

Changes in Japanese Urban Funeral Customs during the Twentieth Century

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Funeral customs in Japan have undergone various transformations during the twentieth century. This article looks at changes in urban funeral customs in Tokyo from the late nineteenth century to the present by examining specific funeral practices. It shows that there has been a trend toward private funerals and the development of new forms of funerary practices (such as the movement for advocating “natural funerals” [shizensō]). However, funerals still maintain their role as an event for building or creating societal relations.

Keywords: funeral customs — death — urbanization — cremation — funeral reform movement — funeral freedom

THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES on transformations of funerary customs in Tokyo since the Meiji era. Funerals were traditionally handled by neighborhood funeral cooperatives (*sōshiki-gumi* 葬式組) and had the characteristics of a village (local community) event. In contrast, most funerals today are viewed as private affairs for the bereaved family. Except for certain special duties, such as receiving the funeral guests, most of the actual work is done by funeral-industry employees hired by the family. The entrusting of large funerals to funeral-industry workers (*sōgi gyōsha* 葬儀業者) began in cities like Tokyo and has now spread nationwide in the wake of regional urbanization. This phenomenon, which I call the privatization of the funeral, is changing not only the way funerals are conducted but also the meaning of funerals.

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Early Meiji

Funeral companies (*sōgisha* 葬儀社) originated during the Meiji era as lenders of funeral accessories. In 1886, Tokyo Sōgisha (Tokyo Funeral Company) first introduced the word *sōgisha* to the public. In *Maru-maru Chinbun* 団々珍聞 we find the following report: “Recently some people have put together the Tokyo Funeral Company in Kanda, Kamakura-chō. They prepare accessories for Shinto and Buddhist services and arrange funerals at cheap prices, rectifying the terrible custom of exorbitant profits that *koshiya* have enjoyed until now” (MORI 1969). Undertakers in Tokyo during the Meiji era were called *koshiya* 興屋 or *kan’ya* 棺屋, literally “coffin maker,” but their services also included arranging for coolies to carry the palanquin. The *sōgisha* at this time not only provided the coffin, the altar, and the items used in the wake and the procession but also acted as a sort of employment agency that organized the workers needed for the cremation and the funeral. The work of pre-Meiji *sōgisha* was called *hayaokeya* 早桶屋 (fast coffin maker) or *hayamonoya* 早物屋 (fast itemer). The term *hayamono*, which was used to refer to funeral paraphernalia in general, suggests that the funeral items were not already prepared for rental but rather were made and sold quickly after someone died.

Edo-period funerals were often modest affairs. People without much social status avoided an afternoon procession and instead close family members silently transported the body at night. This was the case until about 1887, when afternoon processions began to spread among the common people (HIRAIDE 1902). As the funerals and processions became more resplendent, so too did the accessories. We can assume that one factor influencing this was the loosening of the status system (*mibunseido* 身分制度).

As funerals became more elaborate even among common people, items that had previously been used only once were now rented. Conversely, since materials could now be rented, elaborate funerals spread among commoners. In other words, these trends were mutually complementary. Furthermore, beautification of funeral decoration in the Meiji era was related to the display of public mourning as the funeral came to be seen as a social event.

Mid to Late Meiji

The following outline of late-Meiji funerals is based on interviews with Matsushita Katsutarō of Sugimoto Sōgisha in Hongō ward, Tokyo. My focus here is on the elements of the ritual process that involved the family and friends of the deceased.

LAST RITES (*MATSUGO* 末期) AND ENCOFFINING (*NÔKAN* 納棺)

Until the Taishō era it was customary in Tokyo for neighbors and relatives to gather together and choose someone to take charge of the funeral. There were always two people, called *hayatsukai*, who went directly to inform the neighbors of the funeral. The *sōgiya* prepared the cremation spot, the coffin, and the decorations. Members of the bereaved family or female relatives of the deceased made the death clothes (*hyōkatabira* 経帷子) using bleached cotton (*sarashi*). When the main relatives had gathered, the family would encoffin the deceased. Abhorrence of the impurity of death meant that generally outsiders were not involved in this stage. Once the body had been encoffined and the altar set up, the priest came to the house and chanted the “pillow sutra” (*makuragyō* 枕経).¹

THE WAKE (*TSUYA* 通夜)

In principle anyone could attend the wake, but in practice it was mostly relatives and neighbors. Wakes of the Meiji and Taishō eras were called *zen-tsuya* 全通夜 or *maru-tsuya* 丸通夜 (full wakes) and lasted throughout the night. The people who attended the wake were the close relatives who would then later also participate in the procession, people from neighboring houses (*mukō sangen ryōdonari* 向こう三軒両隣), and others with close relations or blood ties to the deceased or the family. Other guests left the wake during the night. This was called a *han-tsuya* 半通夜 (half-wake). The rituals of the wake varied according to religious affiliation, but usually there was some fanfare and at some point liquor and food were provided. These wakes were generally lively affairs.

