

Historical analysis of the Fujisan climbers

—From worship ascents to recreational climbing—

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Fujisan is the highest peak in Japan and is considered to be the symbol of Japan all over the world because of its beautiful landscape. In the summer of 2013, it was nominated as a World Heritage Site.

At a height of 3,776m, and with only a two-month climbing season, Fujisan's summit is visited by 300,000 people every year. Fujisan was an object of worship in ancient times, and in the Edo period, it was worshipped by a group called 'Fuji-ko'. Thus, the system of climbing Fujisan has already been long established.

This paper focuses on the roles of the groups called 'Oshi' and 'Sendatsu', and compares the 'Fuji-ko' group with modern climbers.

Keywords: Fujisan, World Heritage, Fuji-ko, Oshi, Sendatsu,

1. Background

On 22 June, 2013, Fujisan was named a World Heritage Site. UNESCO described Fujisan as follows, 'The beauty of the solitary, often snow-capped, stratovolcano, known around the world as Mount Fuji, rising above villages and tree-fringed sea and lakes has long inspired artists and poets and been the object of pilgrimages... On the upper 1,500-metre tier of the 3,776m mountain, pilgrim routes and crater shrines have been inscribed alongside sites around the base of the mountain including Sengen-jinja shrines, Oshi lodging houses, and natural volcanic features such as lava tree moulds, lakes, springs and waterfalls, which are revered as sacred'.

Currently, over 300,000 people visit Fujisan during the short climbing season of only two months. Most of them are leisure climbers and alpinists.

This paper aims to analyze the historical changes in reasons people climb Fujisan and the attributes of Fujisan that attract so many people.

2. Fujisan as an object of worship

Fujisan has repeated the cycle of dormancy and volcanic activity, and it became the focus of veneration

by the people at the base of the mountain. They looked up to the summit in worship called 'yohai' (遙拝). The Yamamiya Sengen-jinja Shrine (山宮浅間神社) was built such that it had a good view of Fujisan, indicating the fact that the ritual of veneration was performed at a distance from Fujisan in ancient times.

In the late 7th century, it was recorded in historical documents such as 'Kojiki' (古事記) and 'Nihonshoki' (日本書紀), that Sengen-jinja shrines (浅間神社) were built where people had venerated Fujisan.

Fujisan began to erupt in the late 8th century.

In the latter half of the 11th century, the volcanic eruptions subsided and the mountain entered a dormant period.

A belief system was created by different mountain worship methods based on the ancient Japanese Shinto religion and on Buddhism and Taoism introduced from China — people began actively performing hard practices around Fujisan Mountain Area.

As worship-ascents became popular among the masses, the Sengen-jinja shrines that were built at the base of the ascending routes, including the Suyama Sengen-jinja Shrine and Fuji Sengen-jinja Shrine (Subashiri Sengen-jinja Shrine) became more influential.

The ‘Oshi’ (御師) guides, who made arrangements for the worship-ascents and provided lodging for Fuji-ko (富士講) adherents, had houses at the base of the climbing route, and the compound was used as a place for people to worship before starting the climb.

The Fuji-ko groups were at the height of popularity among the commoners of the great city of Edo from the latter half of the 18th century to 19th century and the adherents sought worship-ascents on Fujisan.

Moreover, they went on pilgrimages to ascetic sites around caves, lakes, springs, waterfalls and other natural sites near the foot of Fujisan, such as the Hitoana cave (人穴), Fujigoko lakes (富士五湖), Oshinohakkai springs (忍野八海), and Shiraito waterfalls (白糸の滝).

The sites where Hasegawa Kakugyo (長谷川角行) (who became a legend of ‘Sendatsu’ (先達)) once conducted his ascetic practices became popular, and these sites were described in some documents.

From 17th century onwards, Fuji-ko adherents would climb close to the summit to worship the sunrise as a form of ‘Goraigo’ (御来迎) (also known as ‘Goraiko’ (御来光)), a religious term referring to Amida Buddha welcoming souls into the Buddhist Pure Land). Thus, importance is placed on reaching the summit prior to the break of dawn and worshipping the rising sun.

