

Looking for Empires: Japanese Colonialism and the Comparative Gaze

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ABSTRACTS

Dieser Aufsatz durchmustert Trends der jüngeren englischsprachigen Literatur über japanischen Imperialismus und Kolonialismus. Die Ansätze der anglophon-vergleichenden Beschäftigung mit dem japanischen Kolonialismus haben sich in den letzten Jahren verschoben. Eine erste Generation stellte den inter-imperialen und inter-regionalen Vergleich in den Mittelpunkt. Neuere Untersuchungen entwickeln ihre Vergleichskategorien hingegen aus einer empirisch fundierten Analyse schwelennaher und grenzüberschreitender Phänomene. Insgesamt wird das japanische Imperium nicht mehr als einzigartiges Gebilde oder Summe spezifischer Beziehungen zwischen Metropole und Kolonien dargestellt. Vielmehr wird die Untersuchung des Kolonialismus innerhalb des japanischen Imperiums als Entwirrung der Fäden angegangen, welche die vielen japanischen Imperien ausmachten und immer noch ausmachen. Tatsächlich ist die spannendste vergleichende Forschung diejenige, die sich ausdrücklich gar nicht als komparative versteht, das Feld gleichwohl aber dazu zwingt, die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen komparativer Wissensproduktion neu einzuschätzen.

This article surveys trends in recent English-language studies of Japanese imperialism and colonialism. Anglophone scholarship on comparative Japanese colonialism has shifted approaches in recent years. The early generation of comparative scholarship emphasized inter-imperial and inter-regional comparison. Newer scholarship builds comparative categories from the grounded analysis of liminal and transgressive subjects. Overall, the field increasingly represents the Japanese empire not as a singular phenomenon or a collection of distinct colony-metropole relationships. Instead, the field approaches the study of colonialism in the Japanese empire as an act of untangling the threads that made, and continue to make up, the many Japanese empires. The most exciting comparative work is that which does not explicitly define itself as comparative at all, yet which forces the field to re-evaluate the possibilities and limits of producing knowledge through comparison.

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In the article that follows, I trace the emergence of a comparative perspective that treats the Japanese empire as empires plural. I situate this phenomenon in the context of Anglophone scholarship on Japanese colonialism over the past several decades as well as recent scholarship in the field of comparative colonialism. The first three sections introduce the “anomaly” approach, which has been the traditional approach to analysing the Japanese empire in comparative frame. These sections discuss three ways in which the field has challenged and continues to struggle with a comparative framework that is defined by a quest for Japanese difference. The first section shows how recent scholarship challenges the idea that the Japanese empire was an anomaly among modern empires by focusing on the changing nature of imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These works highlight the constitutive role of Japanese imperialism in shaping the new international order. The second section shows how other scholars have turned to the idea of settler colonialism to challenge the notion of Japanese anomalousness. These scholars situate Japanese colonialism within a global field of empire and settler colonialism. Yet, as the third section argues, there is tension in the field of Japanese settler colonial studies between works that reintroduce the anomaly idea through the concept of the Japanese empire as a unique example of “coloured imperialism”, and works that argue that the racial consciousness and racism of Japanese colonialism makes Japanese settler colonialism a part of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century world, not distinct from it. The final section shows how some scholars have crafted a new comparative framework that abandons the anomaly ideal in favour of an approach that treats the Japanese Empire as a plural project, that is, as Japanese *empires*. Within the overarching structures of settler colonialism and the new, global imperialism, the historical phenomenon of “Japanese imperialism and colonialism” featured a wide variety of subject positions. Works which adopt the empires plural approach suggest that the most rigorous comparative frame is not Japanese empire versus another empire (e.g. “Western empires”, “British Empire”, or “American Empire”), but between and across subject positions.

1. The Empire of Nation-States

The first phase of Anglophone research on Japanese imperialism compared Japanese imperialism to “Western imperialism”. Beginning with Mark R. Peattie and Ramon H. Myers’ *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945*, Anglophone historians sought to distinguish Japanese imperialism by comparing it against a European model. For Peattie, the Japanese empire was an “anomaly” among empires. One, Japanese leaders had been subject to the semi-colonialism of “unequal treaties”. They knew first-hand the significance of treaty and territory to geopolitical power. Two, the Japanese empire was “late” to the game of imperialism. There were few unclaimed territories in Asia. Three, Japan’s “most important colonies, Taiwan and Korea, were well-populated lands whose inhabitants were racially akin to their Japanese rulers with whom they shared a common cultural heritage”.¹ Japanese colonial policies and imperial discourse incorporated this racial and cultural affinity.