THE DEPARTURE OF THE COFFIN (*SHUKKAN* 出棺)
AND THE PROCESSION (*SÔRETSU* 葬列)

The funeral took place after the procession from the home to the temple or funeral hall (*saijō* 斎場). The departure of the coffin generally started at 10 a.m., but often enough it was behind schedule. The coolies were divided into *rokushaku* 陸尺, who carried the palanquin and the coffin, and *hirabito* 平人, who carried the paper flowers (*rengē* 蓮華), fresh flowers, and lanterns. The *sōgiya* provided the coolies, who were organized into groups, each with its own boss, called *oyakata* 親方 or *bōgashira* 棒頭. Wages were paid in advance to the boss, about 25 to 30 *sen* per person.

¹ Editor's note: This is not the name of a specific sutra, but refers to the practice of chanting a sutra or sutras at the “pillow-side” of the deceased.

After the priest had chanted the sutras at the home, the procession went to the temple. Normally the order of the procession was as follows: lanterns, flowers, birds that were later released to bring merit to the deceased (*hōchō* 放鳥), incense burner(s), the memorial tablet, and finally the coffin. The memorial tablet, covered with thin silk, was carried by the male heir. Only male relatives carried objects, while women rode in rickshaws behind the procession. The men in the procession wore formal attire with the family crest.

Originally people from the same neighborhood walked with the procession all the way to the temple, but from the beginning of the Taishō era people began taking trains from some point along the course and arrived at the temple first. When the procession set out, there were usually large numbers of people, but by the halfway point only the family, close neighbors, and good friends remained. Thus the people waiting for the procession began to outnumber those in it. The *sōgisha* provided ashtrays for the waiting guests.

THE FUNERAL (*SŌSHIKI* 葬式)

At the temple, the memorial tablet, incense, food, flowers, and other items were set up on an altar. Usually the reception desk was manned by someone from the neighborhood along with one family member. During the ceremony family members were seated separately from general guests, with the family offering incense first, followed by the other guests. In the case of commoners it was normal to have thirty to fifty guests.

The sweets handed out to the guests included sweet bean jelly (*yōkan*) in the shape of lotus flowers and leaves. Running out of sweets might cause a scandal, so there were always more sweets than guests. There were even some interlopers who made an occupation of cramming in with the guests to get sweets and then exchanging the sweets for money. Any leftover sweets were usually given to the coolies, but there were also tradesmen who came around to buy the extra sweets.

THE CREMATION (*KASŌBA* 火葬場)

After the funeral, the coffin was carried to the cremation spot by male family members and the *rokushaku* coolies only. From 1891, burial within the city was prohibited, so most common people were cremated. Because the crematoriums were located outside the city, getting to them required walking a fair distance. A certificate was received from the temple, and this was used in place of a cremation permit. Since the firewood used for fuel produced a fairly weak fire and gave off a bad smell, cremations took place at night. The coffin was put in the

oven, the permit was handed over, and the door to the oven was sealed with paper and then stamped. The next day only the family would come to pick up the remains.

AFTER THE CEREMONY

Once the funeral books were done and someone from the neighborhood had tallied the incense-gift money,² it was customary for one of the helpers, rather than the chief mourner, to pay the *sōgiya* out of the gift money. People usually tried to finish payments before the final communal meal. Of course, if the bereaved family was poor, the payment might be several days late. After returning from the cremation, the family and relatives would go around and thank the people from the neighborhood. By the Taishō era a thank-you card (*reijō* 礼状) for the general guests (*kaisō* 会葬) was usually sent by post. Neighbors also helped out writing these cards. Then the family, along with those who had attended the cremation and those who had helped with the funeral, shared a meal. The main reason for this custom was to offer thanks to the people who had assisted with the funeral.

