

ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY JAPAN

Robert J. SMITH

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

It has been exactly twenty years since I undertook my study of ancestor worship that led to the publication of a book entitled *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan*. When I first told my Japanese colleagues about my intention to do the research, they urged me to give up the idea and devote my time and energies to some more profitable task. Their reasoning was that everyone knows what I wanted to find out—namely, who are the individuals whose memorial tablets are kept in the 仏壇 *butsudan*.

As the results of the study showed, they were only partly right and it is worth recounting how the research was conducted in order to make clear precisely where they were wrong. Using a variety of introductions, my wife and I undertook to interview 600 households. Perhaps it is the kind of study that only a foreigner can do, for it involved asking very direct questions about matters not usually discussed with outsiders.

The question was, as I have said, "Who are the individuals represented by the memorial tablets kept in your family's *butsudan*?" Since no one had ever asked the question before, people were not prepared to refuse, and I can report that every household welcomed us in and replied to our questions courteously. The second question was, "Why do you have this particular tablet?"

Let me give examples of the two kinds of replies that we obtained. By far the most usual case was the kind that my colleagues had been thinking of when they said that everyone knows which tablets are in the altar. When we came to a tablet and I asked who it represented, for example, the reply would be, "It is my father." Holding fast to my research plan, I would then ask, "Why do you have this tablet in your *butsudan*?" The answer was perfectly obvious—because it is my father and I am head of this house. In short, these were the tablets of the 直系 *chokkei*, the ascending generations of the patriline.

The second case involved kinds of tablets that were quite different in character. "Whose tablet is this?" I would ask. "It is the tablet of my wife's mother," or "It is my elder brother's tablet." Again, I would ask, "Why do you have this particular tablet in your *butsudan*?" And it is here that the major difference between the two kinds of tablets becomes clear, for these *had to be explained*. That is, in terms of the normal expectations of most people, they were the tablets of persons who ought to be worshipped in some other house and kept in some other *butsudan*.

The character of the explanations given is of interest. Ordinarily, the person

being interviewed would offer an account of the circumstances that had led to the tablet being in this *butsudan*. Often the expression used of the deceased was that he or she had no other place to go and so the tablet was put here, "*kawaisō da kara*." In short, the altars contained the predictable tablets for the ancestors of the house (strictly defined as the ascending generations of the househead and his wife). But they also contained tablets for those family members in the ascending generations who had died as regular residents of the house, as well as the children of each househead who had died before marrying out. And they contained tablets for many people who were in no way ancestors of the present members of the household.

It was the unpredictable tablets that interested me, particularly with respect to the reasons given for having them. For the most part, they had been placed in the altar not out of a sense of duty nor simply because they were residents of the house, but for reasons of sentiment. The principle seemed to be that every deceased person should be cared for by someone. Thus, as I have said, a common explanation was that the person in question "had no other place to go." This sentiment has another face as well, of course, for the Japanese have long been concerned about the danger posed by the unsettled spirits of the dead—the 無縁仏 *muenbotoke*. It is important to place—to settle, to locate—the spirit somewhere, for the wandering spirits of the dead pose a threat to the living if they are left untended and uncared for.

It is furthermore obvious that a very large proportion of the tablets in the *butsudan* are not the tablets of ancestors at all in the simple sense that they are the tablets of the children, the descendants, of the living. It is for that reason that I have called them memorial tablets rather than ancestral.

There is yet another type of tablet—the ones that are copies of the originals. Here again, sentiment is far more important than structure in determining whether a person will have such a copy made. Let me give you some examples. The most common, perhaps, is the duplicate tablet found in the altar of a household headed by a second or third son—usually the tablet of his parent. In response to my questions as to why the tablet is here, the answer usually was, "I always felt very close to my mother, and when she died, I asked my brother—the successor—if I could have a copy made for this altar." Or, "It is the tablet of my elder sister. The original is in my parents' house, for she was divorced and returned to that house and died there without remarrying. When I was a child, she took care of me because my mother was so busy with the shop. When she died, I asked if I could have a copy made, for I wanted to take care of her spirit, too." And, perhaps the most extreme case, there are skeletons in the family altar. After he had identified a particular tablet as that of his elder sister, the date of death written on it suggested that the identification was incorrect, and the head of the house said, "Well, actually it is not my elder sister at all. It is a copy of the tablet of my father's mistress. She died of tuberculosis when she was quite young, and my father felt such an attachment to her that he asked a friend to visit her house and make a note of the posthumous name on her tablet. He brought it and my father had this one made by the priest. He said that he felt he owed it to her to take care of her spirit, for he had made her life very difficult."

