Ancestor Worship and Family: An Introduction

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Recently, especially since the 1970s, there has been much activity in the study of various aspects of ancestor worship, including the fields of social anthropology, Japanese folklore, sociology, and the study of religion. Before 1970, as can be seen in the African studies by Fortes, M., studies were mainly on the relationship between unilineal descent groups and ancestor worship. In Japan, studies during the same period centered around the family organization or “Ie”, which is a unilineal descent group, and ancestor worship. However, after 1970, the relationship between kinship organization, which is not a unilineal descent group, and ancestor worship, became a matter of growing interest.

The primary condition promoting this active research into ancestor worship was the appearance of a kind of socially problematic situation, regarding how Japanese society conducts ancestor worship today, as is symbolized in the “family Buddhist altar boom” and the “grave boom”. The second condition was the fact that researchers into family came to tackle the question of how to evaluate the post-war changes in the Japanese family, and that the research into ancestor worship is considered to have much meaning in the approach to this subject. The third condition was that a new development in research into family is now required with regard to aspects of ceremonial worship, as opposed to the corroborative studies on Japanese families and kinship, which started in earnest at the beginning of the Showa era, in which the family was long considered as a labor organization, that is, an economic unit.

Present studies on ancestor worship, especially this joint study on “Family, Kinship, and Ancestor Worship”, may be considered to be faced by the following questions: first, regional difference in Japanese ancestor worship should be clarified to begin with; second, long- and short-term changes in Japanese ancestor worship should be clarified. Third, the question of how the various types of ancestor worship are related to Japanese concepts of the dead and the Other World should be addressed; fourth, the position of Japanese ancestor worship in Eastern Asia should be clarified. The subject of this joint study is the clarification of ancestor worship as one of the Japanese basic faiths from an overall consideration of the subject at the present stage, from the aspects of both social structure and concepts regarding ancestors.