

Mutual Help Networks in Japanese Society

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1. Introduction

As a result of modernization, Japanese people tend to be more self-involved than in the past not only in economic life but also in social life. However, there is one aspect of social action that has persisted at least in spirit. The purpose of the paper is to show how mutual help remains important and has been transformed in the transition from traditional village society to modern urban society.

Mutual help was traditionally divided into three types. One is 'Yui' which refers to reciprocity in helping to plant rice, cut rice, and re-roof houses by exchanging labor. The second is 'Moyai' which refers to redistribution. In exchange for the right to get goods from a common store, local people had the obligation to maintain a common pool of resources. Finally, 'Tetsudai' refers to support in funeral ceremonies in lieu of monetary exchange, which would otherwise have been expected¹.

These customs have almost disappeared from modern life. However, the tradition of mutual help is still manifest in some modern civic activities in the guise of volunteering. The social system of mutual help arising from indigenous conditions contributed to overcome 'tragedy of the commons' and the problem of 'free riders'. Modern Japanese society might do well to review such mutual help networks in search of ways of solving both public and private social problems at home and overseas as well.

2. Mutual help in pre-modern Japanese society

(1) Types of Mutual Help: 'Yui' (reciprocity), 'Moyai' (redistribution), 'Tetsudai' (unidirectional help)

We can classify mutual help into three types. The one is 'Yui', which means the exchange of labor. Many peasants help in planting rice, cutting rice, and re-roofing houses with Japanese pampas grass. When peasants harvested crops, they needed much lot of labor. Many laborers are gathered to do with the condition of later being given one who helps. When a peasant built a house or repaired the roof of a house, other peasants helped principally through the exchange of labor. Women were supposed to contribute half as much labor as men. A peasant helped by others makes returns the favors at another time. The action is symmetrical. The specific definitions of such mutual help are described in detail below.

'Yui' is reciprocity where one gives labor to another and reaps the reward of the other's labor at another time. The giver always gets the same volume and quality of labor in return. It is rational exchange and the labor unit is the family. One family gives to another family. When a family needs a lot of labor to plant and harvest rice, another family helps by giving labor. That family then has got the right to return labor from the family it helped. In another type, the group consists of A, B, and C families. A family gets labor from B and C family. The next time, B gets it from C and A. The third time C is given labor from A and B. Generally speaking, these actions are recorded to reconfirm the kind labor, especially re-roofing in order to confirm the borrowing and lending labor by others. The return of labor is not always at the time when one is helped. It could be settled to be done in the future.

'Moyai' refers to the redistribution of goods and services among local people. Those who have commons of mountain, forest and sea distribute resources among themselves. The practice covers not only goods, but also local people must give labor to maintain the commons. They are bound by the rules of villages to be engaged in public works ('Mura shigoto') to clean roads and canals, as well as remove grass from the roads. There are rules to be obeyed by local people. The vector of the action is toward the center from the periphery.

'Moyai' refers to redistribution based on the equality of volume and quality. Especially we can see this when villagers work together to repair a road or cleaning a reservoir. These are duties of villagers who live together in regional society. Villagers can use the mountains and sea as commons. However the right can be gotten by participating in the work. The work is supported by one member of each family. The rewards from the commons are redistributed among the members in a village. If a member does not participate in the work, he is condemned as the destroyer of village order. However he can pay a penalty to be absent from work. 'Moyai' is the

action of gathering work, getting the outcome in equal way.

In the contrast to gathering labor, money is some times gathered among local people to help the poor and to buy goods. This 'money moyai' became popular after the spread of currency in villages. 'Money moyai' is especially popular in Okinawa prefecture. Of course from goods such as harvested crops to the daily goods and Japanese pampas grasses for roofing were gathered for poor people who could not otherwise afford them. There is 'money moyai' to pursue money for money.

