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The Consequences of Hometown Regiment: What Happened in Hometown When the Soldiers Never Returned?

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Kentaro Asai

Thursday
2026-01-22
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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Wars often reshape economic structures through the destruction of physical capital and institutional change, yet less is known about how the loss of human capital affects postwar economic development. During the Second World War, Japan lost approximately two million soldiers, the vast majority of whom were young males. This constituted a sizable shock to the gender composition of local labor markets, as these losses amounted to nearly 10 percent of the working-age male population.

The Japanese Imperial Army adopted a hometown regiment system, under which military regiments were organized at the prefectural level, meaning that soldiers within the same regiment came from the same prefecture. U.S. counterattacks in the Pacific Islands—where most Japanese military deaths occurred—resulted in large differences in casualty rates across regiments. Consequently, wartime losses were highly uneven across prefectures. These institutional features generated substantial and persistent geographic variation in postwar gender ratios.

Exploiting changes in gender ratios across cohorts and prefectures, this study examines how the permanent loss of young males influenced postwar industrial structure. On the one hand, local economies may adjust to gender imbalances by reallocating labor toward sectors that rely more heavily on

female workers. On the other hand, market forces such as technological adaptation and internal migration may act as restoring mechanisms, offsetting the initial shock over time. To assess these competing forces, we use newly digitized Population Census data covering the period from 1920 to 1980.

Our empirical results indicate that prefectures experiencing larger declines in the male population saw a reduction in the employment share of manufacturing, accompanied by increases in agriculture and services. Quantitatively, however, these effects were modest and largely dissipated within approximately 15 years after the war. This pattern suggests that changes in gender composition slowed the process of industrialization in the short run, but did not permanently alter the long-run industrial structure.

We further examine implications for women's employment. Female labor supply increased significantly in response to male losses, and the share of female workers rose across all sectors. These findings are consistent with adjustments in production technology or factor intensity to accommodate a relatively more abundant labor factor. In contrast to the effects on industrial structure, we find that these changes persisted at least into the 1980s.



Kentaro Asai is an assistant professor (postdoctoral researcher) in the Department of Economics at the Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU). He obtained his PhD in Economics from the Paris School of Economics in 2024. His research fields include labor economics, public economics, and economic history, with particular interests in working hours, income inequality, and the gender wage gap. His research uses modern applied microeconomic methods to conduct empirical analysis. His work includes “Firm-Level Effects of Reductions in Working Hours”, which investigates the effects of the working hours reduction policies on firm employment and productivity, and “Reputation in International Trade: Evidence from the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster,” which examines the impact of the Fukushima nuclear disaster on Japanese agricultural exports.

<https://japanologie.univie.ac.at/ujapanlectures>
ujapanlectures.ostasien@univie.ac.at