On the surface, all of these points are accurate. Japan did not claim Taiwan, its first formal colony, until 1895. By that point, the British, French, and Dutch empires were well established in East, Southeast, and South Asia. There was little land to be claimed under the *terra nullius* model. The Qing Court, while technically still sovereign, bore the burden of multiple unequal treaties, which significantly undermined Chinese sovereignty. Having just emerged from their own subordination to unequal treaties, Japanese leaders were intimately familiar with the havoc that extraterritoriality and the denial of tariff autonomy wreaked on a state’s ability to protect itself economically and therefore also militarily. They were equally familiar with the role that these treaties played in boosting the political, economic, and military power of imperial states. To put it bluntly, Japanese leaders recognized that there were colonized nations and imperial nation-states. The Japanese government pursued the latter status in its domestic and foreign policy throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the time Japan claimed its second formal colony, Korea, in 1910, Japanese leaders had used warfare, unequal treaties, and informal imperialism to establish Japan as an imperial power in Asia and a “Great Power” on the global scene.²

Japanese colonial governance and imperial discourse promoted the idea that Japanese people shared a racial and cultural affinity with Koreans and people of Chinese descent in Taiwan. Japanese colonialists legitimated the colonization of Korea in part through the theory of Japanese-Korean common ancestry (*nissen dōsoron*). Indeed, the official term for the colonization of Korea was “annexation”, a concept that referenced the notion that colonization was returning Koreans and Japanese people to their ancestral state of

- 1 M. Peattie, Japanese Attitudes toward Colonialism, 1895–1945, in: R. Myers/M. Peattie (eds.), *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1937*, Princeton 1989, p. 6. See also K. McDonald, *Placing Empire: Travel and the Social Imagination in Imperial Japan*, Berkeley 2017, p. xiv.
- 2 A. Iriye, Japan’s Drive to Great Power Status, in: M. Jansen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 5, Cambridge 1989, pp. 721–782.

togetherness.³ In Taiwan, Japanese colonialists argued that Japan would be successful in Taiwan where previous, European colonialisms had failed because Japanese and Chinese people were “same script, same race” (*dōbun dōshu*).⁴ As the empire expanded and inter-imperial conflicts in Asia intensified, the government adopted the notion of the Japanese empire as an empire of Asians for Asians, in contrast to Western empires, which were rooted in white supremacy.⁵

While the chronology and discourses of modern Japanese colonialism are not in dispute, more recent scholarship pushes back on the idea that the timing and race consciousness of Japanese colonialism make the Japanese empire an anomaly among modern empires. Instead, newer scholarship recognizes that the structure, discourse, and racial politics of Japanese imperialism were co-constituted with the emerging global order of imperial nation-states. Quite in contrast to the imperialism that came before, the legitimacy of late-nineteenth-century empire relied not only on the recognition of the state’s authority by its subjects but also increasingly on the multilateral, international recognition of a given state’s authority over its claimed territory. Thus, Japan’s modern empire was one instantiation of a transnational, global practice of colonization and empire-building that looked outward to the authority of treaties and nascent international law as well as inward for legitimacy.⁶ Japanese leaders sought to achieve recognition of Japan’s empire in a global order that was increasingly equating civilisation with a global order of territorial nation-states, and working assiduously to establish a framework of diplomatic practice and international law that would affirm the necessity of colonialism in this new context.⁷ As Alexis Dudden argues, “international terms won the twentieth century”.⁸

Japanese colonialism played an important role in defining the terms of the new global imperial order. In this sense, the anomaly was not Japanese imperialism but rather the new imperialism and colonialism of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This new imperialism sought to establish a clear legal basis for colonialism within a framework of international relations that recognized the fundamental sovereignty of the nation-state. Japan’s colonization of Korea is perhaps the best example of this. In the case of Korea, Japanese officials and international legal scholars worked assiduously to establish a vocabulary and diplomatic practice that would lead to the legalization of colonialism in international law. Japanese officials prosecuted a long campaign to have Korea recognized as a protectorate of Japan. The process culminated in the Second Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905, which declared Korea to be a protectorate of Japan. It was subsequently

3 P. Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895–1910*, Berkeley 1998, pp. 417–422.

4 E. Tai, *Kokugo and Colonial Education in Taiwan*, in: *positions: east asia cultures critique* 7 (1999) 2, pp. 503–540.

5 S. Saaler / J. V. Koschmann (eds.), *Pan-Asianism in Modern Japanese History: Colonialism, Regionalism, and Borders*, London 2007.

6 P. Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern*, Lanham 2003.

7 M. Auslin, *Negotiating with Imperialism: The Unequal Treaties and the Culture of Japanese Diplomacy*, Cambridge, MA 1999; S. Chatani, *Nation-Empire: Ideology and Rural Youth Mobilization in Japan and Its Colonies*, Ithaca 2018; S. Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations*, Cambridge, MA 2013; McDonald, *Placing Empire*.

