

From “Shame of Taiwan” to “Fastest-developing Industry”: Rethinking Industrialization of Forestry in Colonial Taiwan

Kuang-chi Hung

ABSTRACT

During Japanese colonial rule, seventy percent of Taiwan’s land was officially categorized as “*rinya*”, literally meaning “forest and uncultivated land.” Hence, forestry would undoubtedly have played an important role in Taiwan’s industrialization. However, until the late 1930s, the performance of forestry in colonial Taiwan had been so unimpressive that scholars in colonial forestry called it the “shame of Taiwan.” The rise of forestry occurred in the 1940s when the Japanese empire began its mobilization for military invasions; and forestry thus transformed into the “fastest-developing industry” in colonial Taiwan.

This essay aims at answering how this remarkable transition could be made possible. The reason why colonial foresters deemed Taiwan’s forestry the “shame of Taiwan” had everything to do with the failures or the “backfiring” of an array of seemingly rational and efficient policies implemented or imposed on Taiwan’s broadleaf forests. As a result, from 1925 onward, colonial foresters endeavored to introduce the so-called “scientific forestry” from Germany to manage and conserve Taiwan’s broadleaf forests through a project called *shinrin keikaku jigyō*. Nevertheless, the project was almost another failure owing to their underestimating the fluctuations of international market of timber. The favorable turn came when Japan mobilized for war, resulting in rising demand of broadleaf timber to meet military needs. In 1941, the *Nanpō* Corporation was established, comprising forestry entrepreneurs from both Japan and Taiwan, with the aim of finding a balance between military-oriented industrialization and conservation of Taiwan’s broadleaf forests. Despite privileges offered by the colonial government, *Nanpō* suffered great initial losses when implementing national policies on vertical integration of forestry resources. By 1943, *Nanpō* switched to emphasize

horizontal integration, relying on cooperation among local networks of timber production in Taiwan through distributing privileges it received from the colonial government among its stockholders. Discussion in this essay opens two black boxes tagged with “science” and “colonialism” respectively; untangling the network that involved colonial governance, modern science, industrialization, and environmental changes, thus contributing to our knowledge of Taiwan’s environmental history during Japanese colonial rule.

Keywords: Scientific Forestry, Colonialism, Capitalism, Industrialization, Environmental History