Funerals, Ancestor Worship, Families, Relatives and Villages
in the Farmers Society in the Edo-period

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This paper aims to examine the form taken by funerals, memorial services and ancestor worship in the modern farming classes; the method of participation and role played by "ie" (families), family groups, relatives, and community members; and various concepts and rules concerning these rituals. At the stage where family groups are closely tied, funerals, memorial services and ancestor worship seem to have been practiced as rituals of the family group, centering around the head of the family group. However, as individual families became more independent, each family tended to take the leading part in the practice of these rituals, and to set up their own tombstones, memorial tablets ('ihai') and death registration roll. At the stage where life in this world and the peace of one's spirit in the next were guaranteed basically by the "ie", the maintenance of the "ie" and eternal continuation of ancestor worship became an absolute requirement for the descendants. Just as their life at home was supported by the mutual assistance of relatives and the local community, funerals and memorial services for the spirits were complemented by relatives and the community. Cases can be found where funerals and memorial services were differentiated according to the status of the deceased, that is, depending on whether he or she was a lineal ascendant, spouse, lineal descendant or collateral relative of the family chief. In many places, the period of mourning for parents, when business would be suspended, was set much longer than in other cases. Those who entered other families through adoption or marriage participated not only at funerals, but also at the anniversary services. It was the duty of children to take care of their parents' spirits until the spirits came to be regarded as ancestors, or gods, after the completion of individual memorial services. Thereafter, their spirits continued to be worshiped as family ancestors by the successors to the "ie". Under the direct-line family system, the successive heads of the family and their wives were considered the authentic ancestors of the "ie". If a person died unmarried at his natal home, he was treated as an untended spirit. To support the "ie" as the master or mistress of the house while alive, and after death, to be worshiped as an ancestor of the "ie" by one's descendants was considered the regular course for one's life to take. The high ratio of remarriage seems to have meant a return to such a regular course of life. A system of differentiation ordained by the family structure was formed among the spirits of the family members, and at the same time, the concept of ancestry, which was extensively established and matured on the basis of the "ie", provided an opportunity to generate social discrimination. On the other hand, it also provided a link with the Emperor.