8 A. Dudden, *Japan’s Colonization of Korea: Discourse and Power*, Honolulu 2004, p. 27.

reaffirmed at the second International Hague Convention of Peace in 1907, when representatives of Korean Emperor Gojong asked the conference to repudiate the treaty as coerced and therefore illegal, and the conference refused to admit the Korean presentation. As a result, “the text of Japan-Korea relations between 1904 and 1910 became legal precedent through the terms ‘admitted in the practice of civilized States’”.⁹ The work of Japanese officials to establish a racial or ethnic basis for imperial expansion dovetailed with the work of other political leaders to enshrine the territorial nation-state as the basis for legitimate government and international relations. When U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for his work facilitating the negotiations for the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the Russo-Japanese War, he argued that establishing clear claims of sovereignty over the world’s territory would bring peace – especially if these distributions of sovereignty placed “backward” states under the control of civilized nation-states.¹⁰ The Treaty, which became one of the foundational documents of the legal order of twentieth-century imperialism, subsequently granted Japan control over the island of S. Saghalien (J: Karafuto), and its Ainu inhabitants, the Russian railway concession and overwhelming administrative authority over much of Manchuria, and recognized Korea as a protectorate of Japan.

2. Settler Colonialism and the Modern Japanese State

Emerging global and transnational frameworks of imperial and colonial practice shaped Japanese approaches to colonialism and were shaped by Japanese efforts to establish an internationally recognized empire. Scholarship on Japanese imperialism has increasingly highlighted the global and transnational nature of nineteenth and twentieth century empire to argue that the structure of Japanese colonialism was not a particularly or uniquely “Japanese” structure. As part of this challenge, historians of modern Japan and the Japanese empire have re-evaluated earlier, modernisation theory approaches to modern Japanese history, which drew a distinction between Japanese modern state-building, presumed to represent a normal process of civilisational development, and Japanese expansionism, which was treated as a failure of modernisation.¹¹ Early critiques of this division demonstrated the intertwined nature of the history of “modern Japan” and the history of “the Japanese empire”.¹² More recent approaches identify settler colonialism as a foundational component of Japanese modernity.¹³ In so doing, they challenge the

9 Dudden, *Japan’s Colonization of Korea*, p. 73.

10 T. Roosevelt, Nobel Lecture, 5 May 1910, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1906/roosevelt/lecture/> (accessed 7 August 2020); S. Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity*, p. 157.

11 The most famous example of this framework is E. O. Reischauer, *What Went Wrong*, in: J. Morley (ed.), *Dilemmas of Growth in Prewar Japan*, Princeton 1971, pp. 489–510.

12 E. Oguma, *Tan’itsu minzoku shinwa no kigen: ‘Nihonjin’ no jigazō no keifu*, Tokyo 1995; E. Oguma, *‘Nihonjin’ no kyōkai: Okinawa, Ainu, Taiwan, Chōsen, shokuminchi shihai kara fukki undō made*, Tokyo 1998; L. Young, *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Total War*, Berkeley 1998.

13 S. Lu, *The Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism: Malthusianism and Trans-Pacific Migration, 1868–1961*, Cam-

distinction between an “internal” and an “external” colonialism in Japan, and situate the many Japanese colonial projects within a global history of conflicts over race and capital driven by settler colonialism.¹⁴

Japanese settler colonialism was transnational in structure and global in scope. It continues to the present day. Central to recognizing settler colonialism as foundational to the modern Japanese state has been recognizing Ezo, rather than Taiwan, as the modern Japanese state’s first official colonial claim. The new Meiji government claimed Ezo, now the prefecture of Hokkaidō, in 1869. Ezo was and is home to many Ainu people, who call the land *Ainu mosir*. The Ainu people who lived and live on Ezo had been subordinated to the early modern Tokugawa state since the mid-eighteenth century. During that period, they retained hunting, fishing, and trading rights, and were recognized as a distinct community with a distinct political structure in their own right. At the same time, the Matsumae domain, which the Tokugawa shogunate granted the privilege and duty of controlling commerce with and access to Ezo, also moved to consolidate international recognition of the Tokugawa shogunate’s sovereignty over the island, introduced devastating diseases, and asserted economic authority.¹⁵

