

‘Another Road’ Shown by Small Villages

Ooshika & Shimojo in Nagano Pref.

By YANO Kohei

LIKE most farming and mountain communities, two small villages in southern Nagano Prefecture in central Japan are exposed to a sagging birthrate and an aging population. The villages of Ooshika and Shimojo lie in the Iida/Shimoina district, larger than Osaka Prefecture, but there are many areas of steep land, and the population scattered in the region numbers only 175,000. Yet they are attracting nationwide attention for unique measures using their regional and historical characteristics.

Ooshika: a Small, Mountainous Cosmos

The village of Ooshika has a population of about 1,300. Half the village has a steep geographic feature of the Southern Alps mountain mass, and the people live in a narrow and deep valley formed by a

river flowing from the peaks. If you go through a narrow, bendy road along the valley, you can see a small cosmos on a mountain with a rustic hot spring, farming fields and an old community against the background of high peaks.

The village, isolated from the low world, used to be a hiding place for defeated soldiers in ancient times. Military commanders of the noble *Heike* clan that perished in the 12th century and princes of the 14th-century Southern Dynasty left the capital's culture behind there. Flowering from that cultural accumulation is the Ooshika *Kabuki* theater handed down from generation to generation.

Tradition of local theater

The oldest *Kabuki* drama played by villagers there was one recorded in 1767, but no accurate patrimony has been



A scene from a “Kabuki” drama played by village residents

reported. As *Kabuki* played by laypeople was prohibited during the Edo period (1603-1867), villagers continued to play *Kabuki* under the guise of a *Shinto* ritual. *Kabuki* was also performed on such happy occasions as the enthronement of emperors and the opening of new bridges. *Kabuki* was managed by young people, and acting on stage was a ceremony to become adults.

But after World War II, young people flowed out of the village. With a sense of crisis over the continuation of the tradition, villagers created a preservation group and unified *Kabuki* plays performed in various parts of the village in 1956, thus creating what today is known as Ooshika *Kabuki*. A *Kabuki* fund has been created, and the municipal government has been extending subsidies for performances. Thus, Ooshika *Kabuki* has been receiving sufficient help as the village's cultural heritage.

Ooshika *Kabuki* is performed in May and October. During this period, the usually quiet village is enlivened. To view *Kabuki* plays, as many as 1,500 people, more than the village population, rush to the village not only from other villages but also from other prefectures. Viewing is free of charge, but tips, called *hana* (flower), are thrown onto the stage. These tips are reportedly almost enough to cover performance expenses.

Toward a Beautiful Village

In 2005, Ooshika formed an “Alliance of Japan's Most Beautiful Villages” with eight other towns and villages. Following

Photo: Educational board, Ooshika village office



Villagers enjoy a “Kabuki” drama played on the makeshift stage set up at a shrine.

Photo: Shimojo village office

the pattern of “The Most Beautiful Villages of France,” the alliance is aimed at achieving their self-reliance and vitalization by maintaining village culture and scenery – fostered in their own history and climate – and thus expanding value added in terms of tourism.

Village head Nakagawa Yutaka says, “If an attractive village is created, village people can also have pride, leading to regional development.” The village’s future can be found in steady efforts to keep and foster village scenery and culture, increase fans of the village, and attract more migrants and tourists.

■ Shimojo: a Miracle Rise in Birthrate

The village of Shimojo, sprawling to the west coast of the Tenryu River, is populated by some 4,200. The village is rich in greenery, surrounded by mountains of the Southern Alps in the east and the Central Alps in the west. Its birthrate was 2.12 in 2003-05 against the national average of 1.25 in 2005. The village is drawing national attention as a “miracle village” amid a wave of fewer babies and increasing older people sweeping the entire nation, especially smaller rural areas.

Coming down a highway to enter Shimojo, easily spotted is a new housing complex. In the morning, many young people go to work from there, and small children go on a stroll or leave for a kindergarten led by their mothers. This is a rare scene in a small local village in recent years. In fact, the housing complex has been built by the municipal government to increase young people’s permanent settlement and boost the birthrate.

Raising villagers’ awareness

Shimojo once prospered as a place to produce raw silk, and its population numbered 6,400 at the peak. But demand for raw silk declined with the popularization of chemical textiles, and its population has since shrunk. In 1992, Ito Kihei became village head with a pledge to increase the population. To realize the pledge, Ito promoted reforms by getting the entire village involved.

Ito first tackled the challenge of raising awareness of village office employees. To streamline bureaucratic jobs said to be

inefficient, he sent out employees to a home center in a neighboring town for training. Then, their eyes sparkled, and their work became markedly more efficient. “Employees were not to blame. There was a problem on the part of their bosses who pretended to be ignorant of inefficiency,” Ito says. With an improvement in work efficiency, it became possible to curb new employment, and personnel expenses were cut by ¥450 million. The number of employees per population of 1,000 is 8.56, about half the average figure of a similar-size municipality.

What he challenged next to reduce expenses was to have public works done by villagers. The village office provided only materials for works to build village roads, farm roads and watercourses, and villagers were in charge of the works. As many farmers in the village work at construction sites as side jobs, there is said to be no problem as to the quality of work. As might be expected, there were objections among villagers at first, but he could soon get their understanding because there were such advantages as early construction and simplified procedures. As a result, public works expenses could be cut to about one-fifth.

Thanks to these efforts for spending cuts, the village’s financial situation has markedly improved, increasing an annual amount of reserves and their balance. The groundwork has thus been laid for implementation of policy measures to promote young people’s permanent residence and increase the birthrate.

Creating a village for child-raising

In 1997, the local government began constructing village-run houses to step up young people’s permanent settlement. Normally, there are subsidies from the central and prefectural governments to build public houses but uniform move-in conditions are imposed throughout the country. On the other hand, the village office has built houses without such subsidies because of its sound finances, and imposed its own unique conditions on tenant applicants such as already having or being ready to have children, and being prepared to take part in regional activities.

“We are choosing those trying to activate the village and contribute to it,” Ito says. Given cheap rent and traffic con-



Road construction by village people: contributing to a sharp cut in public works spending

venience, young people have increasingly moved to the village from cities, towns and villages nearby. The village government has also offered places to enjoy by introducing such facilities as a mobile library, a swimming pool and a culture hall. It has also enriched the child-raising environment and assistance by making medical expenses free for children through junior high school.

With child-raising households of similar generations gathering, an environment has been spawned for quick consultation among worried parents. This has helped lessen anxiety over child-raising, producing the effect of having children easier. With these measures, the population, which once dropped to the 3,800 level, has recovered to more than 4,200 in 10 years.

Ito cites the scale of his village as a reason for successful reforms. He says a population of 5,000 is a limit for people to share an awareness of purpose and a sense of crisis, and understand one another’s personal characters. “If you have a sense of crisis, you can have an awareness of purpose. And the entire village can enjoy a sense of achievement and a sense of excitement in overriding it,” Ito says. In Japan in recent years, there have been successive mergers among cities, towns and villages at the initiative of the central government, chiefly to resolve financial problems, but the example of Shimojo shows that even a small village can survive soundly by maximizing realistic reforms. **JS**

Yano Kohei is former staff writer, Nagano Bureau, Jiji Press.