'Tetsudai' was another way of helping people in a village. It needed no return. The mutual help system also encompassed such 'one-way' help. People did not expect to be helped in exchange by either the poor or people in trouble. However, even such people who were helped would often give goods or labor in return. Those who were helped used to serve some food to their helpers. Today, international aid to a developing country from a developed country is termed 'Tetsudai'.

'Testudai' refers to help without the expectation of reciprocity. Especially it could be seen in wedding or funeral ceremonies. When one died in regional society, villagers would gather to help with the funeral. The family of the deceased did not need to do its normal daily maintenance. People brought food ready to cook and help in other ways to prepare for the ceremony. Their encouragement became vital for the family. In the future the bereaved family would reciprocate the efforts. These actions were noted in a 'memorandum of Unhappiness'. This was done in order not to forget previous such activities in the village. Though 'Tetsudai' as one-way help has unreciprocated relationship, people often feel reciprocity.

'Tetsudai' operated through two types of social relationships, equal and unequal. Equal or horizontal relationships operated between families of equal social rank. The unequal relationships operated between landowners and 'Nago' (peasants), working as paternalistic, vertical social relationships similar to the patron-apprentice relationships.

These are the ideal types. 'Yui', 'Moyai' and 'Tetsudai' are each a phase of action of mutual. 'Yui' provides for symmetrical action, 'Moyai' is bidirectional from the center from the periphery to the center and vice versa, and 'Tetsudai' is largely unidirectional (Figure 1). According to Polany, reciprocity, redistribution, and exchange are economic actions operating as social actions and so exhibit both market and non-market characteristics in livelihood. Mutual help as social action is non-market oriented. When it becomes fully market oriented, the spirit of mutual help disappeared.

(2) The Organizations of Mutual Help: 'Kumi' and 'Kou'

Mutual help is carried out through certain organizations, called 'Kumi' and 'Kou'. The former

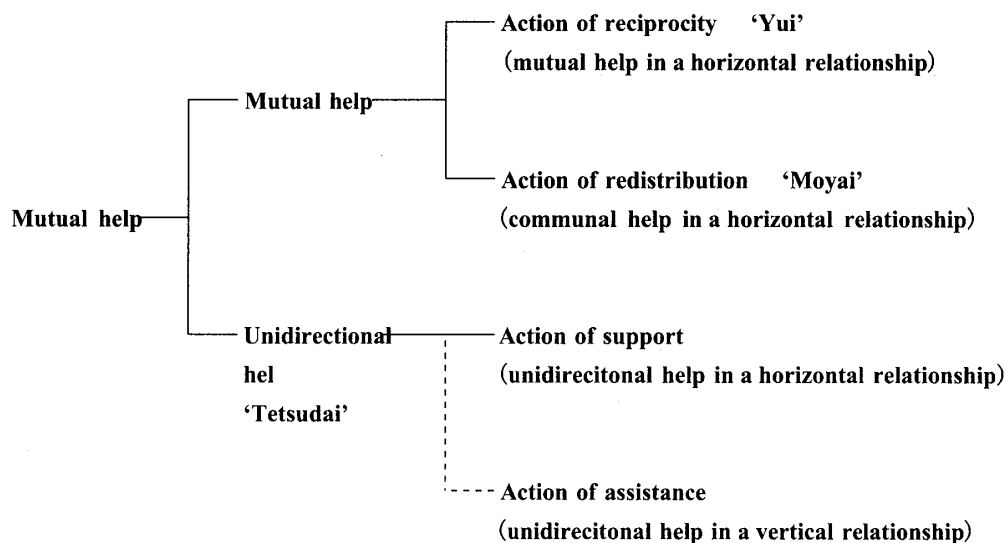


Figure 1: Types of Mutual Help

is the organization that was formal for villagers. The latter was organization focused on certain themes. 'Kumi' was the organization in which one is required to participate. The organization is by family, age, and sex. The unit of the family constituted the organization of mutual help for 'Yui', 'Moyai', and 'Tetsudai'. 'Yui gumi' was the work unit for planting rice, cutting rice, and re-roofing a house. The 'Wakamono gumi' (a youth group) played an important role in public works at the same time as it also taught the rules of a village, turning boys into men.