With the establishment of the Meiji state, however, the terms of Japan’s imperial formation changed. The colonization of Ezo in 1869 proceeded on the grounds of *terra nullius*. As Katsuya Hirano argues, “the new form of subjection in the modern era deprived the Ainu of their means of sustenance – the land, water and forest – and hunting and gathering way of life”.¹⁶ In this sense, imperialism per se was not new to the Japanese state. Settler colonialism was. The emphasis on territorial sovereignty, wage labour, and accumulation, as well as a newfound sense of the “dispensability” of the Ainu people themselves, distinguished the modern state’s colonialism from the imperial formation that had previously structured relations between *wajin* (people identified culturally and socially with the Tokugawa political order) and Ainu.¹⁷ Recent scholarship also attends to the history of Japanese imperial formations and capital accumulation in the Ryūkyū Kingdom, which the Satsuma domain subordinated to the Tokugawa political order in

bridge, UK 2019; E. O’Dwyer, *Significant Soil: Settler Colonialism and Japan’s Urban Empire in Manchuria*, Cambridge, MA 2015.

- 14 M. Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaidō and Imperial Japan: Envisioning the Periphery and the Modern Nation-State*, New York 2012.
- 15 E. Boyle, Imperial Practice and the Making of Modern Japan’s Territory: Towards a Reconsideration of Empire’s Boundaries, in: *Geographical Review of Japan Series B* 88 (2016) 2, pp. 66–79; B. Walker, *The Conquest of Ainu Lands: Ecology and Culture in Japanese Expansion, 1590–1800*, Berkeley 2001.
- 16 K. Hirano, Settler Colonialism and the Making of Japan’s Hokkaidō, in: E. Cavanaugh/L. Veracini (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, New York 2016, p. 327.
- 17 K. Hirano, Thanatopolitics in the Making of Japan’s Hokkaidō: Settler Colonialism and Primitive Accumulation, in: *Critical Historical Studies* 2 (2015) 2, pp. 191–218; D. Howell, Territoriality and Collective Identity in Tokugawa Japan, *Daedalus* 127 (1998) 3, pp. 105–132; M. Mason, *Dominant Narratives of Colonial Hokkaido and Imperial Japan: Envisioning the Periphery and the Modern Nation-State*, New York 2012, pp. 7–10.

1609 and the modern state colonized in 1879.¹⁸ The Ryūkyū Kingdom is now Japan's Okinawa Prefecture.

New scholarship on Japanese colonialism demonstrates that Japanese settler colonialism had a transnational structure and a global scope. As Eiichiro Azuma argues, Japanese settler colonialism was “borderless settler colonialism”.¹⁹ Japanese settler colonialism extended beyond the boundaries of the Japanese empire. Within the empire, Japanese colonial governance promoted “conventional settler colonialism” – a settler colonialism premised on “native elimination” – in Hokkaidō and the central, mountainous regions of Taiwan. In Korea, Okinawa, Manchuria, and urban, plains areas of Taiwan, colonial governance promoted a more conventional colonialism, in which other concerns such as industrial development and political control “prevailed over the goal of land seizure and community-building based on native elimination”.²⁰ But settlement efforts did not stop at the boundaries of the empire. Elite emigration societies and private companies encouraged Japanese farmers to settle in Canada, the U.S. West and Hawai'i. After the Gentleman's Agreement in 1907 closed the United States to further Japanese emigration, the focus on transpacific settlement shifted to South America.²¹

These new approaches to Japanese settler colonialism encourage us, as Jun Uchida argues, “to think about settler colonialism as a global formation shaped in locally specific contexts, and to push the growing scholarly discourse on settlers beyond European examples”.²² As Azuma and Lu argue in their respective studies, Japanese migrants, by virtue of racist laws in North America and the timing of their arrival, were often excluded from property ownership or otherwise funnelled into factory work. In response, Japanese settler colonial discourse recognized wage labour as well as land acquisition as positive accumulation that fostered the economic and political security of the state. This expansive definition of accumulation and a discourse of overseas migration as a solution to Japan's “Malthusian crisis” tie Japanese migration to Hawai'i and California, Japanese migration to Hokkaidō and Manchuria, and Japanese migration to South America together into a coherent phenomenon. Japanese settlers imagined themselves to be pioneers of Japan's overseas development regardless of the sovereign status of the destination territory – and the state agreed. Thus, the empire celebrated those who migrated to Hawai'i, California, or Brazil as “heroes” of Japan's overseas development. In many cases, these “transmigrants” returned in the 1920s and 1930s to lend their experience to growing Japanese settler colonies in Manchuria and Micronesia.²³ As a whole, Japanese settler colonial-

18 W. Matsumura, *The Limits of Okinawa: Japanese Capitalism, Living Labor, and Theorizations of Community*, Durham 2015, pp. 27–48.

19 E. Azuma, *In Search of Our Frontier: Japanese America and Settler Colonialism in the Construction of Japan's Borderless Empire*, Berkeley 2019, p. 6.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 6; P. Barclay, *Japanese Empire in Taiwan*, in: D. Ludden (ed.), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, New York 2020.

