

## Continuity and Change: Funeral Customs in Modern Japan

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### A Case Study of Tokoro and Hamamatsu

The purpose of this article is to examine changes in funeral customs in modern Japan in three areas, while simultaneously investigating a change in their accompanying conceptions, namely a diminishing awareness of defilement. The three areas are that of the organizations which manage funerals, the methods for disposing the corpse, and the burial grounds. Each of these are undergoing major change, with shifts from traditional funeral cooperatives [*sōshiki-gumi* 葬式組] to undertakers [*sōgiya* 葬儀屋], from burial [*dosō* 土葬] to cremation [*kasō* 火葬], and from traditional cemeteries [*bochi* 墓地] to modern memorial parks [*rei'en* 霊園].

The first site for our study is the town of Tokoro and the neighboring city of Abashiri in Hokkaidō. This is no longer a remote area of Japan, but reflects the trends which affect Japan as a whole. One must keep in mind the various networks involved in the funeral industry throughout Japan. The study of folk customs in modern Japan necessitates a critical awareness that what in the past could be studied as a local custom is now influenced by nationwide and even worldwide trends. The second area for our study is the city of Hamamatsu, and the surrounding towns of Yūtō and Maisaka. Hamamatsu is one of the large industrial cities of Japan. The organizations involved in the funeral business here are undergoing major changes. Ceremonial occasions, such as weddings and funerals, are becoming increasingly extravagant. In contrast to Hamamatsu, however, ceremonial occasions in the farming and fishing communities of Yūtō and Maisaka still maintain a simplicity of style.

## Funeral Customs in Tokoro

### 1. From Funeral Cooperatives to Undertakers

The first undertaker in Tokoro opened around the year 1963. Since then this undertaker, who had formerly been a cabinetmaker, has maintained a steady business without any strong competition.

Let us first examine the situation before the appearance of this undertaker. The local funeral cooperative had once played a major role in making funeral arrangements. This funeral cooperative was not an organization involved only in funerals, but formed a part of the neighborhood association dedicated to the general welfare of the neighborhood. The rural section of this neighborhood association had made its own coffins, wooden grave tablets [*sotoba* 卒塔婆], mortuary tablets [*ihai* 位牌], and grave flower arrangements with materials procured at its own expense. The townspeople, on the other hand, usually ordered these items from local carpenters or cabinetmakers. After World War II altars, wreaths or artificial flowers [*hanawa* 花輪], and other items related to funerals, became available on a national scale. The temples in the cooperative's town area acquired these items and began renting them out for funerals. In the case of large funerals, however, the undertakers of the neighboring cities of Abashiri and Kitami would handle the arrangements. The undertaker in Abashiri had opened in 1919, having set up his business as a branch of an undertaker in Nemuro.

The official name of the undertaker's shop in Tokoro is the "Zōka sōgu-ten" (Artificial Flowers and Funeral Accessories Shop). Its business extends beyond undertaking, being also a florist and supplier of Buddhist and Shinto ceremonial accessories. This is a characteristic common to undertakers throughout Hokkaidō. The owner of this shop moved to Tokoro from the neighboring town of Shari, east of Abashiri, to set up shop as a cabinetmaker. He combined his skills as a cabinetmaker and his connections with relatives who managed a florist/undertaker shop in Shari to establish the Zōka sōgu-ten. The incentive for starting such a business originated more from the needs of the people in the surrounding area than from the owner's own aspiration. The nearby temples and townspeople did more than encourage him to start this business. The temples contributed the funeral accessories which they possessed, cooperated in raising the required capital, and offered various other kinds of assistance. Even so, at first the shop handled only artificial flower wreaths, gradually expanding to other forms of altar ornaments, and finally grew to its present form as a shop handling artificial flowers and funeral accessories. Initially it handled only inexpensive altars, but since the shop was established during the period of rapid

economic growth in Japan, the times were ripe for good management to produce a strong business. It was also helped by the fact that the undertakers in Kitami and Abashiri abandoned the funeral market in Tokoro around this time. Therefore, although begun in the town areas, this business eventually came to monopolize the funeral business in the entire Tokoro area. It also made inroads in adjacent areas such as Notoro in Abashiri, and Hamasaroma in the town of Saroma. The present shop, located on the main street of Tokoro, was built in 1973, ten years after the business was established.