3. People who supported the Fuji-ko

During the Edo period (17th century at the latest), a system for assisting common people to reach Fujisan was in place.

It included the ‘Oshi’ (御師), ‘Sendatsu’ (先達), ‘Gouriki’ (強力) and the house of ‘Oshi’ (御師の家).

The members of ‘Oshi’ were professional guides who took all the necessary care, including accommodations and meals, of people who made worship-ascent during the summer.

They usually worked towards spreading Fujisan worship and engaged in prayer-giving and invocation.

The ‘Oshi’ guides of Yoshida were the representative ‘Oshi’ of Fujisan. They built large-scale ‘Oshi’ villages on both sides of the road that extended north to south from the area in front of the gate to the Kitaguchi Hongu Fuji Sengen-jinja Shrine, which marked the start of the Yoshida Ascending

Route.

The Sendatsu was the appointed group leader of Fuji-ko.

‘Oshi’ guides would bestow the qualification of Sendatsu on leaders of Fuji-ko adherents. The guides were in charge of all the arrangements for the Fuji-ko adherents who made worship-ascents during summer, including providing lodging and meals. While they generally worked to spread Fujisan worship and to engaged in prayer-giving and invocation, the Sendatsu would guide the adherents up the mountain. The Sendatsu also played a central role in religious ceremonies such as the ‘Otakiage’ (お焚き上げ) fire ceremony. One could not become a Sendatsu without first having completed many worship-ascents, as well as having made the ‘Hakkaimeguri’ (八海巡り) pilgrimage to eight lakes or completed other difficult ascetic practices.

A ‘Gouriki’ (強力) was the carrier for the ancient Japanese people. He would tow luggage and lunch-boxes for the Fuji-ko adherents.

The ‘Gouriki’ would pound steamed rice into cakes at night and bring them to lunch the following days. The rice cake was called ‘chikaramochi’ (力餅) (in literal terms, great strength).

In 16th to 17th century, there were 80-100 houses of ‘Oshi’.

The houses of ‘Oshi’ are characterized by narrow, oblong plots that are deeper than they are wide. The gateway passage named ‘Tatsumichi’ (タツミチ) was laid down facing and extending from the main street, with a watercourse traversing the precincts. A building that was used for both residential and lodging purposes was located at the end of the precincts across the watercourse.

At the former house of the ‘Togawa Family’ (外川家), the Fuji-ko adherents who were guided there by their leader, or ‘Sendatsu’, first washed their hands and feet with water from the watercourse traversing the precincts. After, reaching the main house, ‘Sendatsu’ was received by the ‘Oshi’ guide and entered the main house from the platform entrance, where the followers entered it from the veranda. From the platform entrance, the guest rooms continued to the back of the main house and there was a ‘Gosnizen’ (ゴシンゼン) sanctum in a detached building that was added to the main building. ‘Oshi’

guides and Fuji-ko adherents gathered and prayed in front of the sanctum, preparing themselves for the worship-ascent. Built in 1768, the Former House of the Togawa Family is an example of the oldest extant 'Oshi' house.

To accommodate the ever-increasing number of Fuji-ko adherents which was due to the flourishing of the Fuji-ko practice, the former house of the Togawa Family was extended with a detached building in which the sanctum was set up.

According to the diary of the 'Oshi' Togawa family, with '112 people tonight, it would be maximum number of people in this summer' (25 July, 1940).

Unlike the 'Ryokan accommodation' (旅館), 'Oshi' lodges didn't provide care for the guests all year round. In just a few days of the year, Oshi lodge greets close to 100 guests.