21 Lu, *The Making of Japanese Settler Colonialism*, pp. 69–98.

22 Uchida, *Brokers of Empire*, p. 19; C. Elkin and S. Pedersen (eds.), *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies*, London 2005.

23 Azuma, *In Search of Our Frontiers*, p. 3.

ism suggests the need to incorporate rather than exclude Japanese examples. As Azuma argues, rather than simply monopolizing land, “the formative process of constructing a new Japan was inseparable from the triangular relationship that encompassed not only land-grabbing settlers and dispensable indigenes but also pre-existing non-Japanese residents and other competing immigrant-settler groups”.²⁴

3. Race and the Comparative Frame

Race was central to the history of Japanese settler colonialism. Within the global and transnational structure of “later imperialism”, Japanese colonial governance and imperial discourse emphasized Japan’s unique position as a “coloured” empire.²⁵ Central to Japanese colonial policy in the formal Japanese empire – and, indeed, dear to the hearts of many colonial bureaucrats – was the idea that Japan had a moral obligation to use its empire to eliminate anti-Asian racism around the globe. In the context of settler colonialism beyond imperial borders, the idea that Japanese settlers were ambassadors of Japanese civility gendered Japanese emigration policy. Migrant women were placed under special scrutiny, while laws governing inter-marriage within the empire cast men as the bearers of Japanese national identity.²⁶ Fukuzawa Yukichi, Japan’s most famous liberal intellectual of the Meiji period, argued that Japanese success as settlers in North America would further the urgent project of carving Japan out of Asia in the minds of white imperialists, equating Japanese people with white people and demonstrating the superiority of Japanese people to Chinese people.²⁷ The rise of the Japanese empire, particularly after Japanese forces defeated Russian forces in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, lent increased urgency to this mission as “yellow peril” discourse exploded around the white imperial world.

In the development of Japanese colonial policy, racial thinking and knowledge production played a central role. Colonial governments partnered with Japanese historians, geographers, and anthropologists to incorporate the land, peoples, and pasts of the regions under Japanese rule into a racialized schema of civility and savagery, which legitimated the superiority of the Japanese nation and state vis-à-vis its Ainu, Ryūkyūan, indigenous Taiwanese, Taiwanese Chinese, Micronesian, Korean, and Chinese subjects.²⁸ This knowledge would also, colonial scholars and bureaucrats argued, illuminate the precise

24 Ibid., p. 6.

25 R. Tierney, *Tropics of Savagery: The Culture of Japanese in Comparative Frame*, Berkeley 2010.

26 S. Burns/B. Brooks (eds.), *Gender and Law in the Japanese Imperium*, Honolulu 2014; B. Mihalopoulos, *Sex in Japan’s Globalization, 1870–1930: Prostitutes, Emigration and Nation-Building*, London 2011.

27 Azuma, *In Search of Our Frontiers*, pp. 44–47.

28 S. Tanaka, *Japan’s Orient: Rendering Pasts into History*, Berkeley 1993; H. Pai, *Constructing “Korean” Origins: A Critical Review of Archaeology, Historiography, and Racial Myth in Korean State Formation Theories*, Cambridge, MA 2000; P. Barclay, *Outcasts of Empire: Japan’s Rule on Taiwan’s Savage Border*, Berkeley 2017; M. Tamanoi, *Knowledge, Power, and Racial Classifications: The “Japanese” in “Manchuria”*, in: *Journal of Asian Studies* 59 (2000) 2, pp. 248–276.

interventions that the colonial governments should take in order to lead Japan's many colonized peoples out of savagery and into civility. Japanese colonialism was, as one of its chief architects Gotō Shinpei defined it, "scientific colonialism".

Some comparative studies analyse Japanese imperialism as a case of "coloured imperialism", "triadic imperialism", or "subaltern imperialism". These terms attempt to capture the contradictions between the Japanese state's enthusiastic embrace of "national imperialism" and the ideological imperative to justify the Japanese empire's inequality and violence as "Asian" liberation.²⁹ Other scholars argue that these frameworks perpetuate the "anomaly" approach under a different name. What appears to be "mimicry" on the micro scale is "co-constitutive" on the macro scale. As Christopher Hill argues, the idea that the Japanese empire appropriated Western imperialism's racial and (racialized) civilisational hierarchies "imposes a synchronic structure on a diachronic phenomenon: a geographically extensive, tangled history, involving several empires, of which the literature of Japanese imperialism was a part".³⁰