To summarize, the vast majority of the tablets in the altar of a house are for those persons who lived and died there. They include children, unmarried adults, and the

ancestral line proper, usually defined as a patriline—that is, the kin of the male heads of the house in all generations. A minority of the tablets, however, are for a highly varied group of people who simply do not fit into the regular pattern—some of them are neither the consanguineal nor the affinal kin of the househeads.

It was in one household of the 600, however, that I encountered what seemed to me a revolutionary conception of the ancestors. The couple were in their thirties, and they had no *butsudan* at all. They did, however, have three photographs, a candle, and an incense burner on a small shelf. When I asked who the three photographs represented, they said that they were the husband's father and mother, and the wife's mother. When I asked why they had the photographs of those three individuals, the answer was, "Because they are our ancestors."

Why is this a revolutionary conception? For the simple reason that in terms of the classic Japanese notion of descent-reckoning, the answer is wrong. The husband's parents are the ancestors of the house; the wife's parent cannot be so designated. But in a new sense, of course, the answer makes perfectly good sense. These three people are the ancestors of the husband and wife—the photographs represent a bilateral definition of kinship and descent.

There could be no clearer example of one of the major ways in which the family in postwar Japan has begun to change. The older notion of the house, 家 *ie*, embodied in the Meiji Civil Code, lost virtually all its legal support with the adoption of the new Civil Code immediately following the end of the Pacific War. That alone would have been enough, perhaps, to guarantee weakening of the ideology of the *ie*, but other pressures have been building as well. In recent years, one of the notable demographic developments in Japan has been the constant increase in the number of simple conjugal families as a proportion of all families. The relative isolation of the married couple and their children has had profound effects of many kinds, only one of which has affected the position of the ancestors in the family.

One may contrast the prewar and the postwar family in structural and ideological terms rather easily. Structurally they are not too different, clearly, but ideologically they represent two different worlds. In the prewar period, the conjugal family was conceived to be a potential stem family. That is, while at any given moment in its history the actual residential unit might seem to be a simple conjugal one, the notion was that with the succession of the next head and the co-residence of senior and junior generations, it would become a stem family once more.

Today, although the change is by no means complete, the conjugal family is becoming increasingly like that of the West. To be sure, the vast majority of older Japanese still live with one or another of their married children, but the words I have used are significant—the senior generation lives with the junior generation. It is not the other way around, as it was in the past.

Recognizing this change, I think, many of the New Religions (most of which place very strong emphasis on ancestor veneration) have opted for bilateralization. The Risshōkōseikai and Reiyūkai, for example, urge the faithful to collect as many tablets of kin as possible—whether they are of the husband or wife—and venerate them in the domestic altar. The one exception that I have encountered is Benten-shū, where the emphasis is on the strict patriline. Indeed, in this sect, the family is urged to send

to the main temple a list of the tablets in its altar. The list is cleansed (the word used is *kiyomeru*) of all tablets not in the direct descent line and installed in the altar of the main temple for permanent veneration.

But Benten-shū is an exception. On every hand there is evidence that while the tablets of the patriline are still important, tablets of affines are today included as well. As one young woman put it to me a few years ago, "Of course, we have tablets made for our parents. After all, they took care of us until we grew up and we want to repay them for all they did. But it has nothing to do with the *ie* and old-fashioned notions like *chokkei*."

How shall we explain the apparent ease with which contemporary Japanese are making this shift? Like any explanation of a complex phenomena, this one, too, is complex. First of all, the essentially Confucian basis of classical Japanese ancestor worship must not be overlooked. To be sure, its idiom is Buddhist, but as in China and Korea, the veneration of the ancestral spirits has its rationale in Confucianism. But unlike China and Korea, the Japanese kinship terminology is a bilateral one—that is, no distinction is made terminologically between kin on the male side and those on the female side. Furthermore, the Japanese have traditionally resorted to adoption of heirs to a much greater extent than is true of the other two societies. And of great importance is the practice of adoptive husbands, one in which the appearance of a patriline is maintained even though the genealogical link with the ancestors is a daughter and not a son.

