Temple Graveyards of the Early Modern Period Viewed from the Perspective of Grave Markers

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In the past, research on grave markers has entailed studies of aspects such as stone materials, dimensions, the number of posthumous Buddhist names and methods of inscription, with a focus on the changes that have occurred in grave markers. Today, however, there are increasing attempts in the area of regional history to understand the significance of grave markers and to reach a new understanding of grave markers in conjunction with hierarchies within rural settlements. This paper examines the formation of graveyards and forms of grave markers through a study of past records and a survey of every single grave marker in the graveyard attached to the Shinpo-ji temple in Ogami, Hiratsuka City, Kanagawa Prefecture.

An examination of past records shows that the addresses of the deceased are mainly in Ogami village where the temple is situated, also in the neighboring villages of Toda, Koinaba, Naganuma, Tamura, Tsukoku and Ochiai, but also in quite distant places such as Isehara, Atsugi, Sugikubo in Ebina City, Hongo in Ebina City, Miyayama in Samukawa Town, and in Edo GOFUNAL. The preponderance of local addresses suggests that Shinpo-ji temple functioned as a key temple for the surrounding villages. A comparison made between the contents of past records and a survey of all the grave markers in the temple’s precincts has revealed the following. 1) Despite transcripts in past records, there are many deceased buried in the graveyard that do not have grave markers; and 2) Compared to the number of grave markers erected carrying Buddhist names that are found in the middle ranks of the whole spectrum of believers, there is a marked drop in the ratio of names used for believers from the lower ranks and also from the upper ranks. When interpreting these data by substituting the differences in rank represented by these Buddhist names with social classes, one may conclude that the Shinpo-ji temple graveyard functioned as a graveyard for a restricted group of middle class people. Past research into grave markers has explained regional differences without making much of a distinction between the grave markers found in communal graveyards, temple graveyards, and graveyards belonging to individual family units. However, judging from the sole example of Shinpoji-temple, we may conclude that whereas village communal graveyards are a strong reflection of the situation within an entire village, graveyards attached to temples are established in connection with neighboring villages while influenced by the geographical and social position and role of the temple in question. Future research into grave markers should interpret grave markers in the context of overall regional history while bearing these aspects in mind.