The strongest competitors of the undertakers at the present time are the professional *gojokai*.<sup>1</sup> These *gojokai* are organizations which sprung up around the country, particularly in urban areas, from around 1955. At first they advocated simple ceremonies, but recently have tended to emphasize novelty and extravagance. The *gojokai* have not yet extended their business to the Tokoro area. One reason for this is that they are well suited to the anonymity prevalent in urban society, but not to the neighborly society of an agricultural and fishing community like Tokoro. Even so, a *gojokai* attempted to penetrate the market in Tokoro with the assistance of the agricultural co-op around 1975, but retreated after performing only a few funeral services. As a matter of fact, in 1975 there were already *gojokai* for ceremonial occasions established in the Hokkaidō cities of Sapporo, Otaru, Muroran, and Obihiro. As if in response to these new associations, the Legal Foundation of the Hokkaidō Funeral Cooperative Association was established in April 1975. This organization was an extension of a liaison association called the Hokkaidō Artificial Flowers Trade Cooperative Association [Hokkaidō Zōkashō Kyōdō Kumiai] formed during the war to supply people with paper, wood, gasoline, and other necessities. At this time the undertakers and *gojokai* are engaged in fierce competition, not only in Hokkaidō but also throughout Japan.

Let us shift our attention from the undertakers to the problems facing the funeral cooperatives. Since 1970 the *han*, a smaller unit of the cooperative, has been involved in funerals in town areas. The most important reason for this is the decrease in demand due to the influx of the undertakers. A new post called the "Funeral Committee Chairman" appeared around this time. At first there was some resistance to this title. A funeral cooperative is a mutual aid organization. All members are theoretically equal. Hence the resistance to an official position such as a "committee chairman". However, the institution of the Funeral Committee Chairman took root. Usually the head of the ward acted as the Funeral Committee Chairman, but at times the post was filled by the town head, a town assemblyman, or the head of the cooperative. In a rare case it was filled by the chief of the Buddhist

temple parishioners. Recently funeral services have been performed at the Fishermen's Center for those involved in the fishing industry, at various Village Centers for those involved in agriculture, and at various halls in their own towns for those from urban areas. Only prominent figures have their funerals at a Buddhist temple.

There are around forty to forty-five funerals annually in Tokoro. The average cost of a funeral in 1980 was ¥1,500,000. Of this, since 1975, the altar fee is at least ¥200,000, with ¥100,000 to ¥150,000 for flowers. The offering for the officiating priest is usually about the same sum as for the altar fee. Tokoro has been designated as a model area for improving the quality of life, so there is resistance to extravagance, but that does not mean that people have been particularly reserved or restricted to simple and modest ceremonial observances.

Let us now examine the management of a funeral business from the perspective of expenditures required for funerals. According to sources at the Tokoro Artificial Flowers and Funeral Accessories Shop, income from funerals alone is not sufficient to run a business, and a profit is possible only by combining the business of a florist and funeral accessories shop. This makes it a multi-faceted enterprise which must take into account a variety of demands. As mentioned above, there are about forty to forty-five funerals per year in Tokoro, with the number rising to about sixty if one includes funerals in neighboring areas. The minimum altar fee of ¥200,000 plus ¥100,000 to ¥150,000 for flowers means an income of around ¥300,000 to ¥350,000 per funeral. A simple calculation of this figure multiplied by an average sixty funerals gives a total annual income of ¥21 million. Even with various expenses deducted, this appears to be an amount sufficient to provide a healthy profit, so I have my doubts about the shop's claim that funerals alone are not an adequate means of support. However, my purpose here is not to examine the inner financial workings of this business. Rather, I will examine the type of administration and management characteristic of the funeral industry.

The cost of a funeral is something which is not usually made public. It is a fact of life not to be openly discussed. Since the mortician is in a service industry, the usual cut and dry relationship between wholesale and market price that one finds with commodity items is not followed. There is rarely any discussion of discounts between the buyer and seller. It is not unheard of for the price to be reduced if the amount of condolence gifts is extremely small, but this is a rare exception. It is also part of the undertaker's ethic that an unreasonable exaction not be demanded from the poor. The use of words such as "charitable" [*Hakuzen* 博善] or "public service" [*Kōeki* 公益] by many funeral businesses in their names is not unrelated to this fact. It is

said that in Tokoro there are two or three funerals a year that are performed without charge, but this figure is much smaller today than it was in the past. In actuality, the highest altar fee is determined beforehand, and then seven less expensive levels set. The fees for the funeral are usually decided through discussions between the Funeral Committee Chairman and chief mourner and/or other relatives. An interesting fact is that often the bereaved family members and relatives complain the most when an inexpensive altar fee is chosen. There has never been a case, on the other hand, when people have protested that the chosen altar fee was too high. Yet, when an expensive funeral is requested by the bereaved family, the undertaker sometimes voluntarily lowers the price in order to avoid any misunderstandings which may later occur. In this way, the cost of a funeral is determined by taking into account various factors such as the general no-discount rule, a spirit of public service, and the status of the bereaved family.