The legend says that Fujisan was created overnight in the 92nd year of Emperor Koan (probably ca. 300 B.C.). The legend spread after the 13th century. It is considered that the custom of celebrating the anniversary of Fujisan every 60 years following the birth of Fujisan because the year of 'Goennen' (御縁年) started around the 15th century. In particular, in the 'Goennen' years between 1800 and 1860, it is recorded that many pilgrims and Fuji-ko adherents climbed Fujisan. The year of Monkey that occurs

every 12 years and which was also considered an important year because the birth of Fujisan took place in the year of Monkey.

In late of Edo period, how the people to crowd in Fujisan was depicted. It is estimated that 7000-8000 people came to Fuji-ko from Yoshida in an average year and this number climbed to 15.000 in 'Koshin' (庚申) years. A registered increase in the number of worship renewal years is because of luck that appeared suddenly.

4. The beginning of the modern climbing

In 1860, Sir Rutherford Alcock (1809-1892), an English minister, became the first foreigner to climb Fujisan. He was known as the first alpinist in Japan. After him, many other foreigners climbed Fujisan. Thus, modern climbing had begun.

Currently, visitors gather from all over Japan and overseas. Approximately 300,000 people climb Fujisan each year despite its elevation of 3,776m.

There are no roads, railroad tracks, or other means of transportation to the summit; therefore, the climbers make the trek up the mountain to the summit by foot, which takes more than six hours. These behaviours of climbers does not liken to its origins in the modern alpinism that blossomed in the

