

The employment of agricultural labor in modern southern Manchuria: Relationships between labor markets and rural society

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This article analyzes rural labor markets, called “*gongfushi*” (工夫市), in Manchuria. These markets played an important role in employing temporary workers (*duangong* 短工), labor which was essential in modern Manchurian agriculture. Using village survey reports submitted by Japanese fieldworkers during the Manchukuo era, this article explores the various forms of *gongfushi* and the relationships between them and the local communities in which they functioned.

Due to the historical development and natural conditions of rural society in modern Manchuria, a large amount of agricultural labor was required during the cultivation season, and under such conditions *gongfushi* served as convenient places to find and employ workers. With the opening of reclamation projects in southern Manchuria between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which involved both land purchases and railways construction, rapid increases in the demand for labor led to the formation of *gongfushi* in that region. From that time on the character of *gongfushi* changed along with changing labor demands in each region. In southern Manchuria during the Manchukuo era, where agriculture was the most developed and small-scale family farming was more common than large-scale capitalist farming, *gongfushi* began to serve as a safety valve to control local labor surpluses. The large number of *gongfushi* that were formed in both county and market towns in southern Manchuria suggests that labor markets were changing in accordance with agricultural developments. The form of *gongfushi* also differed between the county and market town, as both employers and workers used *gongfushi* to suit their respective needs. In addition, *gongfushi* in southern Manchuria were not controlled by administrators or sub-contractors (e.g., *batou* 把頭), and in most cases wages were determined by direct negotiation between employer and worker.

Gongfushi were not limited to Manchuria, but existed all over China. As a result of this investigation, the author suggests that relationships established between employers and workers in *gongfushi*, as well as relationships which developed between specific forms of *gongfushi* and their local communities, may serve as important clues for understanding the diversity of relationships formed between agricultural labor and local rural societies throughout modern China.