During the Meiji era, for funerals in Tokyo, as with traditional rural funerals, the assistance offered by members of the local community was greater than that provided by employees of funeral companies. Like the village associations, the neighborhood developed its role of planning and executing funerals.

Tokyo funerals of the period were strongly centered on a community-based rite for sending off the deceased. The funeral was arranged so that as many people as possible could attend and was organized in a way so that contact with the deceased and participation in the mortuary rituals started with the people who had the closest connection to the deceased and proceeded to those who had a more distant connection. This can be seen in the following sequence: 1) postdeath treatment of the deceased by close family members; 2) attendance at the full wake by relatives, neighbors, and close friends; 3) joining in the procession by family, neighbors, and acquaintances; 4) and attendance of the funeral by all.

Funerals in Tokyo during the Meiji era, however, differed from their rural counterparts in that the latter were principally open only to the people of the village. As can be seen in the procession, wake,

² Translator's note: Today, as in the past, people who attend a funeral are usually obliged to present a gift of money to the bereaved family. The money is called *kōden* 香典 or 香奠, literally "incense offering," indicating that the money is to be used to defray funeral costs. Later, the bereaved family sends a thank-you gift to the guest, worth one-third to one-half of the amount of the guest's incense gift-money.

and giving of sweets, Tokyo funerals incorporated participation by people outside the family and close neighbors. This gearing of the funeral to the outside meant that a large part of the job of the Meiji *sōgisha* was focused on preserving the dignity of the ritual. At the same time, this also meant that, as a precondition for this external orientation toward the neighborhood community, the character of the funeral had to be unified.

Taishō Funerals

Funerals in Tokyo underwent great change during the Taishō era. These changes can be summarized in the following three points.

ELIMINATION OF THE FUNERAL PROCESSION

The procession, a prominent element of funerals during the Meiji era, had completely vanished in Tokyo by the end of the Taishō. After the Tokyo earthquake in 1923, there was no one able to act as the leader (*bōgashira* 棒頭) of a procession. Even earlier, from about 1913, there were more and more funeral notices with expressions such as “No procession” or “We decline offerings” (FUJITA 1971). In Hongō, since the main populace took part in processions until about 1913, we can assume that the ending of processions began among the comparatively upper classes.

HOME FAREWELL CEREMONIES (*JITAKU KOKUBETSU-SHIKI* 自宅告別式) AND HALF-WAKES

Of 102 funeral notices published in the Tokyo *Asahi shinbun* from July to September 1920, only two mention a procession. Moreover, almost half the notices (50) contain the expression, “The procession will be stopped along the way.” About one-third (32) include an announcement of a *kokubetsu-shiki*, most of which were held at the family’s home. In contrast, most of the funerals without a *kokubetsu-shiki* took place at a temple or crematorium. *Kokubetsu-shiki* in hometowns usually took the form of public funerals (*karisō* 仮葬) before the main funeral (*honsō* 本葬). Most of the people who had a *kokubetsu-shiki* as their main funeral were engineers and scientists, the intelligentsia of the time.

By 1924 none of the funeral notices mentions a procession and only six notices state “No procession” (7% of the total). In contrast, the number of notices that include *kokubetsu-shiki* had grown to 64 (77%). Two years later, not even a single notice stated “No procession,” indicating that by then it was the norm in Tokyo to exclude processions. What is more, with *kokubetsu-shiki* hitting 84.7 percent, we

can see that the term had entered common usage.

By the start of the Shōwa era (1926), all-night wakes were no longer held in Hongō ward and many more people from outside of the family attended the wake.³ While the Meiji wake had been conducted by family and close friends, the wake from Taishō on came to be centered on guests from outside the family. Thus the ritual character of the wake changed from a kind of prefuneral night festival to a rite in which guests came to offer condolences to the bereaved family.

HELP WITH THE FUNERAL SHIFTS FROM RELATIVES AND NEIGHBORS TO FUNERAL COMPANIES

From the Taishō era, the functional role played by close relatives gradually decreased not only in the wake but also in the funeral. Female relatives were no longer obliged to sew the death clothes, since they could now be purchased. As the *sōgisha* developed a reputation for taking care of such things as shaving the beard of the deceased and the encoffining, it gradually became acceptable practice for people with no relation to the deceased to handle the body. The shortening of the mourning period and allowing funeral professionals to handle the corpse probably reflects a lessening of concern with death taboos. In the same period, municipal paperwork, such as filling out the death certificate, came to be entrusted to the funeral companies.