The altar's size is usually around nine feet long. In Tokoro the custom is for people to present cakes or fruits with their names inscribed, so a large altar is required. In fact for the funeral of an honored citizen in 1966, about one hundred cakes were presented. The altar ornaments, in addition to Shinto and/or Buddhist accessories, include real flowers. Real flowers are not only welcomed by the bereaved family, they are also more expensive than the artificial flower ornaments, and are a part of the florist business. In fact the artificial flower ornaments are not very popular. The chrysanthemum is the most popular flower, and is valued in the funeral business due to its longevity. Since deaths are unpredictable, it goes without saying that a florist prefers flowers which last a long time without wilting. In this way the materials utilized for a funeral are dictated not only by customs but also by the requirements and constraints of business.

However, making a profit is not the only aspect of managing a business. Besides the main altar for the funeral, there is also a small Buddhist altar called the "later altar" [*ato saidan* あと祭壇].<sup>2</sup> This is used as an altar on which to place the deceased person's bones, offerings, candles, and so forth, after the ashes of the deceased person's cremated body have been gathered up and placed in an urn, to keep in the home for forty-nine days after the person's death. Recently wholesalers have offered fold-up cardboard altars to use for this purpose, but the undertaker in Tokoro takes advantage of the owner's skill as a cabinetmaker and offers a small wooden one for free. This is an example of the extra effort expended by this enterprise in order to succeed among the local populace.

The undertaker provides all Buddhist and Shinto accessories, except in the rare case when a temple is involved. The range of this business in Tokoro is equivalent to the scope of funeral business. In other words, he has

a monopoly on all aspects of the funeral business in this area.

The undertaker is also responsible for the transport of the corpse. The local town office had provided a mini van type hearse, but in 1974 the hearse service was consigned to the private sector. In 1980 a mini van which seats ten people was used as a hearse. There is no Shrine style hearse available in Tokoro at this time. The undertaker in Abashiri purchased a horse-pulled wagon around the second year after he began his business (around 1920) for transporting the bodies of the deceased. This wagon had four wheels with rubber tires and wooden spokes. During the winter a horse-pulled sleigh was used. A 1934 model Chevrolet was purchased in 1936. The undertaker in Kitami purchased a Pontiac for the same purpose in the same year. The undertaker in Abashiri purchased a bus type hearse, peculiar to Hokkaidō, in 1946. They purchased a Shrine style hearse in 1974, the third company in Hokkaidō to do so. The Shrine style hearses first appeared in the Kansai area in 1916, and it took more than sixty years for this development to reach Abashiri (see Inoue 1983 and 1984).

## 2. From Burial to Cremation

Funerals in Tokoro consist of either burial or cremation. Burial was most common during the early days of development at the turn of the century. Open air cremations were also performed in the days before the construction of a crematorium, and this practice continued into the 1930s. A crematorium was established in the rural areas along with a public cemetery. A crematorium was established along with the public cemeteries at Toyokawa in 1913 and at Hiyoshi in 1915. However, a local history reports that no crematorium was built along with the Yoshino public cemetery in 1929 (*Tokoro chō shi* 常呂町史 1969, pp. 669-671). This trend occurred even earlier in the town area, but no exact dates are available.

Cremation was formerly handled by people known as *onboyaki*. These people were not related to the deceased in a hereditary or social sense, but appear to have undertaken this work because they were poor. There was a man who continued in this work until after World War II, and his predecessor had built a hut near the town's public cemetery. He would earn small change by chanting Buddhist sūtras at the cemetery and helping out with the funeral. It appears that he was asked by the town office to keep away stray dogs. From around 1965 the sanitation official at the town office was assigned responsibility for managing the crematorium.

Cremations for the urban area were centralized at the Tokoro crematorium from around 1951 in order to reduce the financial burden of maintaining the crematoriums (*Tokoro chō shi*, p. 370). A new crematorium was constructed in 1957, and a hearse was added in 1963 to further centralize

the operation. In 1965 the wood burning furnace was replaced by an oil burning furnace. The age and decay of the crematorium and cramped condition of the rest area led to a renovation of the premises in 1970, during which two double-burning smokeless and odorless furnaces were installed.

