Preservation of Traditional Open-air Cremation Practices and Spread of Modern Crematories: Co-existence of Two Different Practices

KAWASHIMA Reika

During the rapid economic growth period (1955–1973), an increasing number of public crematoriums were built around Japan, which caused a significant change in funeral customs, including a shift from inhumation to cremation at public crematoriums. Meanwhile, some communities preserved traditional cremation practices dating back to before the spread of public cremation. While new public cremation services used crematories, the traditional cremation took place in the open air. With a focus on the open-air cremation, this paper examines communities that traditionally cremated the dead and communities that shifted from inhumation to cremation to analyze the actual practice of cremation, the spread of crematoriums, the reactions of communities to it, and the replacement of cremation service providers. The traditional open-air cremation is categorized into two types: (i) burning in straw fire and (ii) burning in wood fire. The former cremation was common across the country, seen not only in cremation-dominated areas but also in communities cremating the deceased only on special occasions such as epidemics of infectious diseases. The traditional open-air cremation used to burn bodies in a pit or an enclosed area, but it was gradually replaced by public or privately-run facilities with crematories, especially in urban areas, as the Cremation Guidelines in 1875 and the Public Notice on Cemetery and Burial Regulations in 1884 imposed requirements to equip crematoriums with chimneys and surrounding walls. Meanwhile, communities that had traditionally practiced cremation renovated their cremation facilities in the rapid economic growth period. Some repaired traditional open-air cremation facilities with bricks or concrete blocks, and some replaced them with modern crematories. While the former communities maintained traditional practices, the latter communities, mainly in urban areas, shifted from the open-air burning in wood or straw fire to the modern practice of using a wood-fueled crematory. With the spread of public crematoriums in the rapid economic growth period, a growing number of communities adopted modern cremation in a heavy oil- or gas-fueled crematory. The analysis of these shifts in cremation practices indicates that between the two possible purposes of cremation, (i) quick burning of bodies and (ii) collection of ashes after cremation, the former seems to be principal, and the latter was not necessarily important.

Key words: Open-air cremation, crematory, public crematorium, privately-run crematorium, burning in straw fire