Furthermore, at the time of the Tokyo earthquake neighboring houses lost all connection to funerals. According to Matsushita, in the Hongō area taking a day off work to help with a neighbor's funeral or the posting of signs outside of shops reading "Closed today because of neighborhood funeral" were no longer seen after the earthquake.

The Meaning of Funeral Changes during the Taishō Era

The changes in funerals during the Taishō era are generally attributed to a process of rationalization or simplification, initiated as a reaction against the elaborate funerals of the Meiji era. However, if we take the example of the elimination of the funeral procession, we see that, despite the fact that there was already criticism of elaborate funeral processions around 1898, the processions were not actually eliminated until about fifteen years later. The direct cause of the demise of the funeral procession was not some trend in public thought but rather changes in external social conditions. The main

³ In AKIYAMA Yasusaburō's column *Kichū* 忌中 (1976), he notes that around the first year of Shōwa a new style of ceremony emerged among the common people of Tokyo, wherein a *kokubetsu-shiki* was held in the family's home and sweets were not handed out to guests.

factor was a change in the traffic situation in Tokyo. With the advent of cable cars and other motorized transportation, the roads became more congested, making a large procession impossible. Since the funeral guests were using these new modes of transportation, the custom of walking the long distance to the place of cremation was lost and the number of participants dropped.

The processions were essentially aimed at external display, with the more elaborate ones in particular intentionally parading along a roundabout route. At the time in the Taishō era when large processions became logistically impossible, the societal expression of mourning and the public display of condolence were transferred to the part of the funeral that occurred at the temple.

Since the private funeral (*missō* 密葬) occurred at the family's home, in order to express mourning publicly the *kokubetsu-shiki* was held at a funeral hall or temple. The fact that in many cases the *kokubetsu-shiki* might be held on a different day than the funeral showed the start of the spread of this type of ceremony. The early Taishō funerals, with large numbers of funeral guests waiting at the temple for the funeral procession to arrive, perhaps already included characteristics of today's *kokubetsu-shiki*. This shift to a focus on the *kokubetsu-shiki* and a shortening of the wake was related to the widening sphere and increasing number of funeral guests. By the end of Taishō the custom of mailing thank-you cards to the general guests had started.

This change meant a shift in the focus of the funeral from a rite of sending off the dead to one of receiving condolences. The relatives and neighbors who had, until this time, been on the inside receiving guests were now on the outside with the other guests, limiting the receiving side to the immediate family only. Neighborhood help with the funeral also decreased as neighbors became no different from other guests. This change in the status of the neighbor from a member of a small community to an ordinary guest shows the loosening of local ties and indicates the loss of close friendships within one's immediate social sphere. Many of the Tokyo neighborhood organizations (*chōnaikai* 町内会) were formed in the Taishō era, a time of rapid population growth and movement. The formation of the *chōnaikai* represented an active effort to strengthen local ties.

Through the Meiji era, even Tokyo funerals were centered on the community and to a certain extent the sending off of the dead. But from the Taishō era onward, the length of time one was expected to attend the funeral was no longer fixed and receiving condolences had become limited to the immediate family, making the funeral a private affair. The typical element of Meiji-era funerals, the societal expression of mourning, was almost gone by the end of the Taishō era,

resulting in a loss of work for the funeral companies that had centered on such business. Correspondingly, there was an expansion and increase in the variety of businesses shouldering the funeral responsibilities that had formerly been borne by neighbors and relatives.

World War II and the Shōwa Era

From the end of the Taishō era into the Shōwa, epochal changes took place in mortuary matters such as the advent of park-like cemeteries (*kōenbochi* 公園墓地) and modern crematoriums. These changes occurred against a background of concern about sanitation and efficient land use. An 1891 police order, “Detailed Rules Controlling Graveyards and Burials,” prohibited burials within city limits. In 1919, according to “Laws of City Planning,” graveyards, with the exception of those with some special history, were moved outside the city or the remains of the deceased were moved to a special temple (*tokushu nōkandō* 特殊納棺堂). Japan’s first suburban memorial park, Tama Reien Bochi 多摩霊園墓地, was completed in 1923, and from the mid-1960s similarly modeled cemeteries under civil leadership became common. Even in this time of rapid population growth, the division between the living in cities and the dead in the suburbs was becoming more clearly defined.