All of these considerations point to the existence in Japan of something very different from a unilineal descent system. Indeed, some have argued that the Japanese household does not represent a descent group at all, but rather a corporate one in which consanguineous genealogical links may be preferred but where other kinds of links may be employed freely. It seems an easy transition to veneration of both patrilineal and matrilineal ancestors, once the powerful effect of the Meiji Civil Code was removed. It was, after all, in force for less than fifty years of this society's long history.

Now let us consider the ways in which the memorial tablets are treated by living members of the family. I shall focus on two occasions particularly, for they afford excellent illustrations of the sentiments that seem to me to characterize the Japanese conception of the relationship between the living and the spirits of the dead.

The first occasion is the sharing of gifts of food with the ancestors. Remember that it is the custom to offer ordinary food to them in any event—either the morning meal's rice and tea or that of the evening meal. When a guest brings a special gift of food, it is my experience that a portion of it will be placed on the altar. Why? It is so that the spirits of the dead can share in the pleasure of the gift, obviously. Do those who make such offerings believe that the ancestors actually in some sense consume the food offerings? This is a hard question to answer, for in my interviews I found that people are of many opinions. Whether they believe so or not, they nonetheless place the food in the altar, and the implication is to me very clear. The spirits of the dead are being treated as if they were still residents of the house.

This observation brings me to the second occasion that I want to consider. On the death-day of the individual, it is the custom to include in the offerings at the altar

the person's favorite food. It contrasts sharply with the ritual offerings, for it is usually a very ordinary dish indeed. *Samma*, *soba*, *udon*, candy, alcoholic beverages—all may be placed at the altar. Note that these are not necessarily part of the family's meal of that day; they are prepared or purchased especially for the purpose of including them with the offerings. Why? Again, I think, the reason is clear. It is felt that the spirit of the dead will take pleasure in the offering; what pleased him or her in life will do so in death as well. Like the first example, this one too points to an inescapable implication—the spirits of the dead participate in the life of the house and they are being treated quite as if they were present at the service.

I have encountered innumerable touching instances of this practice. They include the occasion on which a widow had made for her deceased husband's death day a western-style cake, on which, in English, was the inscription, "Happy Anniversary, Mr. X." She explained that he had been extremely fond of cake; it was the most natural offering in the world. A related practice should be mentioned here. I know a man whose son died at the age of 13. On what would have been the boy's 20th birthday, the father included in the offerings a package of cigarettes, explaining that now the young man would have reached the legal age for the purchase of tobacco and probably would have started to smoke, even though his father disapproved of the practice.

In short, beyond any considerations of a structural or ideological kind, there are in Japanese ancestor worship very powerful forces of sentiment, affection, and concern for the spirits of the dead. Propriety, so major an issue in the minds of the Confucianists of China and Korea, seems in the Japanese case to be a concern, but perhaps not the major one. It is the wish and duty of the living to continue to care for the members of their household for as long as they are remembered. Once they fade in memory, they join the ranks of the remote dead, the spirits that protect the house, the community, and the land. Until that time, they remain identifiable people to those who survive them. It is, then, not remarkable that a young couple should conclude that the parents of both of them are the ancestors. And that, I believe, is the shape that ancestor worship in Japan will take in the future.

Discussion

What prompted you to study ancestor worship in Japan?

In the summer of 1962 I was at the University of California in Berkeley. At the time a group of three other anthropologists on campus and I conducted a small seminar. On one occasion, when the discussion was centered on the Japanese notion of *ie*, I remember remarking, "I wonder who the ancestors are." That was what first started me on my study. As to why I continued studying the subject, the answer may surprise you. It is commonly said that religion is not important in Japan. One reads all the time: Japan is a highly secular society, a society where Buddhism died in the Muromachi

Period, Christianity had little success, and the people are tolerant of religion because they are not interested in religion. But that seems to me too narrow a description. My conclusion is that if one is seeking the most common religious experience and the most common religious practice of the Japanese, it is 祖先崇拜 *sosensūhai*, ancestor worship. The shrines and temples are important, but this seemed to me the one experience of a religious character that all Japanese share. That is why I continued my study.