### 3. From Cemeteries to Memorial Parks

The "Federal Regulations Concerning the Control of Cemeteries and Burials" were proclaimed by the central government in 1884. In response the town of Tokoro picked out a site on the town outskirts for a public cemetery in 1885, and the area was blocked off. When the arrangements were made for cemeteries in large cities like Tokyo and Osaka, the same facilities were being established in Tokoro, where the town office itself had just been established. The Federal Regulations were kept despite the fact that there were few graves to manage. The rural areas around Tokoro were developed only around the end of the last century, and, as was mentioned above, a cemetery was constructed in 1913. At the present time there is only one temple cemetery in the urban area of Tokoro besides the above mentioned public cemetery, and there are no private family cemeteries.

A "Comprehensive Plan for the Town of Tokoro" compiled in 1972 clearly outlined "the consolidation of an environment suitable to a memorial park." Based on this plan the town rearranged the blocks of the public cemetery between 1974 and 1975. Blocks had been delineated previously, but the gravestones were scattered around a sandy and uneven terrain, leaving a dreary landscape. These were rearranged to provide "an environment suitable to a memorial park." First, in July of 1974, "Cemetery and Park Regulations" were established. According to the town bulletin, in these regulations the goal of the renovations was described as "a verdant memorial park, a bright cemetery which overlooks the Okhotsk Sea, and which preserves the natural environment as much as possible" (*Kōhō Tokoro* 広報ところ, No. 186, p. 149). Two hectares of land were acquired from a national forest, and a cemetery park was constructed on flat land, along with a parking lot, flower garden, and green areas. The former cemetery has also been left as is, allowing for voluntary transference to the new park. Since 1975 this new cemetery has been called the Tokoro Memorial Park. A supervisor was hired in 1976 to be responsible for maintaining and supervising the park. In 1978 the Tokoro Crematorium, a ferro concrete building of 270 square meters, with two double burning, smokeless and odorless furnaces, was constructed for a cost of ¥77 million. This was completed in March of 1979. A hexagonal Buddhist tower was constructed for the repose of lost souls [*muen botoke* 無縁仏].<sup>3</sup> The second

phase of the Tokoro General Plan proposed in 1982 outlines the goal of "completing all types of facilities, planning the supervision and management of proper environmental beautification, and the establishment of a cemetery park." The development of these sorts of "memorial parks" is a strong nationwide trend.

As of 1972, 775 of the 1200 blocks (340 one *tsubo* [ca. 3.3 sq. meters] blocks, 860 two *tsubo* blocks) in the cemetery park had been used. The fees in 1974 were ¥35,000 for seven square meters, ¥63,000 for 10.5 square meters, and ¥98,000 for 14 square meters (*Kōhō Tokoro* No. 186, p. 149).

The demand for gravestones has grown along with the facilities of the memorial park. There is no stonemason in Tokoro, so demand is met by suppliers in Abashiri, Bihoro, Shari, and Kitami. A stonecutter resided in Tokoro up to the twenties, but no one took his place after his death. The average price for a gravestone is around one million yen.

#### 4. Diminishing Awareness of Defilement

I have discussed changes in funeral customs in three areas, and would like to add some comments concerning the diminishing awareness of defilement associated with death. Recently the only significant remnant of defilement associated with death is for the mourners to avoid sending out New Year's greeting cards. Even the first weekly memorial service is often held in advance. This is one of the most conspicuous changes in customs related to funerals.

These days the most common site of death is a hospital. The corpse is sterilized with alcohol in the hospital and clothed. It is rare these days for the body to be washed at home in preparation for the funeral. The family members of the deceased place the body in a coffin, and the body is kept in dry ice until the time of cremation. Thus there is no need or occasion for the undertaker to handle the corpse. In fact the undertaker in Tokoro has even said that "If I had to handle corpses I'd quit this business." One can perceive here a perhaps unconscious attempt to avoid defilement. In this sense one can say that defilement is still associated with death, but there is no perception of an undertaker as a defiled figure. Nevertheless, the use of a signboard directly advertising the shop as an undertaker is avoided, and the florist side of the business is publicly emphasized. The cooperative for the flower shops is the Hokkaidō Artificial Flowers Cooperative Association. In Tokoro everyone seems to avoid the word "undertaker," preferring the names "florist" or "Artificial Flower Shop."

