Asia and Western colonizers, Liang proudly proclaimed that the eight figures were comparable to Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) and David Livingstone (1813–73) due to their contribution to the expansion of China's overseas influence.⁷⁷ As indicated by the title of his article and the tone of admiration he adopted to write about the eight historical figures, Liang now treated '*zhimin*' 殖民 (colonialism) no longer as a target of condemnation. It instead became a legacy that Chinese should inherit. In his eyes, Southeast Asia was '*tian-ran wozu zhi zhimin di*' 天然我族之殖民地 (a natural colony of our nation). He even offered suggestions about establishing overseas colonies in Southeast Asia, imploring the Qing government to encourage and facilitate its citizens to engage in colonial enterprises.⁷⁸

Liang's ideas of national imperialism and its relationship with nationalism can only be understood within the context of their inception. First, they were shaped by a new perception of China vis-à-vis the West emerging among Chinese elites in the

⁷⁴Chenchen Zhang, 'Situated interpretations of nationalism, imperialism and cosmopolitanism: revisiting the writings of Liang in the encounter between worlds', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 27(2014): pp. 343–60, at p. 351.

⁷⁵Liang Qichao, 'Lun minzu jingzheng zhi dashi', p. 899.

⁷⁶Wang, 'Discourses of "imperialism"', p. 103.

⁷⁷Liang Qichao, 'Zhongguo zhimin bada weiren zhuan', in Zhang Pinxing, ed. *Liang Qichao quanji* (Beijing, 1999), pp. 1366–7.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 1368.

aftermath of the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–5). Chinese elites had recognized China's military inferiority in the face of its defeats by Britain and France in the mid-nineteenth century but still maintained confidence in other parts of Chinese civilization – its political system, socio-economic structure, and culture. They sought to strengthen their empire by adopting Western science and technology, thus launching a series of reforms to modernize China's military and achieve industrialization, which were lumped under the same rubric, *Ziqiang yundong* 自強運動 (Self-Strengthening Movement).⁷⁹ Chinese elites' civilizational confidence was, however, shattered by China's defeat by Japan in 1895, which was construed by them as a result of the former's backward weaponry.⁸⁰ Their construal belied the fact that no significant gaps existed between Chinese troops and their Japanese enemies in weaponry. As several studies have shown, China fell behind Japan instead in war preparation, military training and drilling, as well as the number of soldiers deployed to fight several key battles.⁸¹ Despite that, traumatized by both shock and humiliation, Chinese elites overlooked the complexity of Japan's victory when they reflected on their defeat, trying to find fault with themselves. This line of critical reflection propelled Chinese elites to consider the Self-Strengthening Movement a failure and to reflect on this failure by comparing it with its Japanese counterpart – the Meiji Restoration. In their eyes, Japan succeeded because it, unlike China, adopted a comprehensive reform that not only imported Western science and technology but also changed Japan politically, socially, economically, and culturally in the image of Western states.⁸² Conceiving the Meiji Restoration as the secret behind Japan's victory, Chinese elites now believed the mighty military power of the West derived from other parts of its civilization. As a result, many of them found a motivation to learn from the West to reform China politically, socially, economically, and culturally. The growing enthusiasm for studying and transplanting Western civilization to China sparked Liang's interest in national imperialism, a crucial strategy used by Western powers to strengthen their states.

If we look beyond China's border, we will find that Liang's advocacy for national imperialism was actually one of many similar choices made by elites across the world when confronting the same imminent threat from Western imperialism. In the face of Western expansionism in East Asia, Ukita and similar-minded Japanese elites sought to secure and strengthen their country by adopting their rivals' strategy to turn Japan into an empire. Even stronger resemblance can be found between the Young Turks and Chinese elites in terms of the crises they faced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as well as the choices they made in

⁷⁹For a summary of the emergence and development of the Self-Strengthening Movement, see Suzuki Tomo'o, *Yōmu undō no kenkyū: Jūkyūseiki kōhan no Chūgoku ni okeru kōgyōka to gaikō no kakushin ni tsuite no kōsatsu* (Tokyo, 1992).

⁸⁰For a discussion of backward military technology as a crucial weakness of the Qing empire, see Quan Hansheng, 'Jiawu zhanzheng yiqian de zhongguo gongyehua yundong', *Lishiyuyan Yanjiusuo Jikan*, 25 (1954), pp. 59–79, at pp. 77–8.

