

The Spiritual Life of Regional Peasants in the Late Tokugawa Age

—Specially Centering on the Religious Life—

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Studies on the lives of common people under the feudal society of the Tokugawa age, particularly those on the life of peasants, have generally focused on their economic or social lives. However, there is also a need to study their religious lives and annual agriculture-related ceremonies as well as Buddhist lecture-meetings (講), life-cycle rituals, folklore, etc. The purpose of this paper is to discuss one aspect of the spiritual life of regional peasants of the late Tokugawa period by dividing the religious life-styles of peasants into (1) Buddhist services, (2) Shintō services, (3) other folk rituals.

This paper argues that the agricultural production and rural life of peasants in that period were supported by the religious practice based upon ancestor worship. Buddhist ceremonies, such as funeral services, ceremonies commemorating death anniversaries and rituals to remove curses of the dead, were all ceremonies to propitiate the souls of the dead. Furthermore, Shintō rituals such as agricultural rites, prayer and gratitude cannot be understood apart from the notions of ancestors' souls and tutelary dieties (氏神). Moreover, the Kōshin cult (庚申講) is closely related to ancestor worship.

Although the peasants' religious life is strongly oriented towards

seeking a good life in the after world, their religious impulses are most powerful when faced with illness and agricultural production. They are manifestations of earnest desires brought on by actual life crises. This can also be said of annual festivals related to agriculture.

It can be said that the peasants' concern with ancestor worship is reflection of their spiritual lives based on their notions of soul and death.