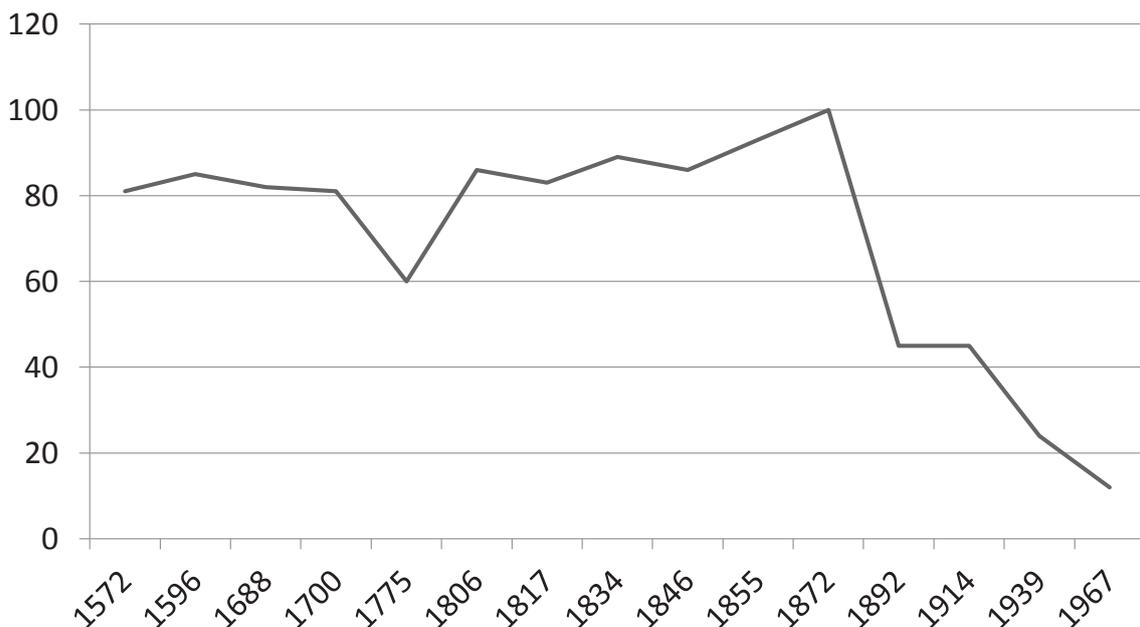


Figure 1. Oshi lodges house in Yoshida

Source: The History of Fuji-ko p.327

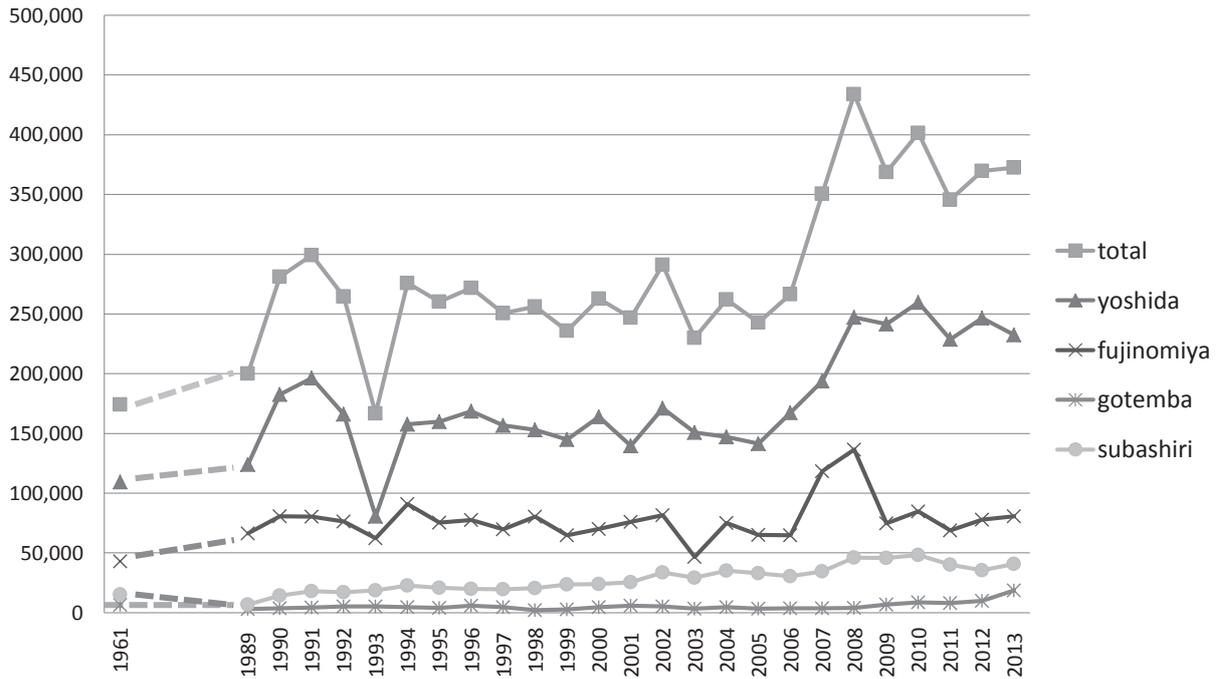


Figure 2. Visitors in climbing season

Source: <http://toukei.pref.shizuoka.jp/kankouseisakuka/tpkei15.html>

first half of the 20th century in Japan. Some climber are looked enjoy in leisure time, and others are looked like rather born from the worship-ascents of the Shugen ascetics and the numerous Fuji-ko adherents that were organized from the 17th century on.

From the end of the 19th century, railways and roads for automobiles were built at the base of the mountain, thereby greatly improving the accessibility for people who make worship-ascents and for other climbers.

In 1889, the national Tokaido Railway Line reached the southern base of the mountain, and horse-drawn train lines and national railway's Chuo Honsen Railway Line reached the northern base of the mountain around 1900. The opening of the railway lines made it even more popular for people to travel from Tokyo to climb Fujisan.

In 1929, a road connecting Yoshida was built, and in 1937, bus-tours began to transport people making worship-ascents and other climbers.

In addition, two new toll roads opened—the Fuji Subaru Line on the northern slope in 1964, and the Fujisan Sky Line on the southern slope in 1970—which allowed automobiles to drive halfway up the mountain, after which the trend was to start one's climb from the midway point up the slopes (elevation

of 2,300–2,400 m). As a result, the number of people climbing Fujisan increased dramatically, reaching an annual average of about 300,000 people. However, the motives for people's ascents have changed along with the transportation to the starting point of the climb.

