Merchant Dōzoku; Their Ancestor Worship, and Business Management

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This paper examines the real status of ancestor worship and business management of the Koyama dōzoku, a powerful merchant dōzoku in Komoro Town, Nagano prefecture, from the mid-Meiji Period to the early Shōwa Period, as well as their mutual relations.

The Koyama dōzoku was composed of ie units in different lines of business, and their business management was developed in meetings of the dōzoku on the occasion of the memorial services for their ancestors. The union of this dōzoku did not show a strong lord-vassal relationship between the main ie (honke) and branch ie(bunke), but there was clear economic superiority on the part of the honke, support given to bunke based on this economic power, and a clear right of ancestor worship invested in the honke. And, there was no common property system, and each ie owned property independently.

However, they accumulated common reserves (commonly owned assets) for ancestor worship, and these were also partially invested in the dōzoku's business operations.

Furthermore, several ie units in the dōzoku invested in the “Junsuikan”, a silk mill established by the head of the honke, and its operation was managed by more than one member, centering around the honke. However, the dōzoku did not form a system whereby all of them were engaged together in the same silk manufacturing business. This can be seen from the fact that each ie had its own independent shop. Moreover, the common reserves accumulated by the dōzoku were far from meeting the huge demand for funds for the silk mill operations. This system of dōzoku assets and ie unification can be mentioned as one reason why the Junsuikan did not show rapid development.

The commercial management of each ie went through rather violent ups and downs. In addition, silk mill management inevitably was speculative, so this tendency became more and more pronounced. On this point, the Koyama dōzoku can be said to have been a typical dōzoku constituting a small-to-medium capital in the Kantō and Tōsan silk manufacturing Regions in the Modern Age.

In this dōzoku, the honke's economic superiority was lost due to the recession, panic and excessive aid to bunke after the later period of the Taishō Era. Events for ancestor worship, which were the axis of the ie unity, were on longer performed strictly due to the head of the honke making inroads to the world of politics. When this happened, their ie unity became much looser, and changed into an kin-like relationship.