After Empire Comes Home: Economic Experiences of South Manchuria Railway Employees in Postwar Japan, 1945-1965

Mrs. NISHIZAKI Sumiyo, London School of Economics

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The economic impact of large influxes of population is a topic that has been much debated. This research contributes to those debates by examining one of the most significant, but least researched, examples of post-war migration – the repatriation of more than six million people to Japan after World War II, including both demobilised soldiers and civilians. One pervasive image of Japanese civilian repatriates is that of the immigrant farmer of Manchuria, despite the fact that many returned from other regions, including Korea and Sakhalin, and that repatriates consisted of not only farmers but also colonial government officials, employees of public and private corporations, small business owners, teachers, and priests amongst others. In the context of Japan’s post-war recovery, this paper will focus on another major group — the employees of Japanese wartime public corporations. In particular, it will examine approximately 10,000 people who had worked for the South Manchuria Railway (SMR) and their post-war occupational transitions.

Whilst it is evident that for many SMR employees the post-war transition was not entirely smooth, this research suggests that their post-war settlement was facilitated not only by a) the transferability of their skills, but also by b) the government’s employment policies (employment at government offices or public corporations) and c) employment in traditional sectors such as family farming and small businesses in retail and services. This trend was shared by other (non-SMR) civilian repatriates too. Free market forces did not necessarily determine the post-war employment of repatriates, and much of their skills and expertise might not have been allocated in the most efficient manner. It can be argued, however, that this type of transition helped to bring political and economic stability, which became a foundation of Japan’s rapid recovery and subsequent economic growth.

Nishizaki Sumiyo is a PhD Candidate at the Economic History Department, LSE. Before joining LSE in 2011, Sumiyo was in the Japan Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies. She has also participated in a research project at the Reischauer Center of the school, where she researched Japan’s political economy. As a master’s student, Sumiyo became interested in the impact of history on the international relations of Northeast Asia, specifically in the ways how Japan settled post-World War II situations and how it made the transitions from wartime to postwar, believing that it might have shaped the country’s postwar trajectory. In order to partly answer these questions, Sumiyo has been researching the postwar economic experiences of Japanese civilian repatriates.