A 'Kou' would be organized to fulfill a certain purpose. Local people helped a troubled person by collecting money, as well as donating goods and labor. These were also organizations that fulfilled the spirit of local and indigenous religions. They were organizations of micro-finance, but also social and religious activity. The 'Kou' originated from the religious activity of reading Buddhist scripture. The group of such activity was organization of mutual help at the same time. It was also associated with the organization of money-gathering to help people. A 'Tanomoshi' was such an organization that lent money to the poor without interest. There was also a 'Kou' organization ('Muzin') that lent money with interest. These 'Kous' were connected with an organization for small finance (a rotating credit association) different from a 'Kumi.' Generally speaking, an organization tended to be called a 'Kou' if it had a religious or an economic purpose.

Spontaneous organizations for mutual help were important for local people. They were not compulsory. There were a number of spontaneous organizations in regional society. However, a 'Kumi' was organized by the government, which also helped it to maintain control of local people who were used to participating in mutual help. The 'Gonin-gumi' (the standard group of five households) and the 'Tonari-gumi' (the group of ten households) were such organizations.

The former was the unit of mutual help with cooperate responsibility in Edo era. The latter was the unit with the same responsibility during the Pacific War in the Showa era.

A Mura had such autonomous organizations of self-reliance, self-help, and self-determination in local life. However, it tended also to be compelled to organize by governmental mandate. The central government used such organizations as the tool for controlling and diminishing local power.

3. A Mutual Help Network in an Island Society

(1) A system of relief for the poor on Uu Island

Oshima Island, 500m northwest of Odika Island situated in the Tsushima channel west of Nagasaki prefecture, is a good example of mutual help network. Oshima Island had the unique system of mutual help to relief the suffering. Its place of the relief was Uu Island which belongs to Oshima Island and inhabited. It has Uu Island as the commons. Oshima has the safety net spreading local people. It may be described that each island has the relationship between donor and donee.

Uu Island was famous for the rehabilitation of the suffering. The history of relief originated in the Tokugawa era (18th century), when a big earthquake and famine brought many deaths. Moreover, heavy taxes were squeezing the villagers. People on Oshima Island thought that they should struggle against poverty by themselves. The poorest peasants were to move to Uu Island where they got the exclusive right to take fish, seaweed and other marine products such abalone. Other income was gotten from selling cows that were raised on a Uu Island ranch.

The two or three households that lived on the island were released from paying taxes. Of course they had the obligation to give some labor to work for official village duties such as cutting grass and cleaning channels on the island. In fact, they were allowed to keep some cows to have them eat the grass to keep it short. They also stood guard against anyone entering the commons to steal grass for their cows. After people worked hard and saved enough money, they returned to Oshima Island. Those whom the village permitted to live there had a monopoly of its resource, meaning the exclusive use of the commons of Uu Island.

It may be an unusual example; however, it was the typical case of self help by the poor in action. There was a natural network of mutual help. The purpose of the system was to support those in suffering and to help them to get life skills on Uu Island as a place of discipline. That is not simply the sharing of poverty, but the rehabilitation of life accomplished on their own. It was an unaided rehabilitation. The commons played an important role of the material means of production in a regional society.

However, this system of helping the poor went out of use around 1970 because of high economic growth elsewhere. People no longer were selected to go to the poorer island to live, because Uu Island had no public services such as electricity or water. Even Oshima Island itself was short of infrastructure such as education and medical facilities compared with other regional economies. People did not dare to go to Uu Island and some people even left Oshima Island to make more comfortable lives in other areas.

Paradoxically wealth in the form of a village commons was needed to diminish poverty. There were some other systems for relieving suffering not only on Oshima, but also inland, on a mountain. It was called 'the mountain to raise the poor'.

