

The economics of Japanese imperialism in Korea, 1910-1939¹

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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*.

⁴ For instance, Oishi, ed., *Nihon teikokushugi-shi*. For non-Marxist work, see Myers and Peattie, eds., *Japanese colonial empire*; Peattie, 'Japanese colonial empire, 1895-1945'.

⁵ Lockwood stresses the costs of the colonization of Korea (Lockwood, *Economic development*, p. 52). Nakamura is sceptical of the value of colonial Korea to the Japanese economy as a whole (Nakamura, *Nihon keizai*, p. 53). These views are only tentative.

⁶ The background to Japanese colonization of Korea is summarized as follows: the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5 was fought in and around the Korean Peninsula and ended in victory for Japan. This swept away Chinese influence from Korean politics. The Russo-Japanese war in 1904-5 ended in a narrow victory for Japan. Japan then converted Korea into a protectorate and finally annexed it in 1910.

⁷ Recent developments in the quantitative economic history of Japan and colonial Korea offer a basis for this study (especially Yamamoto, *Nihon shokuminchi*; Ohkawa and Shinohara, eds., *Patterns*).

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