In this way an awareness of defilement through contact with death is still, though faintly, present among those involved in the funeral business in Tokoro. There is no such awareness at all among those who are in charge of



funerals for the *gojokai*. In Hamamatsu, as we shall see, these people preside over a funeral in much the same way as a wedding, and feel no extra burden from presiding over a funeral. In this sense they are much like funeral directors in the United States. This is a new attitude in Japan among those connected with funerals, and worthy of note (Nakamaki 1978, pp. 15-17).

The awareness of defilement among those in charge of cremation in Tokoro is also weakening. The appellation "*onboyaki*" appears to carry a slightly contemptuous connotation, but those in charge of cremation today are not faced with any such attitudes. This reflects a remarkable diminution in the awareness of defilement among Japanese. There is an even more conspicuous diminution in the large cities.

Memorial parks also contribute to breaking down the image of cemeteries as impure places. Cemeteries in the United States have also tended to become more like parks, and the term "memorial park" itself reflects this change. Cemeteries continue to leave a "dark" impression, but memorial parks give an impression of brightness and cleanliness.

## Funeral Customs in Hamamatsu

### 1. Profit and Nonprofit Organizations

A convenient way to classify organizations involved with funerals is to divide them into two types: those which are involved for the purpose of making a profit, and those which are not. In the past, funerals were often the responsibility of nonprofit organizations such as funeral cooperatives. The appearance of funeral businesses operated for a profit is a modern phenomenon. It is possible to say that the shift from funeral cooperatives to funeral businesses has paralleled the progressive urbanization of the country. The city of Hamamatsu was not an exception to this trend. Nevertheless it is usually the case that the two types of profit and nonprofit funeral service organizations continue to operate side by side in the same area, and in agricultural communities it is not unusual for nonprofit organizations to continue to monopolize funeral services.

In Hamamatsu the first funeral profit-oriented business appeared in the early 1900s along with the increasing urbanization of the country. Profit-oriented organizations developed after World War II as branches of the *gojokai* and are growing rapidly, especially in heavily urbanized areas. However, the nonprofit organizations have not disappeared altogether. In the Hamamatsu area the so-called *rinpo* neighborhood organizations are the smallest unit of the local autonomous council and function as funeral cooperatives. In the heavily urbanized areas the funeral businesses have for

the most part replaced these neighborhood organizations, and even in the outlying areas where support is provided by the city office and the agricultural co-op, the neighborhood organizations are relied on less and less as time passes. The tradition of neighborhood cooperation in times of trouble has weakened, for example. Now there is more reliance on caterers.

In short, profit and nonprofit organizations coexist in the city of Hamamatsu, but in the rural areas the town office and agricultural co-op support the nonprofit organizations and hinder the development of profit-oriented funeral service organizations. Let us take a more detailed look at the historical relationship between these two types of organizations.

The first undertakers appeared in Hamamatsu in the early 1900s. The exact dates are unknown, but if the undertaker which announced its 80th anniversary in 1979 is the oldest, this would place its beginning around the year 1900. This specific undertaker's business was founded by a man who was originally a cabinetmaker. At present the "Hakuzensha" is the largest undertaker among those funeral service businesses which are not *gojokai*.

Undertakers have succeeded mostly in the urban areas, while in the outlying areas the village office has collected funeral accessories and provides them for use by the villagers. In Yūtō during the depression of 1929-1930, the village office purchased funeral accessories for the purpose of providing inexpensive funerals. A bicycle-drawn cart was renovated for use as a hearse by adding a shrine style roof. Recently specially equipped micro bus vans are used as hearses instead of bicycle-drawn carts. A new set of ornaments and funeral accessories are added each year to replace the oldest of many sets. There is one person at the Health and Insurance Section of the city office responsible for matters such as the transportation of the corpse and the altar ornaments. People rely to a great extent on the neighborhood *rinpo* associations for the rest of the matters associated with funerals. This is the normal pattern in the villages, and the funeral businesses of Hamamatsu are called on only in exceptional cases to provide special ornaments.

