The Diversification and Decline of Gravestones: Studies from the Haiko-gorinto Gravestones in the Nakayama Nembutsuji Temple Graveyard in Tenri City

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There are gravestones on more than 9,000 graves in the graveyard of the Nakayama Nembutsu temple in Tenri City, Nara Prefecture that date from the Medieval period through to the modern day. The main forms of the gravestones changed with the passing of time, as haiko-gorinto gravestones (gravestones depicting an image of five-tiered gravestones) were erected in the 16th and 17th centuries, boat-shaped gravestones in the 18th century, comb-shaped gravestones in the 19th century, and square pillar-shaped gravestones in the 20th century. Among these are haiko-gorinto gravestones that were built over a period of 200 years and were popular during the transitional period between the Medieval and Early Modern periods. These gravestones provide excellent source materials for tracing the process of the formation of communal graveyards. This paper focuses on the haiko-gorinto gravestones, firstly classifying them into three types and 18 different kinds. Then, on the basis of these classifications I discuss the phenomenon of the diversification in the form and types of gravestones by way of a comparison with the different boat-shaped and comb-shaped gravestones. Next, through an analysis of the size of the gravestones and the inscribed Buddhist names (posthumous Buddhist names) we learn that the differences in the shape (type) of gravestones demonstrate differences in social ranking, and that this phenomenon first occurred at the end of the 17th century when there was an increase in the number of gravestones erected. In other words, in the beginning when everyone was not able to erect a gravestone, the erection of a gravestone signified social ranking. However, as more and more gravestones were erected, people began to express their social ranking by erecting gravestones that were different from those of others. This phenomenon is seen in the graves of commoners, and shows in archeological terms the evolution of class differentiation that was occurring amongst commoners during this period. Further, the number of Buddhist names (people) inscribed on gravestones provides a useful clue as we learn that the more gravestones came to represent a number of people instead of an individual the more these haiko-gorinto gravestones began to disappear. Gravestones possess both a religious aspect and a functional aspect. While both are important, there are more contributing factors that affect the functional aspect, which helps trace the extinction of a particular form.