Attending to the global and regional contexts of Japan's settler colonialism, critical scholarship approaches race as a dynamic mechanism for acquiring and achieving political and economic power rather than a pre-existing feature of inter-imperial or settler colonial relations. As Jun Uchida argues in the case of Korea, settler colonial power was "a practice rather than an attribute".³¹ Japanese settlers in Korea used the malleability of racial discourses of identity to develop their own power and political identity in opposition to colonized Koreans *and* the Japanese colonial government in Korea. In Taiwan, Japanese settlers who came from the colonized prefecture of Okinawa mobilized racial discourses of inclusion and exclusion to lay claim to an ethnic Japanese identity, and the political power that came with it, vis-à-vis the island's Chinese population, which was generally speaking far better capitalized than settlers from Okinawa, and the indigenous peoples who lived on the land that settlers sought to occupy.³² Race likewise played a central role in Japanese capitalism's strategies of primitive accumulation, as the colonial and metropolitan governments deployed racialized notions of difference and inferiority to justify the exploitation of Korean, Chinese, and indigenous labourers.³³

Other historians of Japanese imperialism and colonialism are turning to frameworks built on transpacific comparisons and connectivities to incorporate the racial consciousness of white empires into the analytical frame. These works argue that Japanese imperi-

29 Tierney, *Tropics of Savagery*, p. 18; K. Inoue, *A Little Story of Settler Colonialism: Imperialist Consciousness and Children's Literature in the 1920s*, in: H. Lee / M. Mason (eds.), *Reading Colonial Japan: Text, Context, and Critique*, Stanford 2012, p. 191; J. Sand, *Subaltern Imperialists: The New Historiography of the Japanese Empire*, in: *Past & Present* 225 (2014) 1, pp. 273–288. For "national imperialism", see Chatani, *Nation-Empire*, pp. 4–5.

30 C. Hill, *Review of Tropics of Savagery: The Culture of Japanese Empire in Comparative Frame*, in: *Journal of Japanese Studies* 38 (2012) 1, p. 162.

31 J. Uchida, *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945*, Cambridge, MA 2011, p. 30.

32 H. Matsuda, *Liminality of the Japanese Empire: Border Crossings from Okinawa to Colonial Taiwan*, Honolulu 2018, pp. 59–78.

33 M. Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque: The Living, Dead, and Undead in Japan's Imperialism, 1895–1945*, Durham 2010; K. Kawashima, *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan*, Durham 2009.

alists' and colonialists' attentiveness to race makes Japanese settler colonialism a part of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century world not distinct from it. The Japanese colonization of Hokkaidō, Okinawa, and Taiwan positioned Japan as one of the key players in a "global field of imperialism" that was intensely concerned with crafting a racial basis for political and economic exploitation.³⁴ European and American colonialists and imperialists were as focused on the racial and racist character of their empires as Japanese imperialists were. Indeed, the success of Japanese imperialism and its pan-Asianist rhetoric pushed the American empire to reformulate its own discourses of race and nation, particularly during World War II.³⁵ The racial consciousness of Japanese imperialists provides an avenue for challenging the distinction between "coloured imperialism" and "imperialism". After all, white is a colour. It is a colour with a history, too. As Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds argue, the distinction between a white and non-white empire is itself a product of "the global ascendancy of the politics of whiteness". White empires "recast the previous multiplicity of nations, races, and religions – Aryan, Caucasian, Chinese, Hindu, Kanakas, Islanders, Malays, Blacks, Lascars, Moslems, Japanese – in binary terms as 'white' or 'not-white'".³⁶ Accepting a binary distinction between white and non-white empires furthers the already long life of a comparative frame that was not only rooted in European imperialism, but was also a central tool in its reproduction.

4. Empires Plural

If we set aside comparative frameworks based on a quest for Japanese anomalousness, what do we work with instead? The newest generation of scholarship on Japanese imperialism and colonialism argues that when thinking comparatively, the Japanese empire should be approached as a plural project. These works show that within the overarching imperial and global structures of Japanese colonialism, there was such a variety of subject positions that the appropriate comparative frame is not empire to empire, but this subject position to that subject position. As Tristan Grunow writes in a review of new works in the field, "Moving forward scholars must continue to [...] recover the personal histories of obscured peoples across the empire and to rediscover their lives as complicated, diverse individuals, not simply as colonized subjects."³⁷ Imperial subjects, too. More often than not, a Japanese emigrant's destination defined whether or not his (or her)

34 J. Go, *Global Fields and Imperial Forms: Field Theory and the British and American Empires*, in: *Sociological Theory* 26 (2008) 3, pp. 201–229.