⁸¹Allen Fung, 'Testing the Self-Strengthening: The Chinese Army in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895', *Modern Asian Studies*, 40 (1996), pp. 1007–31; Benjamin A. Elman, 'Naval warfare and the refraction of China's Self-Strengthening reforms into scientific and technological failure, 1865–1895', *Modern Asian Studies*, 38 (2004), pp. 283–326, at p. 320.

⁸²Elman, 'Naval warfare', p. 285.

response to these crises. Like the Qing dynasty, which suffered from foreign imperialism, the Ottoman Empire declined in the nineteenth century and continued to lose territories to European empires. In order to solve imminent crises, elites in the Ottoman Empire pursued reforms as their Chinese counterparts did. They launched the Young Turks Movement, whose central goal was to overthrow the absolutist regime of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and install constitutionalism. The movement has often been remembered as a nationalist movement, as it did contribute to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Yet the initial and ultimate goal of the Young Turks was not to liberate nations from the imperial prison created by the Ottoman Empire. Rather, like Liang and other like-minded Chinese elites, the Young Turks aimed to preserve their empire by transforming it from a traditional one into a new one that resembled a nation-state – what Nader Sohrabi calls an ‘imperial nation-state’.⁸³

By placing Liang’s discourse on imperialism in a global context, we can better understand the influence of Western theories of imperialism. The historiography of modern China, especially what was written by historians in China during the twentieth century, nearly always portrayed the post-1840 Qing dynasty as a weak state on the brink of collapse, which barely survived foreign imperialism. Chinese elites’ agency in their interaction with imperialism was reduced to mere resistance, which was nearly always in vain. Liang’s advocacy for Chinese imperialism reminds us that imperial elites could continue to seek for expansion, even when their empire was in its twilight. More importantly, his theory of national imperialism and his vision of China as a national empire show that the expansion of late Qing China intended by its elites was at least partly inspired by Western theories of imperialism. He did not call for a revitalization of the same expansion pursued by the Qing empire in Inner Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While Qing imperialism in this region, as Peter C. Perdue points out, was indeed comparable to Western imperialism,⁸⁴ it remained different from its Western counterparts in a key respect. That is, Qing authorities in the empire’s vast Inner Asian periphery – Tibet, Mongolia, Xinjiang – were less exploitative than their Western counterparts. The ruling elites in Beijing might be interested in some exotic resources in the periphery of their empire, such as mushrooms, horses, and furs,⁸⁵ but they had no intention to extract surplus from it. Throughout the Qing era, they refrained from imposing taxes on natives in Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang. Nor were Qing ruling elites interested in direct administration of the empire’s vast periphery. They instead endorsed the conventional authority of native elites in Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang, and governed these regions indirectly through native elites until the last decades of the Qing era. In contrast, what Liang advocated was to transform China into a national empire that prioritized the pursuit of economic interests. As shown by his vision of Southeast Asia as a Chinese colony, he hoped to establish Chinese rule in Southeast Asia to

⁸³Nader Sohrabi, ‘Reluctant nationalists: imperial nation-state, and neo-Ottomanism: Turks, Albanians, and the antinomies of the end of empire’, *Social Science History*, 42 (2018), pp. 835–70.

⁸⁴Peter C. Perdue, ‘Comparing empires: Manchu colonialism’, *The International History Review*, 20 (1998), pp. 255–262, at p. 256.

⁸⁵Jonathan Schlesinger, *A world trimmed with fur: wild things, pristine places, and the natural fringes of Qing rule* (Cambridge, MA, 2017).

govern what were often scorned as local barbarians, and exploit local resources to help China compete with Western powers in the global trade war.

