By reviewing the course of research and the history of development that has faded away with the promotion of tourism, this article aims to recall the past life in mountainous villages. To this end, the Sho River Basin, including Gokayama and Shirakawa-go with three World Heritage sites, is analyzed as a case study. Although now in Gokayama and Shirakawa-go, attention focuses on farmhouses with steep thatched roofs in Ainokura, Suganuma, and Ogimachi villages designated as World Heritage sites, similar farmhouses used to be common throughout the Sho River Basin, where people mainly engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture and sericulture activities. Due to the dam development since around the 1920s, followed by road improvement projects, a rapidly increasing number of households abandoned steep thatched roofs. Moreover, as the gap in the quality of life between each of the villages was growing, many villages were depopulated and abandoned. On the other hand, around 1900, researchers focused their attention on the origin of farmhouses with steep thatched roofs, and then they shifted their interests to the response of residents to the dam development and the changes of their lifestyle.

The dam development transformed the lifestyle of villagers in the Sho River Basin; agriculture fell into decay while the construction, commerce, and service sectors were growing. In addition, cultural property protection activities for farmhouses with steep thatched roofs gained momentum after World War II, and Ainokura and Suganuma villages were designated as historic sites in 1970, which further promoted tourism. Researchers also shifted their attention to the landscape preservation of villages with farmhouses with steep thatched roofs as well as the impact of tourism. Thus, the past life in mountainous villages has been forgotten. These trends, however, are hard for the generations who experienced the life before the advent of tourism to follow.

Key words: the Sho River, Gokayama, Shirakawa-go, dam development, research history