By the end of the Taishō era, the custom of cremation was almost universal. In June of 1926, two heavy oil kilns at Tokyo Machiya Crematorium 東京町屋火葬場 were installed, and for the first time it was possible to cremate a body and pick up the remains on the same day. In the Meiji era, wood-fueled fires for cremation were weak and noxious, and it sometimes happened that bodies were only partially cremated. No wonder that most people thought of crematoriums, like graveyards, as gruesome, horrible places. Thus the first consideration in the development of crematoriums was to shed this dismal, unsanitary image.

During the 1920s and 1930s crematoriums and memorial parks were constructed to counteract this negative image of death and impurity. Inoshita Kiyoshi, a planner for Tama Memorial Park and a section chief of Tokyo City Parks at the time, wrote, “The existence of funeral institutions is contrary to the development of cities. The expansion of graveyards not only casts a dark and gloomy influence on urban structure, but it also means that precious active areas of the city will be encroached upon by ash from cremations. These, and other issues, are points of contention with regard to urban problems” (INOSHITA 1973, p. 422). On the other hand, the Tokyo Mizue Funeral

Center, completed in 1936, was described (as quoted by Inoshita) as “a building that puts aside the ugly, convenient style of the so-called motorized hearse and provides a beautiful bright send-off to the eternal hereafter that is both tranquil and solemn.” Inoshita adds, “Unlike former crematoriums, these have no gruesome image.”

This decorating and concealing of death, the tendency to separate it from everyday life, could also be seen in the funeral rite itself. From about 1934 it became more common to place a more decorative altar and other items at the farewell ceremony. This influenced the shifting of the social expression of condolence from the funeral procession to the farewell ceremony. The paper flowers and fresh flowers originally carried in the procession were now used to decorate the altar at the temple ceremony. Furthermore, from the beginning of the Shōwa era, under Western influence, colorful flowers began to be used. Placing a picture of the deceased on the funeral altar also became common around this time.

From 1965 in particular, the altar became more elaborate, and even items such as water wheels were used to decorate the front of the building in which the funeral was held. As altar decoration grew more extravagant, the various customs of sending thank-you gifts (*tōrei* 答礼) and the postfuneral meal also grew more lavish.

In the past, the group closest to the deceased (the group in mourning) would maintain direct contact with the body as it was prepared, but the modern method, from the beginning of Shōwa, was to leave the preparation to specialists (*sōgisha*, priests, crematorium staff, etc.). Even close relatives did not maintain direct contact with the deceased while all the rites were performed. With the postwar abandonment of nursing the dying at home, the last moments of life were left to doctors. This invited a decline in the customs and techniques for dealing with death in everyday life and corresponded to the formation of the funeral industry.

A main characteristic of the postwar period for the funeral companies was a widening of scope and a shift toward becoming funeral-specific businesses. Previously, since *sōgisha* in Tokyo were limited to that area, most regional funerals were handled by small family businesses. Even today this form is prevalent. On the other hand, from the wartime period, hospitals, cooperative groups, and businesses became more active. Even advertisements for undertakers, formerly taboo, began appearing in magazines. All this indicates a change in the funeral industry from a business that was rooted in receiving orders from local temples and parishioner groups to one that actively pursues customers in a religiously floating population.

Funerals in Tokyo today are essentially cut off from regional com-

munities and are decidedly private events. Aside from exceptions such as reception duties, the actual work of preparing for and conducting the funeral, which in the past was handled by friends and neighbors, is now almost entirely in the hands of the industry. Furthermore, the funeral has come to be seen as basically an event for the mourning family. One can say that this move toward private funerals was matched by an expansion into more multifaceted services on the part of the funeral industry, or one could look at it from the opposite perspective and say that the expansion of the industry made it possible for a funeral to be a private, individual affair.

The outward expression of the funeral has shifted from the procession to the *kokubetsu-shiki*. Moreover, since Japan's period of rapid economic growth, the solemnity of the funeral has been emphasized. Underlying these trends is a practicality of thought that separates the mourning family from the direct shadow of death and shortens the time it takes for them to return to normal society. Moreover, given the move from community involvement toward a more individual rite, we can see that overall the changes in funerals that started in the Taishō era are still continuing.

