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Bosogaku: Praying for Prosperity in Modern Japan

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Abstract

After the Meiji Restoration, some new religious movements related to graves have been launched frequently in Japan. As one example of it, this paper focuses on “Bosogaku.” It is so-called “grave chiromony”, which instructs the “right” style and shape of the grave for making descendants good luck. Drawing from archival and hearing research, this presentation examines for what kind of background Bosogaku was born and spread.

Since the early modern times in Japan, there has been the folk belief that people can gain merits by holding a service for Muen-haka (graves of someone with no relatives to mourn their death) as good deeds; particularly in Kansai Region. Yet, at the time of earlier period of Showa era in Japan, rapid industrialization and urbanization had been causing social unrest, and then most people came to believe that if they built their graves in conformity with the right model, their family would surely prosper. Interestingly, in Tokyo, Bosogaku transformed to the lighter form than before, and unfolded by the publication of books and magazines, the holding of the lecture for customers, and the cooperation with stone dealers. It is possible to say that Bosogaku was attributed to the factors characterizing modern Japan.

Introduction

In simple terms, Bosogaku 墓相学 is a religious study on how to build a grave. In this short essay, I would like to provide a basic explanation of the phenomenon of Japanese Bosogaku. Recently, the younger Japanese generation have little notion about Bosogaku, not to mention foreigners who have apparently never heard of the word. This rather peculiar study of grave building originated during the Showa era. I have been researching the topic by carefully studying Bosogaku's history from the perspective of the sociology of religion. In this paper I would like to offer answers to two questions, namely, "what is Bosogaku?" and "why did Japanese need Bosogaku?" As per my understanding, Bosogaku was connected to not only superstition and fortune-telling but also was considered an element of praying for prosperity.

1. What is Bosogaku?

Bosogaku is a religious study about the way of building graves. It can be written in Kanji (characters) as 墓 (Bo) 相 (So) 学 (Gaku), which mean "grave," "phase," and "knowledge." Regarding the kanji, Boso means shape, style, color, and the location of graves. Bosogaku explains that Boso might very well influence a grave owner's family fortune. Big or small, new or old, broken or well-kept, such features of the grave could determine a family's fortune. Meanwhile, the "collect" grave, Kissobaka 吉相墓, was thought to bring good fortune to a family. Those who study Bosogaku recognize that it is based on statistics, history, and archeology.

According to English dictionaries, Bosogaku is the "physiognomy of a grave." The term physiognomy, in this case, refers to a kind of divination lore similar to distinguishing facial features to ascertain whether luck can be expected, or reading a line on a palm that answers a question, such as whether a person will have a long or short life. Bosogaku is similar in that it represents this kind of reading but to that of graves. In Japan, when houses or graves are constructed, people are concerned about their locations or in this case a "phase". Because Japanese culture was influenced by Chinese, so Bosogaku was partially influenced by Chinese geomancy (feng shui 風水) for such readings, but was developed very uniquely in Showa Era Japan.

In Bosogaku, if people do not follow its rules then various misfortunes may befall them. They might either fall sick or, even worse, lose their lives. There are many books which describe the connection between the shape and location of a grave and a family's misfortune. According to one of the Bosogaku books, "if the grave is filled with water, it may cause an eye disease; a black grave may cause cancer; a grave located at too high an altitude may ruin a family's foundation," and so on. Another book mentions that "the graves must have a three-tiered platform. If you build a four-tiered grave, your husband will surely become unfaithful." Bosogaku have many prohibitions regarding the construction of graves. Unfortunately, I cannot introduce all rules because there are far too many details.

Regardless, the doctrine of Bosogaku can be summarized as follows (some rules can be different depending on Bosoka but the general outline remains mutual): "a grave is the root of 'ie'

家。” “Ie” is a family in the Japanese family system (ieseiido 家制度), which was established by the Meiji Government in 1898. Under the system, it is supposed that “ie” will last for generations. Within a family, inheritance is passed through the paternal line; and “Ie” members must hold memorial services at their ancestors’ graves correctly. Failure to do so may lead to misfortune and ruin “ie.” Such an idea brought outbreak of Bosogaku rules. Indeed, Bosogaku embodies a family’s fortune rather than personal fortune.

Bosogaku originated in 1929 and gained popularity in the 1930s. Despite receiving severe criticisms for being superstitious and fraudulent, Bosogaku reached the height of its popularity during the period of fast economic growth, the so-called “bubble economy” of the 1970s and 80s. Now this phenomenon is disappearing gradually; however, it still has some supporters.

Bosogaku is preached by Bosoka 墓相家, an expert in Bosogaku. Bosoka do not require either a certification or qualification. Their activities usually revolve around publishing books in order to become popular among the public and work with private clients. At the same time, they also work not only as preachers but also as gravestone dealers and they advise in the designing of gravestones for clients. It seems that Bosogaku has both the features of Client Cults and Audience Cults.

Fig.1 is a Bosogaku cemetery. Some of the influential Bosoka have established a new cemetery in collaboration with several gravestone dealers and temples. A religious Bosogaku organization called Tokufukai sells spaces in a graveyard as well as gravestones.