(2) Commons as the Core of the Network of Mutual Help

The commons played important roles as a material means of production, infrastructure of life insurance, and a symbol of solidarity in regional society. The commons supported expenditures for public services. Money from selling trees and foods gotten in the commons were used to maintain it and the rest was distributed among local people. Fish caught in sea as part of the commons were equally distributed among not only the fishermen, but also people who did not engage in the work; children, the elderly and the housewives, because they supported the work of catching fish and viewed the fishery as village members. People who repaired fishing boats and fishing nets also had the right to receive part of the catch.

Local people have 'the wisdom of life' to overcome 'tragedy of the commons' and the problem of 'free riders'. They established rules for using natural resources. 'Kuchiake' day, on which the usual ban to enter the commons was lifted, was determined by the 'yorai', a meeting of local people. Anyone who didn't obey the rule, was condemned by villagers and they had the sanction of 'Murahachibu' imposed on him. 'Murahachibu' means ostracism and people would shun him except when his help was needed for firefighting and funeral ceremonies. The system of mutual aid was supported by variety of sanctions, not only physical, but mental. They controlled individualistic behavior in village life, ensuring the observation of order. The system of mutual help needed these sanctions. There were few 'free riders' in Japanese villages.

There are several types of ownership of the commons. The first is the possession of a group within the village, the second is that of the village itself and the third 'private', including not only private citizens but also village institutions. The commons is supported by co-ownership. People prevented public and private development of the commons. The commons was the core site in communal life. It was also the core of the network of mutual help.

Japanese villagers created a spontaneous order to live amicably with each other. Especially islands had the wisdom of a common life. There is the principle of *shima* (island) society on

islands, making an island itself the commons. The society has a strong network and spirit of mutual help. It originated from the character of society in the closeness and openness of an island. An island is open to its people, but closed to off-islanders. Although Japan itself has been called closed and seen to have an 'insular spirit', it also exhibits some 'open' behavior. The whole society has the principle of *shima* society. Its mutual action systems and mutual social system have been applied to the transformation of the environment outside of its society.

(3) The balance between vertical and horizontal mutual networks

There are two types of mutual networks. The one is vertical such as patron-client relationship where man is supported in exchange of service to a master. The other is horizontal, in which one helps another as a qualified equal. The vertical mutual network is based on the relationship between a head family and a collateral family, man and master. It contains consanguine relationships, semi-consanguine relationships ('douzoku'), and quasi-parent-child relationships. A master as parent helps another in daily life by giving room and food in exchange for cooking, cleaning, etc. Although the relationship between landowner and renter is economic, a social relationship sometimes can be seen between them.

In this social relationship, the assistance is by doing a favor and is a kind of 'Tetsudai'. These two types of mutual help can be seen in not only on islands but also inland. There have been a few vertical mutual networks where land was divided and distributed equally among local people by themselves. It is carried out over a period of years. Good land and bad land are exchanged by the year. The purpose of the institution of the division of land to farmers by local government was taxation through mutual responsibility of the farmers in the guise of equal distribution of land.

According to Putnam (1993), the vertical network does not contribute to good governance. However, island society has had the two types of mutual network. The vertical mutual network complements horizontal mutual network. In the case of Oshima Island, a patron as the capitalist of a fishery supported the villagers' owning fishing boats. They also borrowed money for festivals and paid him back with barley. A patron bore certain quality to get the exclusive right to take seaweed made of materials for glue used in making clothes by supporting the villagers.

Of course it is better for local people to live with each other through self-reliance, self-help, and self-determination. Balance between vertical and horizontal mutual networks is important. The fishermen's cooperative paid the patron back in substitute for villagers who borrowed individually in Oshima Island. International aid can be seen as a vertical mutual network between the donors of developed countries and the donees of developing countries.

Observing the whole Japanese society, we can see both vertical mutual networks and horizontal mutual networks. 'Yui', 'Moyai', and 'Tetsudai' as the action of mutual help have been

carried out through not only consanguine relationships but also regional relationship. Mutual help through consanguineous relationships is based on the principle of *ie* (family) group and regional proximity relationships on the principle of *mura* (village) society (Onda, 1996).