*The Funeral Reform Movement and
the Right to Determine One's Own Funeral*

Quite some time has passed since it has become common to say, "In recent years the discussion of graves and death is no longer taboo." Interest in death is rising, and there have been several books published on nursing the dying and preparing for death. At the same time, there are currently a number of criticisms and discussions of the modern grave system.

One complaint is the problem of getting a grave when a person has no successors. In the past, since having a successor was a condition for acquiring a grave, people without children or with only a daughter who had married into another family had a hard time getting graves. Different movements have responded to this situation. In 1950, war widows who had no successors established an organization called *Onna no Ishibumi no Kai* 女の碑の会 (The Association for Women's Gravestones). In addition, *Moyai no Kai* もやいの会 (The Association for Sharing) arranged for unrelated people to be buried in the same grave and have offerings made in common. *Sōsō no Jiyū o Susumeru Kai* 葬送の自由をすすめる会 (The Association for Freedom with Regard to Burial) argues against traditional-style graves and advocates scattering the ashes, known in Japan as a *shizensō* 自然葬 or "natural funeral."

The media has also introduced the movement for *yuigon ginkō* 遺言銀行 or “will banks,” which hold wills people have written that spell out their funeral wishes. Friends can then conduct the funeral without contacting a temple or funeral company. The question asked by these reform movements is not “How should someone else be buried?” but rather “How do I want to be buried?”

Anti-Funeral Criticism in Historical Perspective

In 1898 in the magazine *Fūzoku gahō* 風俗画報, Noguchi Katsuichi and Yamashita Shigetami published criticisms of the growing extravagance of funerals (NOGUCHI 1898; YAMASHITA 1898; HOSUNSHA 1898). In Noguchi’s *Sōgi no heifū o aratamu beshi* 葬儀の弊風を改むべし (Bad funeral customs should be changed), he made the following arguments and recommendations:

Since a funeral is the end of a person’s life, it is only natural that dutiful children and grandchildren should try as much as possible to give the deceased his due. But all things have their limits and today’s funerals have crossed that line. These days one must provide food and drink for all the guests, and if you do not offer gifts worth more than the incense money received to all those who paid their respects at the thirty-fifth and fiftieth-day rites, then you are said to be someone who does not know the obligations of respect.

The writer Sakai Toshihiko, in his column *Fūzoku kairyōan* 風俗改良案 (Suggestions for the improvement of customs) in *Yorozu chōhō* 萬朝報 often called for the improvement of funeral customs. In 1903 he wrote, “To improve funerals, let’s end the parading of the procession” (SAKAI 1971).

There was a saying that two funerals in two years would bankrupt a middle-income family. Noguchi also wrote that the use of money for funerals was an unnecessary expense and that the industry produced nothing while exploiting people’s misfortune. Yamashita added that if money spent on funerals were diverted to national industry there would be great benefits.

The calls for funeral reform at the turn of the century attacked customs such as providing food during the funeral, gifts of sweets from the mourning family, as well as the flowers, birds, and other offerings made by the guests. These were considered empty customs, and the money used for this showing off could be better spent on production to build the national economy. This was the time of the victory in the

Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), when nationalist sentiment was growing against a background of higher taxes, the printing of national bonds, and the need to strengthen the economy. The idea of limiting money spent on individual funerals in order to help improve the economy was similar to the attacks on Buddhist funerals of the Edo period by the Zhu Xi school of Confucian scholars.

We should also note the birth of the new working class in Meiji-era Tokyo. Most of the working class rented rooms and did not make much money, but they assumed a progressive lifestyle and had a strong will to improve their lot. In Sakai's column mentioned above, the attempt of middle-income families to imitate the upper class by not having wives work outside the home was criticized as impractical and uneconomical. At this time two contrary trends coexisted: the desire to improve one's lot and climb the traditional ladder of social success, along with an attack, influenced by Westernization, on traditional customs as impractical.