In a survey given to climbers in 2013, 46.7% replied that this was their first climb to Fujisan and 32.8% replied that it was second or third climb. Many climbers are so-called 'beginners'.

A total of 71.2%climbers did not have guides. The distinction between beginners and climbers without guides is important in modern Fujisan climbing.

5. Conclusion

Here I compare the transition in mountain climbing at Mt. Fuji to the societal changes surrounding Japanese tourism.

The tendencies concerning tourism among Japanese people after World War II changed during the period of rapid economic growth, which occurred in the 1960-70s in terms of the following three aspects.

The first aspect is the rapid increase in the population of travelers with the expansion of company trips. Many companies implemented company trip system as part of a benefit package during the period

of rapid economic growth. In many cases, such trips lasted one night and two days, during which passengers were taken to hot spring areas in reserved buses. This was the beginning of mass tourism in Japan.

The second aspect is that social capital improvements such as high-speed railroads and road constructions were carried out in the metropolitan areas of Tokyo and Osaka. With such efforts, mass transportation modes such as railways and large buses were established, resulting in significant shortening of travel time. These improvements boosted the expansion of Japan's mass tourism at that time. Since then, one-night-two-day trip became the mainstream of travel among Japanese.

The third aspect is the expansion of lodging facilities at tourist resorts to meet the needs of mass tourism. To accommodate the rapidly increasing travel population, tourist resorts made provisions to make the rooms bigger. The building extension and new constructions of inns at existing tourist resorts near popular hot spring areas and temple cities contributed to the mass tourism that later spread throughout the nation. Mt. Fuji became one of the destinations for mass tourism.

In other words, the 'Sendatsu', a guide who leads visitors from the guest houses to Mt. Fuji, was replaced by large tour buses arranged by travel agencies. With the bus service, lodging at 'Oshi' lodge houses was no longer necessary since climbers can go directly to the 5th station. From there on, climbers can use the trail and 'Yama-muro (山室)', which were lodging facilities constructed since the Edo period to allow visitors to go up the mountain and see the beautiful sunrise at the top.

The travel time required for climbing Mt. Fuji was shortened; it became possible to fit within the one-night-two-day trip, which was preferred by the Japanese people then. Thus, it is thought that this scheduling for mountain climbing was popular since then.

With such societal background as the base presupposition, now I will compare worship-ascent which was what climbing Mt. Fuji once meant, with recreational mountain climbing.

① Motives for mountain climbing

The motive for worship-ascent was religious

devotion toward Mt. Fuji based on the teaching of 'Fuji-ko', devotional Fuji confraternities, and was considered to be sacred training. On the contrary, the purpose of recreational mountain climbing is to see the sunrise at the top.

② Method of reaching the top of Mt. Fuji

'Sentatsu' and 'Fuji-ko' groups started the base of Mt. Fuji on foot, which was time consuming. On the way, they visited sacred places around the Five Lakes of Fuji and reconfirmed their religious piety to Mt. Fuji. On the other hand, climbers making the trip for recreational purposes use transportation systems from their nearby homes and reach the 5th station in a very short period of time.

③ Way of climbing Mt. Fuji and climbing experience

'Fuji-ko' groups used to go through purification ceremonies at 'Oshi' lodge houses. In addition, they ate meals and bought packed meals for nutritional support of climbing. They stayed for one or two nights with the instruction of 'Sendatsu' on the way up the mountain. Their luggage was carried by 'Gouriki'. Many travellers could not travel at the same time or travel multiple times; therefore, many of the travelers climbed Mt. Fuji only once.

Based on the research in 2013, approximately half of the visitors (46.7%) climbed Mt. Fuji for the first time, and 79.5% of the visitors were beginners with not more than three experiences of climbing Mt. Fuji. In addition, 71.2% of the visitors answered that they climbed to the top without using guides.

While the essence of Fujisan worship was carried forward by the act of climbing the mountain, the values and economic circumstances of the Japanese people had changed. This resulted in a shift from the religious worship-ascent to a broader ascent motivated by an admiration for Fujisan itself.

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