Followers and Former Bakufu Vassals Following the Death of Ohara Yugaku

HIGUCHI Takehiko

After he had traveled around Japan, Ohara Yugaku settled in Nagabe village, Katori-gun in Shimousa Province (present-day Hikata-machi, Chiba Prefecture), where he sought to rebuild rural villages devastated during the Tempo period (1830–1844). Yugaku aimed to do this through an industrial union organization that would establish arable land, improve agricultural techniques, systemize agricultural work and facilitate the group purchase of consumer goods. He advocated an abstemious lifestyle in which individuals subjugated self-interest and worked hard, which constituted practical ethics that combined ethics and economy. Many peasants became followers and embraced his teachings. Yugaku’s philosophy was called “Seirigaku,” or “Seigaku,” and these teachings which spread far beyond the confines of the village eventually aroused the suspicions of the Bakufu, culminating in Yugaku taking his own life in 1858.

Yugaku’s Seirigaku was carried on by a second and third generation of leaders both before and after the Meiji Restoration. The followers, the majority of whom were Shimo-Usa peasants, were joined by Bakufu vassals from Edo and former Bakufu vassals from Tokyo and Shizuoka. Although the impetus for this may be ascribed to the existence of the Takamatsu family, which revered Yugaku as a benefactor and did not stint in providing assistance even at the time of the crackdown by the Bakufu, the Takamatsu family distanced themselves from Seirigaku following Yugaku’s death. In contrast, Seirigaku began to be accepted among other Bakufu vassals. Seirigaku spread particularly rapidly among former male and female vassals living in Tokyo for about a decade starting around 1877. Their way of living eschewed civilized society, in that they did not cut off their topknots, did not eat meat and did not ride in horse-drawn carts or on the railway. They formed a type of unusual colony that was isolated from the world around them.

This group of Seirigaku followers living in the Meiji period, made up from former vassals who adopted an anti-civilization and anti-Western stance, also included those who had studied and taught at the Yokohama Language School, Numazu Military Academy and Shizuoka School, which were leading institutions of Western learning during the Meiji Restoration at the end of the Edo period. This raises the question of whether their conversion from Western learning to Seirigaku can be attributed to something that occurred during their past experiences. By introducing the materials left behind by Ito Haya, one of these figures, this paper traces the ideological odyssey of these former vassals in the Meiji period.