As mentioned earlier, in the Taishō era as well as during and after the war when there were general shortages of goods, funerals were simplified. However, when economic growth started again funerals grew more extravagant. Correspondingly, criticism of the funeral system also increased. Tamamuro Taijō's 圭室諦成 critical *Sōshiki Bukkyō* 葬式仏教 (Funerary Buddhism) was written in 1964, the same year the Olympics were held in Tokyo. *Sōshiki muyōron* 葬式無用論 (The uselessness of funerals), edited by Inada Tsutomu 稲田 務 and Ōta Tenrei 太田典礼, was published in 1968. The next year Japan had the second largest GNP in the world. That same year saw the publication of the first funeral how-to book, Shiotsuki Yaeko's 塩月弥栄子 *Kankon sōsai nyūmon* 冠婚葬祭入門 (Introduction to weddings and funerals), as well as Haga Noboru's 芳賀 登 often quoted *Sōshiki no rekishi* 葬式の歴史 (The history of funerals).

Sōshiki muyōron was published by *Sōshiki o Kaikaku Suru Kai* 葬式を改革する会 (The Association to Improve Funerals),⁴ which originated in September 1964 when the respected Kyoto University professor, Inada Tsutomu, wrote, "I won't have a funeral," in the column *Koe* 声 (Voice) of the *Asahi shinbun*. His statement, "I have decided against a funeral, just notices of my death will be sent out," resonated with readers, and the newspaper received only one negative letter. In the January 1965 issue of *Nōkei* 農鶏, along with Inada, former Diet Member

⁴ This group was originally called *Sōshiki Muyō no Kai* 葬式無用の会 (The Association [against the] Uselessness of Funerals), but changed its name because some members felt that the term *muyō* or "useless" was too strong and that the association's aim was the simplification, rationalization, and reform of funerals.

Azuma Shun'ei 東舜英 announced, "My last request—don't hold a funeral!" and the January 1967 issue of *Miyazu* carried their "Declaration of Nonreligion" (*mushūkyō sengen* 無宗教宣言).

As the ritual grandeur of funerals increased, the Association articulated the following criticisms: 1) though funerals in the past were solemn and sincere, current rites are just formalities; 2) what should be a time for quiet farewells among family is now an overblown, obligatory gathering that inconveniences people and wastes time; 3) most of the money spent is wasted on showing off and people are being used by priests and the funeral companies.

We have already seen these criticisms of funerals in the Meiji era, so they are not particularly new. What deserves special attention is that these postwar criticisms emphasized that expensive funerals were being held reluctantly, and thus people could not have the funeral they wanted.

This was especially true of the three writers mentioned above. For Inada, the question of how to live was answered in how one died, and one's own death was the time to deal with this question. Leaving arrangements to the bereaved was irresponsible and would not clearly reflect one's own beliefs. Ōta's *Sōshiki muyō to kaikaku* 葬式無用と改革 (The uselessness of funerals and their improvement) states, in clarifying the position of nonreligion, "I want to die peacefully with no help from buddhas or kami."

Many of the members of the Association were doctors. For them, at the very least, the belief in life after death or an eternal spirit was a fantasy. In scientific thinking, the spirit ends with the body. They felt that the value and importance of the funeral was to express the true sentiment of the family and friends of the deceased. The traditional perception of the funeral as a precondition for the deceased becoming an ancestor was refuted in their materialistic view of death.

As the sense of individualism strengthened after the war, the importance of the household (*ie* 家) as the focus of ancestor worship diminished and family and community relations weakened. The two cornerstones of the traditional funeral system—the household and communal society—were both becoming mere shells. The trend to regard the funeral as a private (family) affair was in no small way related to individualism. From this point of view one can talk about the secularization of funerals.

In Japan today, the idea that one's funeral is the final expression of one's life is becoming fairly common. Natural funerals, women's graves, and the improvement of the present funeral system are all ways in which Japanese people are trying to win the freedom to conduct a funeral in their own style. New funeral styles introduced by the

funeral industry such as Gyokusen'in Funeral Home's *nobe-okuri* 野辺送り, in which the deceased's departure is accompanied by music and clouds of smoke produced by dry ice, are not mere formalities but rather can be interpreted as attempts to create a proper funeral. The value of the grand funerals for singer Misora Hibari or actor Ishihara Yūjirō, on the one hand, and the private family funerals for author Hasegawa Machiko or actor Atsumi Kiyoshi, on the other, is that they give the impression that the funeral is an expression of the deceased's way of living.

*The Privatization of Funerals and the
Scaling Back of the Role of the Bereaved Family*

Recently, with the continued urban privatization of funerals, there is a gap between those who favor innovative and individualistic funerals (especially reflecting the wishes of the deceased) and those who think that a society should bury its dead in traditional ways.