Fig. 1. A cemetery based on Bosogaku in Kyoto

2. People Who Needed Bosogaku

Why did Japanese people need Bosogaku? Someone may give simplistic explanations. For example, it is because the Japanese are superstitious. They like mysterious power, charms, and fortune-telling. They also feel that they are haunted by the fury of their ancestors’ victims. They tend to hastily connect their misfortune with a lack of memorial services for the souls of the departed. However, according to my research (reading literature on the subject and by interviewing a Bosoka’s son), these reasons are not complete enough, especially during the prewar period.

I would like to introduce the content of a book, authored by Kosho Imai 今井鴻象, who was one of the most popular Bosokas in the 1930s. In this book entitled “*Illustrated Guide to Building a Grave: Shinto and Buddhist styles* 神道佛式墓相図解 お墓の建て方”ⁱ, there was a question and

ⁱ Imai, Kosho 今井鴻象. 1937. *Shinto Busshiki Boso Zukai Ohaka no Tatekata* 神道佛式墓相図解 お墓の建て方. Tokyo: Togakusha.

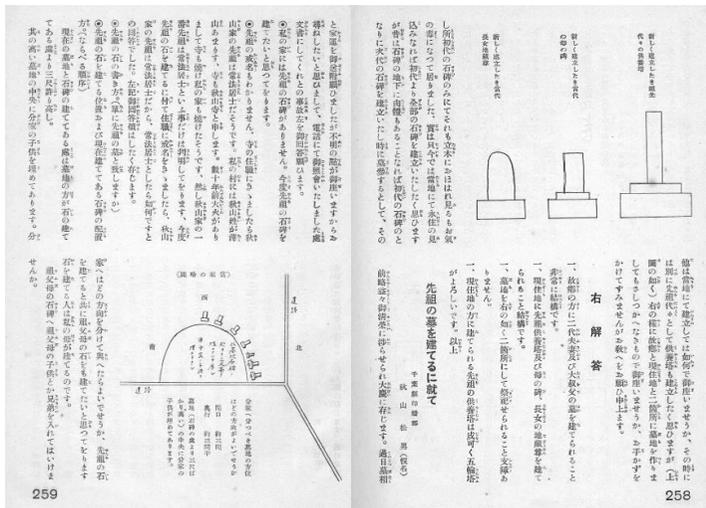


Fig.2. A Bosogaku book by Kosho Imai, 1937

answer column for readers. It contained 57 letters from readers who wrote of their troubles, worries, and concerns about their families. Readers sent long letters to the author Imai from all over Japan. This column can tell us what the readers of those days were worried about.

As an example, I would like to analyze a letter from a man who lived in Tokyo. According to his letter, his ancestor was a samurai from the Saga prefecture, also the location of his ancestors' graves. He decided to restore the graves of his ancestors. Looking for information about how to rebuild them, he bought Imai's book. Reading it, he came to understand that his ie's graves were actually the reason for his misfortune. Until the Taisho period of the 1930s his "ie" had been successful, but after this period and during the Showa period, his father lost his business. In an attempt to reverse his fortune, he ask for Imai regarding the ways to build a perfect grave. Fig.2 is the man's illustration of his ie's grave. Imai answered the man's query by explaining, "This grave is bad, and this may cause bad fortune to your family. You have to move the graves from Saga to Tokyo and build a new grave as per the Bosogaku in a new park cemetery in Tokyo!"

The others with questions in the book also had a variety of reasons for writing. Some were settlers in Hokkaido, Taiwan, and Manshu. Others were employees who were being transferred but worried about what they should do with their family's grave plot in their hometown. Some wanted to know how to build a grave in a new park cemetery in Tokyo. Some changed their faith to new religion or Shintoism and wanted to rebuild their graves in accordance with the rules of their new religion. And there were some who succeeded in business and therefore wanted to build large graves. They all asked for advice about grave construction.

3. Why Did Bosogaku Gain Popularity?

Why did the clients need Bosogaku? To answer this question, we should also consider the social conditions of the time. In the period after WWI, which saw the rapid growth of the Japanese

economy, industrialization and especially the “heavy and chemical industries” caused people to move to urban areas, which also increased in productivity and the Westernization of culture. Because of such social and economic structural changes, the gap between rich and poor continued to increase. In fact, it unexpectedly ruined many “ie”. The prospects of their “ie” were uncertain so family members worried about their luck. At the same time, while I have to omit specific details in this essay, I would also like to mention an important factor; new forms of cemeteries were constantly appearing in urban areas. These new park cemeteries gained popularity in urban areas by the end of Taisho Period of the 1930s. For people who decided to move to cities, they were faced with a difficult question as to whether they should build a new grave in the city, especially because they could not keep the old graves in their hometowns. To learn how to do this in the “right” way of praying for prosperity under such social situation, they bought books about Bosogaku, and were visiting Bosoka.

With a change in the social structure and traditions, people still wanted to have “knowledge” about how to protect themselves from bad luck and what could bring about the general well-being to their “ie” and family members. Methods of doing so were wide spread in the mass media. I think that Bosogaku mark one of the case of a religious belief made in the modernizing age.