4. Transformation of Traditional Society into Modern Society

(1) Mutual help in modern Japanese society

‘Yui’ and ‘Moyai’ have almost disappeared in regional society through the modernizing transformation of village into city. ‘Tetsudai’ can still be found in funeral and wedding ceremonies. However, the traditional systems of mutual help do remain in villages, especially on smaller or isolated islands. All of Japan is a country of islands. An island has strong ties of social bondage of mutual help. As I have mentioned in previous papers on Japanese social structure, the two principles of *ie* (family) group and *mura* (village) society control Japanese society (Onda, 1996). The principle of *shima* (island) society can be added to the two principles. As each society has indigenous social characteristics, Japan has these major principles of society that control people’s behavior.

The principle of *ie* group reflects the vertical nature of family relationships. It means that the social group is controlled by the human bonds which are seen in the relationship between parent and child. Some Japanese companies have just as closed relationships as in a family. As parents care for children, patron-client relationship penetrates into society to some degree. This can be called mutual help through ‘familism.’

The principle of *mura* society refers to human relationships that are controlled by the horizontal nature of relationship in an area. It is based on the solidarity and coexistence of living in the same place in a closed relationship of sentiment. It describes horizontal relationships as a village. This can be called mutual help by ‘groupism’. A village is a district where all local people feel they are one body.

The principle of *shima* society means that the closeness of living in isolation through the condition of nature influences the soul of people on the island and produces the spirit of mutual help through identification. Strong relationship of mutual help can be found in the people. An island is an entire commons itself. It introduces a communal life and exhibits the characteristics of the principle of *shima* society. This might be called mutual help by ‘islandism.’

The social cores of mutual help by *ie* group, *mura* society, and *shima* society have persisted in modern Japanese society. However, there is also a negative aspect of mutual help. A Japanese company acts like a parent, and officially and privately protects employees in exchange for their loyalty to it. This is obedience as ‘Pietät’ meaning devotion to parents and filial obedience in

a closed relationship of sentiment. Japanese companies engender a strong sense of belonging (familism). However, this strong group cohesion seems also to engender paternalism. A single industry consists of rival companies. Egalitarianism by identification and solidarity in the company as *mura* has contributed greatly to motivate Japanese businessmen to work hard. Moreover, each company acts in the interests of its entire industry to exclude outsider's entry into the closeness of villages and *shima* society, and divide contracts based on mutual reciprocity (going into a huddle, the Japanese word 'dangou'). This can be seen as anticompetitive or unfair behavior. However, this does not negate the modern use of the system altogether. *Shima* society can be progressive, as shown in the Oshima Island case where new welfare policy was introduced faster than in other places because of it.

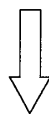
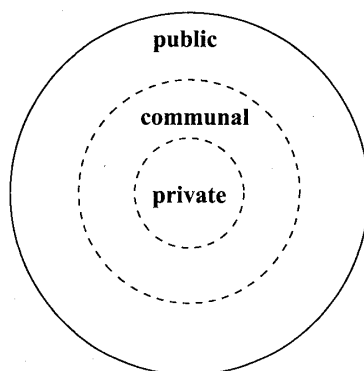
The action of mutual help has been reinforced by the three principles and introduced by the principle of *shima* society especially. The spirit of mutual help has been successful in the creation of modern Japanese society. However, the action of mutual help has also begun to disappear. One reason for its disappearance is the invasion by local government of the regional society to help local people in repairing roads and maintaining the commons, and in the area of security which local people undertook as the duty of villages. The other reason is the growth of the commercial services of mutual help. The commercial funeral and wedding ceremony industries have grown rapidly. Where people start to buy such services, then the action of mutual help weakens and they come to rely on commercial suppliers more and more. Government services dependency and the market-oriented motivation have strengthened recent years. The more people depend on the local government and the commercial services, the more mutual help disappears and 'amae' (relying on others without reciprocity) grows.

