Mail-order Services and Consumption Behaviors of Wealthy Families in Rural Areas in the Taishō Period: A Case Study Focused on the Relationships between Mitsukoshi and the Tanaka Family in Suzaka City, Nagano Prefecture

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This article analyzes the consumption behavior of the Tanaka family in Suzaka City, Nagano Prefecture, focusing on their use of mail-order services. The family is known to have purchased various goods from department stores in Tokyo, such as Mitsukoshi, through mail order from the late 19th to the early 20th century although not all the related letters have been analyzed. These unorganized letters are examined in this joint research through a comprehensive examination of documents of the family, revealing how they actually used mail-order services. The results of the examination are shown below.

The Tanaka family made intensive use of mail-order services and purchased a variety of goods in the Taishō period (1912-1926). Their most favorite store was Mitsukoshi, followed by shops in Nagano City and other stores than Mitsukoshi in Tokyo. It is worth noting that the family had close connections not only with stores in Tokyo but also with those in the nearest prefectural capital. This discovery can provide important insights for the analysis of how wealthy families in rural areas used mail-order services. A comparison of prices of kimonos and fabrics purchased by the Tanaka family reveals that they bought the most expensive products from Mitsukoshi, the second most expensive ones from stores in Nagano City, and the cheapest ones from stores in their local city of Suzaka.

This distinction indicates the strong influence of Mitsukoshi on fashion trends. Still, in actuality, the influence was significantly restricted due to the store’s mail order service. The letters preserved in the Tanaka family suggest that many of the orders were cancelled or substituted because the ordered items were out of stock. This uncertainty of availability forced the family to deal with stores in Nagano City, which responded flexibly to various demands of the family by leveraging their geographical proximity and face-to-face relationships. Conversely, it is worth noting that the family continued to patronize Mitsukoshi despite disadvantages. One of the reasons is considered the influence of Mitsukoshi on fashion trends though such a strong influence was merely incidental to the store’s brand image.

Key words: Wealthy families in rural areas, consumption behavior, mail-order service, department store, Mitsukoshi, fashion trends