The Relationship between Urban Society and the Exhibition of Images of Deities in Samurai Residences

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In nineteenth century Edo, the samurai households would exhibit statues of deities (gods and buddhas) in their residences, gathering a large number of visitors. This phenomenon has been regarded as an example of the "hatarigami," (gods that are briefly popular among the people). It has also been thought that the samurai households put their gods and buddhas on exhibit in the hope of acquiring money offerings, which they needed to help pay their expenses as their economic conditions worsened. However, the studies that infer such conclusions have not carefully analyzed the facts and cannot be regarded as genuine research. The author approached this phenomenon from the point of view of the relationship between the samurai residences and urban society, an aspect that has yet to be fully clarified, and addressed the following three points: (1) the actual state of the exhibition, (2) the end of the exhibition, and (3) the religious devotees who formed the foundation of the exhibition. The following discoveries were made. (1) The samurai households set the dates for the exhibition, displayed famous statues of deities from their domain, and prepared festivals and attractions to gather visitors. This is similar to the way local shrines and temples gathered money by setting a specific period to exhibit statues rarely shown to the public in Edo. However, particularly in the case of the samurai residences, it was the act of opening to the public these residences which ordinary people normally had no opportunity to enter that drew visitors. Moreover, the shogunate controlled the merchants who regulated their business around the samurai residences, and also questionable religious practices, but they could not forbid the samurai to open their residences to the public. However, the area opened to the public was not the central part of the residences and the statues of deities put on display were not the tutelary gods of the household itself. (2) Even after entering the Meiji period, the households opened their residences and sometimes became the tutelary shrine for newly developed cities. However the Meiji government, in order to build up a nation with the Emperor as the spiritual center, unified the gods and forbade people from freely worshipping deities enshrined in individual homes. This instruction in 1876 signified the end of the exhibition of deities in former samurai residences. (3) It was not visitors from the general public that began and supported the exhibition of the statues of deities. Rather, the religious foundation supporting this custom consisted of the merchants living nearby who regularly came to the residences for business.