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East Asian latecomer firms: Learning the technology of electronics

Mike Hobday

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Abstract

This paper introduces the idea of the latecomer firm to explore how the four dragons of East Asia (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore) learned to innovate in electronics. The paper examines the historical progress of technological development and sets out the institutional mechanisms by which firms acquired foreign technology. Using one case study from each country, the paper explores how East Asian firms learned process and product skills and know-how. Within the firms, subcontracting and original equipment manufacture (OEM) mechanisms acted as a training school for latecomers, enabling them to overcome entry barriers and to assimilate manufacturing and design technology. The needs of export customers drove the pace of learning and acted as a focusing device for technological assimilation, adaptation and innovation. To interpret the findings, a simple model of how latecomers linked their technological learning to export markets is put forward. In contrast with the research and development (R&D) and design-led strategies typical of leaders and followers, latecomers began with incremental improvements to manufacturing processes which led

latecomers began with incremental improvements to manufacturing processes which led on to minor product innovations. The evidence suggests that the origins and paths of the East Asian latecomers continue to influence their strategies, structures and technological orientations.



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