A Study of the Local Status of Villagers in the Myoshu-za

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The "Myoshu-za" is defined as "a Miyaza (council of elders) found in the Chugoku region that is made up of a number of Myo (administrative organ of agricultural fields) and their chiefs as its basic unit, and which rarely serves as a bridge to the next level." This paper examines the Myoshu-za from the perspective of its status within a village.

First, I show that during the early part of the Medieval period, in the Chugoku region soshos (peasant administrative districts) rites were performed as Miyaza rites by groups of elders and men with resident status. These sosho Miyaza rites underwent change, resulting in the formation of the Myoshu-za at the beginning of the 14th century. Factors behind this were changes to the roles of Myo and the connection between Myo and communal benefits derived from mountains, fields and irrigation water, etc. Kashira-bun documents, which are regarded as evidence of the formation of the Myoshu-za, do not contain mention of the "autonomy" of the Miyaza, but they are documents that were compiled under the supervision of shrine families as a result of the reorganization of the Myo.

The Myoshu-za was a Miyaza that was operated jointly by persons who had the status of leading landowners within the local village. The contribution deemed appropriate for these leading landowners amounted to the success of the next successful status (an obligation to provide goods). It was because of this that within the Myoshu-za there did not develop an element that served as a bridge to the next level.

At the end of the 16th century, households were formed universally in villages in the Chugoku region. A compromise was reached over the feud between the Myoshu-za and those with power in villages from these households who did not belong to the Myoshu-za. As a result, during the Early Modern period the status of a landowner with a leadership role in Myo changed so that it came to indicate social standing, whereby the Myoshu-za became a powerful mechanism for upholding the system of social standing.

Lastly, the paper also covers issues related to the period when the status of a leading landowner was established, their special privileges, the impact that the confiscation of shrine-operated rice fields had on village finances and measures to counteract this, the entrenchment of the system of
household status and changes to this system, the situation after the "dissolution" of Miyaza and the range of the distribution of the status of leading landowners.