

Utilization of Fuel and Development of Fuel Industry in Qing Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

As fuel is an important material in daily life, its acquirement and utilization is thus a significant subject of research in life history, economic history as well as in environmental history. This paper first examines how fuel was consumed and traded in Qing Taiwan, and then traces the development of the wood-for-fuel industry. Four major types of fuel, namely straw, timber, charcoal and coal, were used in Qing Taiwan. Among them, straw was used mainly by people engaged in agricultural production. With the rest of the population using timber and charcoal, the consumption demand for timber and charcoal thus constituted the main market of fuel in Qing Taiwan. During the reigns of Emperors Tongzhi (同治) and Guangxu (光緒), the consumption of timber per capita was around 0.9-1.0 ton.

Since the mid-Qing Dynasty, increase in population led to further growth in the market of fuel. However, decrease in natural forests caused the price of fuel to soar. In particular, towards the end of Qing Dynasty, the demand of fuel increased rapidly because of the growing need for roasting tea leaves. Under such circumstances, the planting and sale of Taiwan acacia, an alternative source of fuel, emerged as a new industry, which promised significant profits. Consequently, the wood-for-fuel transformed from a necessity of the poor into a business for opportunists, and finally became a new venture for colonial capitalists. Many rich businessmen and landlords in central and northern Taiwan joined the afforestation industry, and such development initiated a new trend toward capitalization of the fuel industry in Taiwan.

Keywords: fuel, fuel industry, Taiwan acacia, charcoal, timber, coal