In speaking of the bilateralization of ancestor worship, if my impression is correct, you suggested that the influence wrought by the Meiji Civil Code is being reversed in modern times, bringing about a return to the older form. Is that so?

When I did the enumeration of the tablets, I was interested in the fact that in the Kansai area (I did not do any work in Kyūshū) the setting up of what one might in a restricted sense call "bilateral altars" was the result of a decision that had been taken quite a long time ago. That is, there were many old tablets of affines. The Meiji Civil Code, as you know, does not specify who may be venerated in the altar, yet the whole framework is so clearly "patrilineal" (which we need to discuss further), that I would prefer a formulation somewhat different from yours. Consider this: 1945 to 1982 is the first time in more than 300 years that the central government has not had a direct involvement in the development and creation of religious observances. Beginning with the 宗門改め帳 *Shūmon Aratamechō* in the middle of the seventeenth century through 国家神道 *kokkashintō* and 修身 *shūshin* textbooks and the Meiji Civil Code, the government has tried to play a major role. Now, it seems, to me the situation is free—at least in the sense that there is no clear orthodoxy. I think the situation was more free in the Edo Period than it was in the period between the Meiji Restoration and the end of the war. Whether it was bilateral then and is again bilateral I do not have enough evidence to decide. But it does seem that the constraints affecting normal people now are far fewer than at any time in the last 150 years or so. Now that means, of course, that what the Meiji Civil Code established has become Japanese tradition. Older people may say, "Alas, the young do not do things right any more, they don't understand, they don't believe any more, etc. etc." But the Meiji Civil Code represents a tradition deliberately designed to suppress whatever bilateral tendencies there were in Japanese kinship reckoning. And there, what is appearing now may indeed be examples of people acting on principles that have been suppressed. I think I would argue that—and get into a lot of trouble.

It struck me as only natural that in speaking of ancestor worship in Japan, at least contemporary Japan, you stressed the role of affection and sentiment. But Japan is very wide and admits of many variations according to social status. That includes, of course, ancestor worship in the classical form that we find for instance in the Edo Period in the merchant and ruling classes. Of late I have been studying Inazawa and there I find that the system is a patrilinear one, not one defined by affections.

That is a very good point. I should have offered a disclaimer at the beginning. When I was writing the book on ancestor worship, I tried to discuss variation, partly for the

benefit of my American colleagues who read books about China and Korea where there is no variation ever presented at all. The first comment I got from a Japanese colleague was, "Thank you for your interesting book on ancestor worship. It is unfortunate that you paid so little attention to variation." I was crushed. Variation is, of course, critical. For example, the whole relation of ancestor veneration to Jōdoshū is crucial indeed. Or again, I am informed that in many parts of Tōhoku women are in fact not permitted to offer *anything* at the *butsudan*; even daily food is always offered by the man, preferably by the head of the house, which is quite remarkable in the light of Kansai practices. There my impression is that for the most part it is the women who offer the food because it is the women who are feeding all the members of the family, including the ancestors. That is perfectly reasonable.

Now suppose one take a couple in their thirties who are not, let us say, successors and are not residing in the 本家 *honke* but in a small apartment as a conjugal family, whose child has died. The results of my interviews, by and large, show that they would purchase a small *butsudan*, have a small 位牌 *ihaimade* and perhaps even call a priest. When their parents die, such a household in traditional terms need do nothing. But again, my interviews suggest that there is a slightly increasing tendency for such people—and I think primarily on the basis of sentiment—to undertake some act that bears some resemblance to ancestor worship or veneration as they formerly existed. On the other hand, if one does one's interviews instead with the heads of *honke*, then I think one would get a very different picture up and down the country. In the research of Keith Brown in Iwate Prefecture, it was pure, absolutely unmixed *chokkei*. And I am sure that is the case still in that community. But I would like to know what their children who moved to Tokyo are doing. There's the crux.

Before asking my question, I'd like to share an experience from yesterday. I was teaching an English Bible class to high school students. A young man who had not been there for about six months appeared and wanted to talk a bit afterwards. He had only come to the Bible class over a period of about three months without ever attending the Church services, and was now in the process of studying for university entrance examinations. He said that now he was praying to God and to his ancestors, and wondered if it was wrong to include the ancestors. I asked him if he thought it was helpful to pray to the ancestors, and in the course of the conversation asked if he had particular ancestors in mind. Interestingly, the only one he mentioned was a younger brother who had died at birth, which again raises the question of what we mean by ancestors...