35 T. Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II*, Berkeley 2011; G. Horne, *Race War! White Supremacy and the Japanese Attack on the British Empire*, New York 2004; Y. Onishi, *Transpacific Antiracism: Afro-Asian Solidarity in 20th-Century Black America, Japan, and Okinawa*, New York 2013.

36 M. Lake / H. Reynolds, Introduction, in: id. (eds.), *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the Question of Racial Equality*, Melbourne 2008, p. 9.

37 T. Grunow, *Pushing the Margins: New Perspectives on the Modern Japanese Nation*, in: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 79 (2020) 2, p. 501.

history would be analysed as part of Asian-American history or Japanese colonial history. “Like migration routes themselves, which must be established and learned”, write Martin Dusinberre and Mariko Iijima, “the historiographical pathways toward studying Japanese ‘colonists’ and ‘emigrants’ became institutionalized in scholarly associations and department nomenclature – and can only be unlearned with great difficulty”.³⁸ In short, grappling with the geographic, social, and political complexity that shaped the lives of colonized and imperial subjects is precisely the point of “empires plural”. As Dusinberre and Iijima conclude, we must attend to the many histories of “what empire *did* rather than what it *was*”.³⁹

Japanese colonialism established discourses of regional and racial comparison grounded in capitalist measures of moral value, contributed to the reterritorialization of Asia and the Pacific as a source of commodities and labour, enabled new patterns of movement and meanings of mobility, restructured social relations, and transformed the environment. The life histories of colonized, semi-colonized and metropolitan Japanese subjects offer a way of approaching the history of Japanese colonialism through intertwined “social sites” rather than a hierarchy of scaled comparisons.⁴⁰ These works analyse how individuals negotiated their lives and livelihoods in a social world shaped by capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism.

The empires plural approach characterizes studies with topics as disparate as a history of labour migration from Okinawa to Taiwan; the story of a Japanese pirate queen in the South China Sea; transnational anarchist networks in modern Japan; and the life history of a Hokkaidō settler colonial daughter turned documenter of Japanese-mandate life in Micronesia turned icon of the post-war anti-nuclear movement.⁴¹ Empires plural scholarship analyses the “transgressive” mobilities of previously un- or under-studied groups, such as non-elite Japanese women, who moved through informal networks that at times crossed the jurisdictional and administrative boundaries of the state and challenged discursive constructions of Japan and Japanese people as the bearers of security and strength in Asia.⁴² This scholarship also emphasizes the liminal: the places and peoples who demarcate the edge of Japan when seen from one perspective and who appear fully contained within Japan when seen from a different perspective. For example, Okinawa’s Yaeyama Island was “the Southern Gate” of Japanese expansion and the border zone between nation-empire when seen from the “inner territory” (*naichi*) of Japan, as the metropole was known. Yet, as Hiroko Matsuda shows, from the perspective of urban,

38 M. Dusinberre / M. Iijima, Transplantation: Sugar and Imperial Practice in Japan’s Pacific, in: *Historische Anthropologie* 27 (2019) 3, pp. 330–331.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 333.

40 S. Marston / J. Jones III / K. Woodward, Human Geography without Scale, *Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers* 30 (2005) 4, p. 422.

41 Matsuda, *Liminality of the Japanese Empire*; D. Ambaras, *Japan’s Imperial Underworlds: Intimate Encounters at the Borders of Empire*, Cambridge 2018; Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity*; C. Eubanks, *The Art of Persistence: Akamatsu Toshiko and the Visual Cultures of Transwar Japan*, Honolulu 2019.

42 Ambaras, *Japan’s Imperial Underworlds*, p. 8.

colonial Taiwan, Yaeyama was not part of the metropole but rather Taiwan's economic and cultural periphery.⁴³

Attention to transgression and liminality recasts the narrative world in which scholars of Japanese imperialism and colonialism define the choices and consequences of their subjects' lives. In so doing, these works move away from comparisons based on fixed hierarchies of scale to ones based on encounter, itineraries, social networks, and discursive communities. In this framework, there are many globals, constituted within multiple time scales. ann-elise lewallen argues, for example, that Ainu women's cloth-making constitutes a critical act of self-fashioning and empowerment, which has its origins in gendered practices of resistance to early modern imperialism and draws its meanings from the contemporary institutional and cultural lexicon of the global Indigenous Peoples movement. "Heritage textiles" crafted by Ainu women, she shows, "serve as important markers of indigeneity and point toward a mode of expression instantly legible to fellow Indigenous delegates, government representatives, and observers".⁴⁴ Moreover, ethno-racial hierarchies and the directionality of social mobility were site specific. In one telling example from the work of Kirsten Ziomek, in 1919 Pedro Ada, resident of the Japan's League of Nations Mandated Territory in Micronesia, finds himself the first in his family to study abroad in Japan – the imperial metropole. Yet this was not a step up. Rather it was a step down: "All of his older siblings had studied abroad in Germany. But because Pedro was the youngest, by the time it was his time to study abroad, they did not have enough funds to send him to Europe."⁴⁵ The result of an empires plural approach is not always alterity. Sayaka Chatani's analysis of the recorded and oral history of individuals from multiple colonial and metropolitan contexts who joined youth groups (*seinendan*) and, later, volunteered for the Japanese Imperial Army, demonstrates how the structures of and desires for social mobility produced a remarkable uniformity of action among a highly diverse population of youth in rural Japan and Japan's colonies.⁴⁶