In the summer of 1993 I took part in the Tranquility (*annon* 安穩) Festival at Myōkō-ji 妙光寺, a Nichiren temple in Niigata. There is a collective graveyard at Myōkō-ji called Annon Byō (Tranquility Shrine), and every year at the Tranquility Festival people who are planning to be buried there gather for a symposium on how to accept death and hold a funeral.

An older woman gave the following account of her sister's funeral. When her sister died, her children, who had all succeeded in life, gave their mother an elaborate, large-scale funeral. Guests at the funeral said to the woman, "Isn't it great that all the children were successful and gave their mother a great funeral?" However, the woman knew that her sister had hated big funerals and had always hoped that her own funeral would be modest. During the funeral the woman repeatedly prayed to her sister, "It'll be over soon, so just hang in there." After that, she decided to join Annon Byō.

When the deceased has occupied a high social position, society demands to a certain extent a large funeral. But when the deceased is fairly old and retired, the funeral will not be centered on the friends or acquaintances of the departed, and instead the guests are mainly acquaintances of the surviving family members. In urbanized societies in particular even family relationships are in many cases declining. In fact, one often hears of cases in which the notification of the death of someone's parent is done solely with New Year's cards (*nengajo* 年賀状).

The above circumstances have become common today and are one reason for the frequent complaint that Buddhist funerals are mere

formalities lacking any real feeling. Most of these criticisms are made by people who are thinking about their own funerals. The complaints are not simply due to the loss of power of traditional meanings in funerals. The diminished importance placed on the position of the bereaved family in contemporary urban funerals can be interpreted as a development of the consistent privatization of funerals from the latter half of the Meiji era. Expressions like “funerary freedom” and “self-determination of death” clearly reflect the increasingly positive value placed on living an individual life. There are also a number of people who say they do not wish to cause their children any trouble. The increasing number of people who save money for their own funeral (35%) or buy their own grave while still alive (70%) can be viewed as one expression of the death-with-dignity (or living will) way of thinking.

The focus on a person’s living an individual life neglects the problem of how the bereaved family deals with death. It is also necessary to consider the right or obligation of the family to do what is socially expected.

The rate of donating bodies to science has always been low—only 20% of the bodies used for practicing autopsies in medical schools are volunteer donations—primarily because the relatives are against it. Donating the body to science robs the family of the opportunity to have a normal funeral. It is said that the idea of brain death has been accepted by national consensus, but the surveys are all based on one’s own death. I think the numbers would be much lower if the surveys asked whether one would accept the brain death of a family member.

Summary

In the past, most mortuary customs in Japan included burial; the funeral was centered on the *nobe-okuri* rite and was carried out by the local funeral cooperative. Ethnological studies have usually focused on this traditional type of funeral. Since the war, however, almost all corpses have been cremated, the *kokubetsu-shiki* (farewell ceremony) has been highlighted among most communities, and funerals have been managed by professionals. The earlier type of funeral was a local communal event. Everyone in the village helped out, and because they all ate at the house of the bereaved it was said that the fires in other kitchens throughout the village would die out. In some villages, outsiders were completely excluded from participation in funerals.

While funerals in Tokyo during the Meiji era maintained some of the characteristics of village rites, the custom of giving out funeral

sweets and the holding of large processions showed an awareness of those outside the community. In the Taishō era, neighborhood groups became less involved as the funeral was increasingly viewed as an individual family affair. After the postwar period of rapid economic growth, the funeral came to be a less uniform event that is more for the family of the deceased than for the *ie*.

Though urbanization led to the development of a wider group of funeral guests, there was also a narrowing of the sphere in which relatives were considered to be responsible for holding the funeral. A large division over the meaning of the rite has grown between those who are contemplating their own funeral and burial and those who are thinking about holding a funeral for a relative. These days funerals are more varied, and the idea that death and funerals can be dealt with on an individual basis is widespread. Alternatively, one can say that it is precisely this change in thinking about funerals that has led to their increased variation. However, if one remembers that in the past funerals functioned to allow the opportunity for rebuilding societal ties, it is still difficult to say the funeral has become a completely private, individual affair. The Association for Women's Gravestones, the Association for Sharing, and other new funerary trends are also examples of a move toward creating new societal relations.

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