Materials for the Study of Mura and Sato in Ancient Japan

HIRAKAWA, Minami

The administrative units of sato and mura were the end points of ancient Japan’s regional administrative apparatus. Despite an enormous body of research on the important topic of the relationship between these two kinds of administrative unit, their relationship has yet to be made fully clear. It seems that not enough work has been directed at analyzing sato and mura for differences over time and between historical materials.

A focus on changes over time highlights the initial emergence of mura in regional areas followed by the creation of sato as an administrative unit comprising fifty households. At this stage sato and mura exist alongside one another. This condition is recorded variously in historical records. As a result, the relationship between the two grew unclear.

There is a need to examine historical records by type to discover the instances in which mura is used to name regional locations in ancient written materials. Dividing ancient written materials into three categories—official histories, Ritsuryo administrative records, other non-administrative materials—we find that mura appears most frequently in the third of these categories. To the extent this analysis reveals features common to the use of the word mura in the materials, these features can be regarded as characteristics of mura. Moreover, these characteristics can be understood as the basis of the widespread use of the word mura.

Analysis of materials along the above lines led to the following conclusion:

The word mura refers to a place or territory. This characteristic use of the word served to supplement the Ritsuryo administrative apparatus based on kuni, kori, and sato. Moreover, it is probable the use and elevation of mura as a new administrative unit were encouraged by examples set by mura in regions of former capitals and detached palaces, by large-scale mura in outlying regions, and by Fukami mura, whose territory marker unearthed at the Kamo site in Ishikawa Prefecture represents the oldest known edict.

In recent years it has been speculated that regional names appearing in written materials unearthed in areas of Japan are closely tied to mura. The next stage of research will use these as powerful clues in the effort to understand the nature and formative principles of mura collectivities, about which we possess so few historical records.