Daimyo Funeral Customs and Society in Early Modern Japan
IWABUCHI Reiji

Research on the funerals of daimyos (feudal lords) has traditionally focused on archaeological investigations of gravestones and burial sites, or on investigation of historical records for information regarding bans on making music, and other aspects of enforced mourning. However, the death of a ruler in pre-modern society could result in a political succession crisis. The funeral of a ruler and succession by a new ruler were thus often events conducted in public with much pomp and circumstance so as to maintain and bolster the existing political order.

Assuming the role of family head in Edo period samurai households did not require public events to legitimize succession in the eyes of the people, since it was the local ruler who approved the successor as the head of the household concerned. Family heads were in fact usually required to transfer authority while they were still alive and able to do so, and as such the dead family head would have already retired from active life and relinquished his authority. However, when a feudal lord died while still in power, even if the Bakufu government had been notified of the lord's chosen heir, mourning requirements forbade immediate transfer of power him. As a result, such households were generally leaderless for a certain period, normally at least about 50 days.

In this paper, I look at the funeral rites of the daimyo of the Tottori domain, focusing in particular on the function of the funeral held during hiatuses in leadership. I also endeavour to provide a more general view of domain and Edo funerals, since the system whereby daimyo were required to spend alternate years residing in Edo and their domain effectively split their families and retainers between Edo and their fiefdoms, and Edo was also a focal point of relationships between daimyo themselves, and between daimyo and the Bakufu government at both political and blood tie levels.

My research revealed that daimyo funerals fulfilled the political and societal function of unifying the consciousness not only of retainers but of everyone living in the domain by bringing them together to participate in the event, and that daimyo funerals held in Edo were also important from the viewpoint of attendance by family and relatives, socializing between samurai families, and succession issues between the Bakufu government and daimyo. Particularly, when a daimyo died while in power, the funeral was the first event to be organized by the new head of the household during the hiatus in leadership, and thus effectively served also as a succession rite.

Keywords: daimyo house, funeral, Edo family temple, succession rite, daimyo society