Degeneration and Revival of City Festivals in the Rapid Economic Growth Period

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This paper clarifies the features of the transformation of city festivals by comparing how they were transformed during the rapid economic growth period and how the changes were related to local communities. This study analyzes the following three festivals: Aomori Nebuta Festival (Aomori City, Aomori Prefecture); Noda Tanabata Festival (Noda City, Chiba Prefecture); and Tonami Yotaka Festival (Tonami City, Toyama Prefecture). Aomori Nebuta Festival witnessed a decline in the number of Nebuta floats from local communities in the 1960s. It was, however, re-established as a popular tourist attraction in the 1970s, with a rebound increase in float numbers supported by the growing participation of public entities and private companies around Japan. The festival became so popular to be held in other cities around the country and designated as a cultural asset. Noda Tanabata Festival is one of the star festivals held in urban areas to pay tribute to the Legend of Tanabata. This type of festival was embraced by shopping districts around Japan between 1951 and 1955. Many were, however, discontinued in the late 1960s. Noda Tanabata Festival also needed to be refreshed to continue on. It was therefore transformed into an event similar to a community fair by introducing a parade in 1972. Tonami Yotaka Festival, like other fight festivals in Toyama Prefecture, was once abolished around 1960 due to criticism from the police, parent-teacher associations, and other organizations and revived in the late 1960s.

Thus, the festivals experienced significant changes in the first half of the rapid economic growth period. Some went into a decline, and some even discontinued. On the other hand, the festivals were revived and redeveloped in the second half of that period. The degeneration in the first half was attributed to the New Lifestyle Movement as well as the trend of the times to put the economy first. The revival in the second half was supported by the following factors emerging in the Age of Culture, when Japan was enjoying stable growth after the oil shocks: (i) “enculturation” to recognize festivals as important culture and designate them as cultural assets; (ii) “touristization” to use festivals as tourism resources; (iii) “organization” to let local authorities operate festivals and bear the cost; and (iv) “safety improvement” to make festivals accident-free.

Key words: Rapid growth, degeneration and revival of festivals, enculturation of festivals