...and what we mean by worship.

But I am interested in asking what would be your idea of ancestor worship before so-called Chinese influence.

I really ought to defer to others present for that one. It does seem to me, however, that although there are many possible answers to your question, all are based on such limited information as to what the situation was before Chinese influence that it is

difficult for me to accept any one of them outright. For instance, it is said the Japanese were "animists" and that the spirits of the dead hovered about and could be called down by shamans and the like. There may be something to that. But it seems to me that the main evidence we have is the result of extrapolations in time from customs that are believed to be remnants of ancient custom, and that is a very dangerous tack to take. The tendency in the *kōkashintō* period was to say that ancestor worship had been a major focus of indigenous religion and that the allocation of ancestor worship to Buddhism was a major offense of the feudal period. I am sorry that I cannot offer you an answer that satisfies me.

I am interested in knowing how you would compare the feelings associated with what is called "ancestor worship" in Japan and the feelings of "living for the dead" in other countries with long traditions of showing respect for the dead in one form or another. Is there a qualitative difference? Are there similarities?

Yes, I think there are similarities, but—and I change my mind on this every few months—all in all it is my sense that the differences are greater than the similarities. Many years ago I was at a conference on ancestors (It was originally called "Ancestor Worship," but the argument was so heated about the use of the word "worship" that it was finally chopped off the title.) Among the participants were Takeda Chōshū from Dōshisha University and Myer Fortis, a contingent from Japan and another from Africa. At one point Myer Fortis said, "I do not understand. Why, after a hundred years of industrialization, have the Japanese continued to worship their ancestors in the way they do." Professor Takeda drew himself up and replied, "That is not an interesting question. The interesting question is why the people in the West do not!"

It seems to me, first of all, that one could reasonably expect that Buddhism, classically interpreted, would preclude the kind of ancestor veneration that the Japanese practice, instead of which it has incorporated it. We know that in the classic Mediterranean world ancestor worship of a very clear and direct kind was practiced, but that it was inimical to Christianity and that in the end—to put it too simply—Christianity won out with the result that ancestor rites were gradually wiped out. But this leaves the question, for example, "Does the way Americans treat the dead of their families reflect a different attitude?" I think that yes, it does. As to the problem of the word "worship," it seems to me that the Japanese do two things vis à vis the ancestors. One is to *care* for them; the other is to *petition* them for help, to an extent that does not occur among non-Japanese. Sometimes I think the Japanese pray for the ancestral dead and sometimes I think they pray to them, depending very much on the occasion, the intent, the nature of the petition, and so forth.

During a recent visit to Benten-shū, where 水子供養 *mizuko-kuyō* is a very big thing, I was struck by the offerings. There was a 供養塔 *kuyōtō* over 70 meters high and down below it were the *ihai*. The offerings were all food. Now in American cemeteries, in my experience, the graves of children frequently have various things on them, but they tend to be toys or Christmas trees, or childhood things. I have never seen food there. I asked the priest about why there were no toys and he looked quite surprised. "Do Americans leave toys for their *mizuko*?" "Well, I said, never mind

about the *mizuko*, by and large yes." "Oh," he said, "I think the people who come here would feel very strange not feeding them." At that level the differences, if not profound, are at least quite striking. Do I know Americans that talk to the dead at the cemetery? Lots of people carry on imaginary conversations with the deceased, but in my experience it never seems to have the profound quality of the petition of the sort that the Japanese address to their dead.

I am not sure of any of this, but it is my overall impression that the living and the dead form a highly interactive unit in Japan, much more so than is the case in the West. But perhaps others with a wider experience of Japan might have something to say.

Do you not think feeling is a method of inter-communication. It seems to me that it carries a special symbolic significance.

You are probably right, but what impresses me here is that, in contrast to the Chinese, the feelings are of such ordinary things...

...But an offering is not a feeling.

That is very interesting. How about domestic rites in China?