As people tend to buy many services in exchange for money and local government invades the area of assistance in local life, communal areas disappear (Figure 2). In a primitive and archaic society the public area, communal area and private area are not distinguished but unified. However, when the influence of the official government and private enterprise grows, the communal area is expelled from the contiguousness. It means that the both public (government) interest and private interest become more influential. In respect to property, communal land (the commons) disappears and both public (government) and private landholding increases.

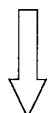
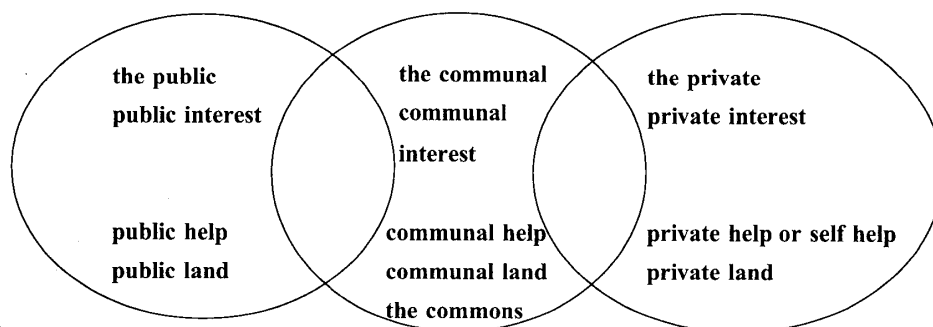
(2) Mind of Mutual Help revitalized in Modern Society

The origin of the autonomy of local people can be traced to the middle of Muromachi period, 1338-1573. The autonomous organization was called 'Sou'. It was independent of local government and the organization of mutual help. Villagers helped one another to survive and even improve their lives. However, the government controlled the same villages through violence

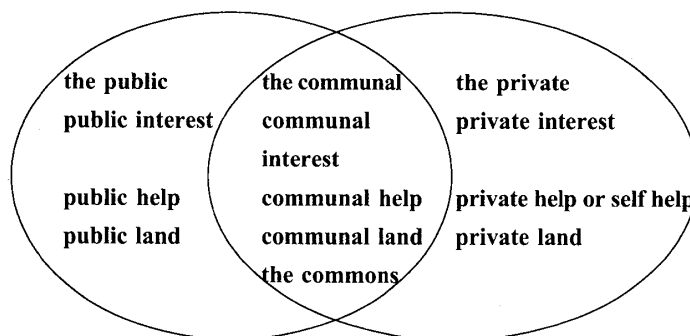
condition of no difference among the private, the communal and the public



separation of the public, the communal and the private



disappearance of the communal through the public and the private



public interest
oriented altruism



private interest
oriented egoism

Figure 2: Change of the territory of the public, the communal and the private

and public law. Local people kept their own autonomy.

After the confusion of samurai and nobles courting hegemony, people got peace through the sustained victory of the Tokugawa shogun. Local people were able to maintain autonomous control as well. The government controlled the organization of villagers to make 'Gonin-gumi' which were responsible for paying taxes in rice, mutual prosecution and mutual help. However, people's autonomy and mutual help were also in evidence. Villagers acted to help each other during Edo (Tokugawa) period, 1603-1867. This spirit of mutual help persisted into modern times. Although some of the mutual help was compulsory, volunteer mutual help existed along side it.

'Yui', 'Moyai', and 'Tetsudai' were still operating in Meiji, Taisho and Showa in modern times, 1868-1989. However, 'Yui' has slowly disappeared as machines were introduced to harvest rice as ceramic Kawara tiles replaced thatch. 'Moyai' is no longer in evidence as group work for a regional society has not needed because few commons are left and the local governments repair roads and support the collection of goods for the poor. People's public spirit has decreased because local people now depend mostly on the government. Finally, 'Tetsudai' has almost disappeared as the business of funeral and wedding ceremony grows.

