
Reconsidering the “Butsudan Boom” : The Democratization of Tradition in an Industrial-Historical Context

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Previous studies have positioned the “butsudan (Buddhist altars) boom” that occurred in 1970, during Japan’s period of rapid economic growth, as a phenomenon caused mainly by the purchase of butsudan by the generation familiar with them, triggered by the death of a close relative. In contrast, this paper attempts to reconsider the question of what the butsudan boom was from the perspective of the industry, using the association and company histories of the butsudan industry and the autobiographies of its founders as the main historical sources.

Through the research of historical documents, we learned that the butsudan industry unexpectedly underwent major structural changes in its production and distribution system. In the early modern period, the butsudan industry was centered on local production for local consumption in large cities and Shinshu religious areas, but in the Meiji period (1868-1912), local producers gradually began to sell low-priced products nationwide. In the Taisho period (1912-1926), small karaki butsudan altars began to be purchased in large cities. In the post-war period of rapid economic growth, traditional production centers were branded, while newer production centers emerged, and inexpensive products were distributed throughout the country. The rapid increase in demand for Soka Gakkai altars was also an important factor. In the Heisei era, Hasegawa, another latecomer to the market, became the number one manufacturer and retailer of mass-produced altars, establishing an OEM system that transcended production areas and developing a nationwide chain of multiple stores. In this way, butsudan was transformed from a highly labor-intensive industry to one that could be mass-produced and distributed.

On the demand side, it turned out that factors such as reconstruction after the Great Kanto Earthquake and war damage, the need for memorial services for war dead and accident victims, the boom in new housing construction, and the increase in new religious believers came in waves, and the 1970 butsudan boom was only one part of this trend. However, it is important to note that 1970 was the year Hasegawa introduced his gold butsudan at an incredibly low price.

There are many issues to be addressed in the future, but for now we would like to present a hypothetical new argument for the “popularization of tradition” made possible by industry and commerce. In the development of ancestral rituals in Japan, modern industry can be seen as an

important actor that brought about a shift from a focus on rituals to a focus on the acquisition, maintenance, and transmission of mass popular religious products such as butsudan and graves.

Key words: history of the butsudan industry, labor-intensive local industry, mass consumer society, Soka Gakkai Buddhist altars, Memorial services for the dead