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The economics of Japanese imperialism in Korea, 1910-1939[1]

By MITSUHIKO KIMURA

A by-product of European imperialism has been a large literature on its motivations and consequences. A classic theory among many proposed, the Hobson-Leninist theory, has been particularly influential.[2] However, in recent years, alternative theories such as informal imperialism have gained momentum.[3] In the study of Japanese imperialism, Hobson-Leninist views based on Marx's theory of the class struggle remain a major conceptual framework.[4] Thus, many Japanese historians contend that the colonization of Korea (1910-45), the largest formal colony in the Japanese empire, was quite profitable to Japan and contributed substantially to Japan's economic development. This proposition, however, is not well founded; evidence cited is neither comprehensive nor has it been subjected to any rigorous statistical tests. The non-Marxist camp also lacks substantive arguments, both theoretically and empirically.[5] This article attempts to fill this gap in the literature, focusing specifically on the period 1910-39.[6] I examine the economic gains and losses from the colonization of Korea and thus throw light on the theory of Japanese imperialism.[7]

Hobson-Leninists focus on the profitability of colonial investment since they see that as the essential element in imperialism. By contrast, the so-called colonial drain approach looks at import surplus, treating imports as a gain and exports as a loss for the country, because imports are an inflow and exports an outflow of resources. The import surplus for the imperial

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[2] Hobson, *Imperialism*; Lenin, *Imperialism*. For discussion of economic imperialism, see Landes, 'Nature of economic imperialism'; Wolfe, 'Introduction'; Boulding, 'Introduction'.

[3] Gallagher and Robinson, 'Imperialism of free trade'. For recent theories of imperialism, see Owen and Sutcliffe, eds., *Studies in the theory of imperialism*; Mommsen, *Theories of imperialism*.

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