

Chinese National Income, ca. 1661-1933

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Abstract

This paper pulls together many primary and secondary sources to arrive at consistent estimates of national income for China between the 17th and 20th centuries. We find, in line with much of the literature, that GDP declined between the mid-17th and 19th centuries. This trend was reversed during the 19th century, mainly due to a shift into services and, for the late 19th century onwards, also in industry. Since these sectors exhibited higher labour productivity, this fostered economic growth. This pattern of decreasing share of services and industry from the 17th century and increasing shares in the 19th century is common in many Asian countries except Japan. The reasons for this development, however, are unclear. The standard ultimate factors of growth such as institutions (low marriage age for women, exclusive society) apply to both almost all Asian countries, while the role of colonial government does not apply to China as it was never colonized. Geography (such as low share of pasture) again is applicable to both Japan and Indonesia. Hence, more research is necessary.