I have never seen China directly but the usual situation in Japan is somewhat different from the cases you mentioned in which only the men make the offerings. My everyday experience tells me that it is the wife who does it. The dead ancestors are treated like living members of the family. The sense of ie has certainly changed, but remains a group that preserves its identity as a community by sharing feelings and eating together. If the meaning of ie as a community should disappear, ancestor worship would also disappear. Until that happens, it would seem it will continue on.

I think the matter of the unit that eats together is exceedingly important, and therefore I see no reason why what I see as an emerging style of relationship between the conjugal family and the spirits of its deceased members should not continue forever. But let me try a less "imaginative" approach. How are the *muenbotoke* conceived? They are hungry, unfed. That is pure and simply Chinese. The implications seems to be that the food is offered so that the 餓鬼 *gaki* will not bother you.

My question is along somewhat different lines...

Good, I was beginning to get hungry.

I am somewhat hesitant about what you call the "revolution in ancestral worship." Personally, I reject everything connected with the ie and yet I think that connection with the dead is a transfer of the emphasis on immediate human relationships that exists in Japanese society and is important. Again, while I appreciate the feelings involved in honoring the dead, I would not call it "worship."

This brings us back to an earlier question: Am I suggesting that what is appearing now was true earlier, interrupted, and returning now? Your comment about the *ie* reaffirms what I am suggesting. That is, the *ie* that you have been rejecting is not entirely the product of the Meiji Civil Code, but certainly was strongly influenced by it. The ways in which the Japanese interact with the dead has nothing to do with the *ie* of post Meiji Japan. The orthodoxy of praxis of that short period, again, has no essential relationship, it seems to me, to its affective background. Therefore, it seems to me possible to reject the vocabulary of *ie* and *chokkei* and still remain in a totally different kind of relationship with the dead than is maintained by most Americans with their dead.

Now I have a question, about something that has been intriguing me. If you think of all the funerals you have attended recently or of all the pictures you have seen recently of funerals in the media coverage of funerals, what is the one, single, inevitable object present there? A photograph. Extraordinary! From one point of view, it seems reasonable enough, considering that the Japanese speak to the dead, call them by name, include their real name on the back of the *ihai*. But photographs are new, obviously not present among the ordinary people in the Meiji period. The practice must have begun sometime in the Taishō Period. What is the appeal of the photograph? What do they mean? I take a very straightforward approach to questions like this.

Back in 1975 I was in Japan and watching the high school baseball tournaments on television. I recall an interview with a young pitcher who had made an exceptional showing in which the reporter drew attention to something special about the team: the pitcher was wearing on a string about his neck a little bag containing a lock of his mother's hair. The reason was that his mother, who had supported him in his effort to become an outstanding pitcher, saving money from the food budget for his uniform, getting him a little extra protein, attending all the practice sessions, had died just before the tournament. What the young man said impressed me: since his mother had taken such an interest, he had "brought her" with him. Then the reporter went to the stands to two middle-aged women, one of whom was holding a photograph of the boy's mother, face-outwards, so that, I think I have to say it, she could "see the game." I can think of no other reason for that particular action. (By the way, they lost.)

Then I got to thinking. Somehow, maybe fifty to seventy years ago, it became quite common practice for the Japanese to place on the altar a photograph of the dead. People are also very concerned about names, and bring their problems to 姓名相談 *seimei sōdan* or 印鑑相談 *inkan sōdan*. The extent to which in this allegedly group-oriented society the emphasis on persons (as I mentioned in connection with food preferences) persists and in fact seems to me a rather major concern and intrigues me particularly in connection with the dead. As long as a person remains alive in the memory of someone living, they count for something. They are present or their presence can be invoked. I am sure I will puzzle all night about that young man praying to the spirit of his younger brother. It is not necessarily worship, and it does not even necessarily have anything to do with "the family" or any structural-institutional segment of society. I think the attachment of those practices to particular structures or institutions at different times in Japanese history is important to look at

because of the alterations that occur in the practices as a consequence. But I am still banking very heavily on the continuation in this society of the notion that there is an indistinct line between the living and the dead, as of humans and deities, as of animals and humans, and that as long as that persists, very little institutional support need be given to guarantee its continuity. As long as that notion is there, there is no need for any civil codes or religious sect telling them how to do it. It is something that the Japanese appear to find mutually comforting outside social organizational forms altogether.