Although the institutions of mutual help have become extinct, its spirit has not entirely disappeared among local people. For example, people have begun to organize mutual help for the day care for children and the care of elderly people. When the great Hanshin-Awaji earthquake hit area around Kobe in 1995, many people gathered to the area from near and far to help the troubled. The year is now called as 'the original year of volunteerism'. People have been conscious of the need for mutual help.

For example, we can recognize the successor of 'Moyai' in the fishery of three towns in Shizuoka prefecture. The cherry tree shrimps which are caught only in Suruga bay as the commons are equally distributed among fishermen of Yui town, Kanbara town, and Oigawa town. It is called 'pool institution'. In spite of the varying age and skill of members of the fishery, they all share the money by selling the cherry tree shrimps equally. There is no competition and no indiscriminate fishing. They pay for fuel of ships, ice for refrigerating the shrimp, and the premiums for accident insurance equally. However, there is no spirit of competition because a stable income for everyone is accepted as a social good. As Ostrom acknowledged, there is a good system for protection of the commons in Japan (Ostrom, 1990, pp.1-28). A wide symbiosis is in effect including exploitation, competition, and mutualism where everyone benefits together. In the 'pool institution' of the cherry tree shrimp fishery, we recognize mutualism by using the commons.

There have been the organizations of mutual help as 'self-governance', but they are sub-

organizations of the local government. Local people who were not content with this began to develop other organizations by themselves, civic organizations in effect, called NPO's (Non-Profitable Organizations). They act in the area of life where the local government does not work or its activity is weak. They have also begun community businesses in areas where private enterprise does not work or its activity is weak. For example, housewives have opened a boutique for the disabled or a shop to sell soap made of home waste oil. Some regional societies have issued original local currencies not only to boost the regional economy, but also to awaken local people to the fact everyone can be useful for the regional society. The spirit of mutual help continues to penetrate into modern Japanese society in spite of the control of the government and the daily life altered by modernization.

5. Conclusions

Mutual help originated out of sympathy (Smith, 1759). Mutual help is based on self-reliance and supported by cooperation. The outcome of the process is the solidarity of society and improved conviviality. Conviviality means not only living together, but also self-reliant individuals and groups. It is important for us to reconsider mutualism in modern times.

Japanese society had three types of mutual help of 'Yui', 'Moyai', and 'Tetsudai' as before. 'Yui' is the action of reciprocity. 'Moyai' is the action of redistribution. 'Tetsudai' is unidirectional (non-reciprocal) help. Modernization has weakened these institutions and they have all but disappeared recent years. However, the spirit of mutual help revived whenever there is a disaster, such as earthquake. Points to which special attention should be paid are that the spirit of mutual help persist in modern times, that we could learn the wisdom of solving 'the tragedy of the Commons' from local people in Japanese villages and that we need to reconsider mutual help in the age of Globalization. The revival of the communal area should be emphasized.

International aid means to perform 'Tetsudai'. It is supported not only by the vertical mutual network of donor and donee but also by horizontal mutual network between partners. It is advisable that the developed countries should assist the developing countries to become independence and so that the latter can give something in return for the help from the former.

If we could have a 'global commons' not only in natural resources but also social and cultural resources, we would notice that their maintenance of them through world collaboration is important. We can learn how to manage them from the local people in many countries². There are 'local commons' in a country but no 'regional commons' among countries and no 'global commons' in the world. We can create such commons based on success at local level. The unique territoriality of an island as a model is a problem that can not be ignored. However, one solution

would be that the countries concerned manage it as the commons cooperatively.

This globe itself may be considered as the single commons protected by the 'global citizens' in the world. Japanese villagers managed the commons through 'Moyai' gathering labor intensively and sharing the output from the commons fairly. We might well learn the importance to build mutual help network in the world from 'wisdom of life' based on the traditional action of local people.

Notes

- 1 This research is based partly on a qualitative study that was carried out by interviewing local Japanese people in villages and country towns. The interviews were conducted through a series of prepared questions about mutual help and lasted about an hour.
- 2 The same types of mutual help exist not only in Asia, but also in other areas. Here we only discuss comparisons in Asia.

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