Obviously, the first half of the twentieth century never allowed Liang and his peers the luxury of pursuing overseas expansion. Yet when Chinese elites shifted their eyes inward to look at Tibet, they found abundant opportunities to experiment with national imperialism advocated by Liang. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Qing rulers had granted Tibet a high degree of autonomy, endorsed native Tibetan elites' authority in local administration, refrained from exploiting Tibet, and provided financial resources and military aid to Tibetans. The foundation of the Qing rulers' Tibet policy – their empire's military strength – was, however, eroded by internal rebellions in the mid-nineteenth century. In the meantime, Britain, and to a lesser extent Russia, sought to expand into Tibet in the late nineteenth century, placing the once isolated and autonomous region in a precarious position. In order to secure Tibet, Qing rulers started to tighten control over it through reforms. Ironically, the Qing reforms, which were intended to deter British imperialism, were inspired by its rival's very practice of imperialism.⁸⁶ The British influence on the Qing empire's new Tibet policy was evidenced by a memorial to the throne submitted in 1907 by Zhang Yintang 張蔭棠 (1864–1937), who served as the assistant imperial resident in Tibet from 1906 to 1907. In the memorial, Zhang argued that '[as] Tibet has a vast land and a small population as well as abundant mineral reserves, it can be a colony someday'.⁸⁷ He recommended that 'China should rule Tibet as Britain ruled India'.⁸⁸ He then tirelessly referenced the British colonial policies in India to justify his sixteen-point proposal to restructure Tibet, which aimed to 1) place the entirety of Tibet under Qing officials' direct rule while limiting the Dalai Lama's and the Panchen Lama's authority to religious affairs; 2) establish a Chinese monopoly of military forces in Tibet; 3) exploit Tibetan mineral reserves to enrich China; and 4) assimilate Tibetans through Chinese education.⁸⁹

Deeply worried by the bold change suggested by Zhang, Qing rulers removed Zhang from Lhasa and assigned other tasks to him. However, Zhang's reform plan was not entirely abandoned. Its underlying logic was adopted to formulate the Qing government's new Tibet policy. Zhang's two colleagues – Lianyu 聯豫 (1858–?) and Zhao Erfeng 趙爾豐 (1845–1911) – carried out some core policies in his reform plans. Lianyu's and Zhao's aggressive moves soon provoked strong resistance from Tibetan elites, which escalated into battles between Tibetan and Chinese troops. The defeat of Tibetans resulted in the flight of the thirteenth Dalai Lama to India in February 1910, leaving Tibet in the hands of Qing officials.⁹⁰ After having subjugated Tibet, both Zhao and Lianyu initiated radical reforms to transform Tibet into a colony. If their reforms had not been disrupted by the outbreak of revolution in China proper

⁸⁶Fei Chen, 'Transforming an imperial frontier: Japanese knowledge and the Qing empire's new Tibet policy', *Asian Studies Review*, 44 (2020), pp. 422–440, at pp. 423–5.

⁸⁷Zhang Yintang, 'Zhang Yintang zouchen Xizang neiwai qingxing bing shanhou shiyi zhe', in Zhongguo zangxue yanjiu zhongxin, *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan, Zhongguo di'er lishi dang'an guan, Xizang zizhiq dang'an guan, and Sichuan sheng dang'an guan*, eds., Yuan yilai Xizang difang yu zhongyang zhengfu guanxi dang'an shiliao huibian, (7 vols., Beijing, 1993), IV, p. 1556.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 1557.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 1558–9, p. 1561.

⁹⁰Chen, 'Transforming an imperial frontier', pp. 435–6.

in 1911, which collapsed the Qing dynasty, they would probably have managed to convert Tibet into a colony by the end of the 1910s.

V

Compared with many historical studies of imperialism, this article has a narrow focus, as it only deals with theories of imperialism advocated by three scholars in the 1900s. Nevertheless, a comparison of these theories helps one better understand three important issues pertaining to imperialism: Japan's mediating role in the development of a positive perception of imperialism among Chinese elites, the transnational flow of theories of imperialism from the United States to East Asia, and the consequence of embracing the Western ideal of national empire in East Asia. Moreover, a scrutinization of the three scholars' theories illuminates the specific appeal of imperialism to elites in the United States, Japan, and China during the early twentieth century. For elites in the United States, imperialism was a lesson they had learned from their British predecessors, who they fought and looked up to at the same time. Japanese elites were fascinated by the theories of imperialism because they had never been part of any formal Western empire. Chinese elites could maintain ambivalent relations with imperialism due to the fragmented nature of foreign control over China. The lack of outright foreign dominance of China, as Shu-mei Shih argues, allowed Chinese elites to separate Western culture from its colonial practices – they could afford to adopt Western knowledge without critical assessment of its underlying ideology while simultaneously criticizing Western colonial practices.⁹¹

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⁹¹Shu-mei Shih, *The lure of the modern: writing modernism in semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley, CA, 2001), pp. 16–30.