High Economic Growth and Change of Life in Mountain Villages

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Mountain villages in Japan drastically transformed themselves in the period from the '30s to '40s of the Showa Era (1955 to 1973), and it was generally understood that the transformation resulted from the influence of high economic growth. In this paper, the relationship between high economic growth and change of life in mountain villages is examined and considered from three viewpoints: (1) checking the changes made to mountain villages in the high-economic-growth period (the '30s to '40s of the Showa Era); (2) grasping the changes in the high-economic-growth period and their characteristics in a wider time frame including the years before and after high economic growth; and (3) studying the specific changes in three regions: Aizu region in Fukushima Prefecture; Sougawa, Seiyoshi in Ehime Prefecture; and Itsuki-mura in Kumamoto Prefecture.

After the '30s of the Showa Era, in mountain village areas, the populations decreased and conventional means of livelihood were no longer sufficient. It is not only because of the influence of high economic growth but also the decrease in demand for charcoal in cities, for example, that started from the latter half of the '20s of the Showa Era (1950 to 1954), and it is considered that products from mountain villages suffered from this change in the times whereby their value was lost. In order to fill the gap, the means of livelihood were transformed to a pattern in which people earned money by working in cities away from home or undertaking civil engineering work during the wintertime. This was a great change of life in mountain villages in this period.

This resulted from not only the loss of jobs in mountains but also from a reduction in opportunities to go into the mountains, the loss of awe of and devotion to the mountains symbolized by a belief in mountain gods and "risan (leaving mountains)," which promoted being distanced from the mountains from the aspects of both work and mind. It may seem that "risan" resulted from the fact that the "growth"-oriented trend in the high-economic-growth period reached the mountain villages, but the major contributor was that such mountain products that met the needs of the times using mountain resources could not be created.

Since the completion of the high-economic-growth period, the mountain village communities have been unable to escape its influence. At present, they are called "genkai shuraku (marginal settlements)" and considered to be futureless communities. However, toward creation of life along
the mountain principle, some residents have tried to rebuild their mountain village life and started to become involved in activities. It is said that these activities aim to escape “growth” based on an orientation and method that are different from the mentality of the high-economic-growth period and to show a new contemporary development of mountain village life.

Key words: high economic growth, mountain village life, depopulation, “risan”, escaping growth