Changes in the Epitaphs of Edo

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Epitaphs in 17th century Edo were mostly limited to named bone urns used in urn cemeteries, but by the early 18th century at the latest, epitaphs accompanying burial tombs had become the mainstream. This change corresponds to a period of transition in burial customs in Edo from the late 17th century to the early 18th century. The transition in epitaphs also reflects a change in religious and ideological influences from Buddhism to Confucianism.

The epitaphs of the graves of shoguns may go back at least to the 4th Tokugawa shogun, Ietsuna, who died in 1680. The epitaphs of shoguns, their wives and some sons have been excavated in shogun graveyards, and basically take the form of inscriptions carved on the stone lids of the chambers. It is thought that shogun epitaphs became formalized from the early to mid-18th century. Among feudal lords, epitaphs first appeared in the mid-18th century in the graveyard of the Nagaoka Domain Makino clan, and other examples too date from the early 18th century. As with shogun graves, the epitaphs on the stone chamber lids changed in style in the late 18th century, becoming longer and thinner, with more detailed epitaphs increasing in number from the start of the 19th century.

The epitaphs of Confucian scholars such as the Hayashi clan are frequently detailed, with many taking the form of an epitaph stone lying under the stone lid. The shape, style and content of epitaphs in the Hayashi clan graveyard became formalized in the late 18th century, and appear to change from the start of the 19th century. The oldest epitaphs in the Hayashi clan graveyard is that of the third generation Hoko (Nobuhatsu) who died in 1732, but it is thought that epitaphs of Confucian scholars go back even earlier in time.

The epitaphs of the graves of retainers of shoguns and feudal lords increase in number from the late 18th century and early 19th century, and this is thought to signify increasing popularity of epitaphs among those of lower rank or class. The simple epitaphs that display only name and date of death on the graves of retainers of shoguns and feudal lords and such like were probably regarded as reflecting the personality of the individual buried. This spread of epitaphs in Edo is thought to have been fueled by a growing sense of individuality. However this sense of individuality as reflected in grave epitaphs appears to have been shared only by warrior, scholar and certain other classes.

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