Scholarship that embraces "empires plural" is fundamentally comparative. As Katherine Hayes and Craig Cipolla write, "a comparative approach can identify common concepts and categories but can also be used to deconstruct common (received) concepts and categories".⁴⁷ Comparative analysis, in other words, is as much an act of identifying the limits and possibilities of comparison as it is an act of comparing historical phenomena. The fruits of comparative analysis are self-referential: they open comparative analysis up to new possibilities. Scholarship that treats the Japanese empire as a collection of "Japanese empires" juxtaposes and sutures histories across regional, temporal, and conceptual categories. In so doing, it suggests new categories, such as transgressive mobilities,

43 Matsuda, *Liminality of the Japanese Empire*, pp. 41–57.

44 a. lewallen, *The Fabric of Indigeneity: Ainu Identity, Gender, and Settler Colonialism in Japan*, Santa Fe 2016, p. 25.

45 K. Ziomek, *Lost Histories: Recovering the Lives of Japan's Colonial Peoples*, Cambridge, MA 2019, p. 265.

46 Chatani, *Nation-Empire*.

47 K. Hayes/C. Cipolla, *Re-Imagining Colonial Pasts, Influencing Colonial Futures*, in: id. (eds.), *Rethinking Colonialism: Comparative Archaeological Approaches*, Gainesville 2015, p. 3.

liminality, individuals as “sites” of empire, and global assemblages. These new categories create new units for comparison, within, without, and across the received geohistorical boundaries of “the Japanese empire”.

5. Conclusion

The empires plural approach poses challenges for comparative analysis. The story world is fractured. The unifying frameworks we identify at the macro scale dissolve into a muddle of contradictory actions and relationships at the microlevel. At the same time, empires plural provides a valuable and necessary corrective to a comparative frame grounded in a priori categories of cultural, ethnic, and regional difference and hierarchy. It is a grounded approach to comparative colonialism, whose findings should change how we construct macro-frameworks of comparison.

The field is already well on its way to revising one of the most pernicious macro-frameworks for comparative analysis: the Japanese empire as a racial anomaly among empires. In the comparative study of Japanese colonialism, race, culture, and ethnicity no longer suffice as a priori evidence of historical difference. These categories cannot explain the actions of Japan’s colonized subjects nor the actions of Japan’s colonizers. We now know too much about how the lives of Japan’s colonizing and colonized subjects shaped the production of categories of racial and cultural difference over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and how these categories were manipulated locally to account for the wide variety of practices of economic exploitation in which Japanese subjects, colonizing and colonized, participated. The Japanese empire, like other contemporaneous examples, was *colouring* not coloured.

There is more work to be done. The empire of nation-states is still with us. The field continues to advocate for more rigorous knowledge of empire by expanding the range of people whose lives we analyse as Japanese colonial history and by diversifying how we define their lives as sites of empire. There is also the related work of continuing to counteract the methodological impulse to use 1945 as the end of empire. The lives of our individual historical subjects continued across this historiographical boundary. Japanese colonialism did, too. Anglophone scholarship in this vein has been a part of the field since at least 1979, when John W. Dower published his critical biography of Yoshida Shigeru.⁴⁸ It continues in new form today with many of the studies discussed above. Scholars write with great insight about how the legacy of empire created specific conflicts in post-war Japan. But the study of the post-war period has yet to grapple with how we might incorporate Japan into a field of “comparative postcolonialism”. At the minimum, carrying forward “empires plural” means embracing “Japans plural”, too. Key to this work will be using the history of post-war Japanese relations with Asia and histories of

48 J. Dower, *Empire and Aftermath: Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1878–1954*, Cambridge, MA 1979.

labour migration to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the possibilities for postcolonial histories of Japan. Recent works underscore the necessity of this approach.⁴⁹ More are on the way.

49 See H. Mizuno/A. Moore/J. DiGioia (eds.), *Engineering Asia: Technology, Colonial Development, and the Cold War Order*, London 2018; E. Chung, *Immigration and Citizenship in Japan*, Cambridge 2010.