Ie and Graves in Early Modern Tohoku

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This paper is an attempt to explore the extent to which a study centered on archeological materials is able to close in on studies of Early Modern ie (households) that have been undertaken to date using the method of examining folk customs, from the example of the Omuro Suzuki household, a wealthy farming family belonging to the Date domain of the Sendai fief (present-day Maesawa-cho, Iwate Prefecture.

My investigation centered on a survey of the grave markers at the Omuro Suzuki family’s graveyard, a study the Records of the Omuro Suzuki Family in the possession of the Suzuki family, and materials related to the funeral system.

This investigation revealed that changes in the number of grave markers erected in the Omuro Suzuki family graveyard occurred around the 19th century and peaked in the second quarter of the 19th century. As for changes in their form, in the second half of the 18th century Type C (processed natural stone) was replaced by Type B (unprocessed natural stone), followed by a change to Type C-D (top part is semi-cylindrical).

An analysis of both grave markers and family records showed that after the Tenmei era (1781-89) the grave markers of the dead who were not recorded in the records of the Omuro Suzuki family, the head family, were erected in the Suzuki family graveyard, and that conversely, there were many family members who despite being recorded in the records before the Tenmei era did not have grave markers. In other words, after the Tenmei era the erection of Omuro Suzuki family grave markers was extended to include others besides the close relatives of the head of the Suzuki family.

With respect to number of grave markers that were erected, the rise and fall in their number are affected by a wide range of changes such as the occurrence of natural disasters and must be understood in the context of the huge changes that were taking place as the Early Modern period gave way to the Modern period. As for the style of the grave markers and the changes over time in the stratum of people for whom they were erected, from the history of the Suzuki family and the findings of two excavation surveys of the remains of the Omuro Suzuki family’s former residence it is clear that these concord with changes that were occurring to the ie system.

Consequently, we need not limit studies to the evaluation the grave markers themselves, as
they can be described as a vital first step for understanding trends in the Ie system and in local communities, made possible through materials that contain data that have been deciphered from grave markers.