The funeral businesses are gaining strength in Hamamatsu, but there are also movements to avoid this pattern. In the town of Maisaka, for example, a "Committee for Promotion of a Better Life" (Seikatsu Kaizen Suishin In-kai) has been established as an auxiliary organization to the village office, to which the town's funeral service organizations consign their altar ornaments. The hearse is borrowed from Hamamatsu, and the town office helps pay the expenses. This method was put into practice in 1973, along with the establishment of the "Committee for Promotion of a Better Life," and is becoming the dominant pattern for funerals in this area. Thus in the town of Maisaka there is an attempt to encourage the simplification and uniformity

of funeral practices under the banner of a "better life." There is one undertaker operating in Maisaka, but his business is not bound by the rules of the "Committee for Promotion of a Better Life" when handling funerals outside the town. However, it is not difficult to imagine that the inauguration of the Committee has been a blow to this undertaker's business.

The most conspicuous postwar change to occur in the funeral business is the permeation of the above-mentioned *gojokai*. In Hamamatsu, the first of these, the Tōkai Mutual Aid Center, was established in 1956, but the section in charge of funerals was succeeded by the Hamamatsu Aichi Sōsai, a *gojokai*. Around 1963-1964 the Hamamatsu Kankonsōsai Gojokai was established. Later, the Izumoden (another *gojokai*), which had started business in Hamamatsu in 1965, established a funeral section in 1967. This was the original form of the present Hamamatsu Heiankaku. These organizations incorporated a new pattern of what may be loosely called "mutual benefit associations" (*gojokai*). This type of funeral business has shown rapid growth not only in Hamamatsu but in cities throughout the country. Let us examine this situation in more detail.

## 2. Problems Facing Profit-Oriented Organizations

As of 1980 there were twenty-one funeral service businesses in Hamamatsu. Of these, eighteen were undertakers and three were *gojokai*. These include some which were about to go out of business. These businesses are in desperate competition with each other. Also, those involved in the funeral business regard the involvement of the town offices and agricultural cooperatives as an obstacle to the growth of their business, and they are seeking ways to counter this competition.

Let us examine the number of funerals handled by the funeral businesses to get a grasp of recent trends. However, it is almost impossible to take a detailed survey of the number of funerals handled by each business, so we will get a general idea of the trends by examining the situation at the Hamamatsu Saijō Kaikan crematorium. The Saijō Kaikan is a modern facility constructed in a corner of the city cemetery by Hamamatsu city in 1972. This facility includes fourteen cremation furnaces, a large ceremonial hall which seats 150 to two hundred guests, and two smaller rooms which will seat fifty to one hundred guests. This facility was built on the former site of the city crematorium first constructed in 1924.

The applications for permission to use this Saijō Kaikan were examined from the years 1976 to 1979. However, since this survey was conducted in March of 1980, the results for 1979 are actually those for the year from March 1979 to February 1980. The number of cremations in Hamamatsu during 1978 was 2,135 adults and seventy-four children for a total of 2,209.

In the same year, the use of the Saijō Kaikan included 612 cases for the funeral rooms and 225 cases for the lounges for a total of 837. As for the involvement of funeral businesses in the use of the Saijō Kaikan for funeral services, there were five hundred cases in 1976 and 596 cases in 1979.

In the city as a whole, funeral services conducted in the home are much more common than those conducted at the Saijō Kaikan. It is therefore not easy to draw any conclusions based on the use of the Saijō Kaikan, but at least it can be said that it indicates some important trends.

The first thing I noticed upon examining the results of this survey was the large share of the market controlled by Heiankaku (a *gojokai*) and Hakuzensha (an undertaker). There was no significant difference between the number of cases handled by the respective institutions in 1976. By 1979, however, one had more than twice the business of the other. This change symbolizes the reversal in market share between the *gojokai* and the undertakers. The undertakers had 60.4% of the market in 1976, and *gojokai* had 39.4%. By 1979 the undertaker's share dropped to 40.8% and the *gojokai* advanced to 58.8%. In short, the proportionate share of the market of the undertakers to the *gojokai* was 6:4 in 1976, but three years later had reversed to 4:6. At the same time, the *gojokai* began in 1976 to handle large funerals. This is also a major change from past practices.

On the basis of the situation at the Saijō Kaikan we are struck by the rapid growth of the *gojokai*. Of course, the undertakers have not been standing idly by watching this rapid growth of the *gojokai*. Around 1973 the Hamamatsu Funeral Business Cooperative (including seven or eight businesses) was formed mostly by undertakers in the city. These businesses prepared pamphlets and other PR material for use by all the members and have attempted to maintain a cooperative relationship. As our survey has revealed, however, the undertakers appear to have lost out to the developing *gojokai*, or at least are on a downward course. Moreover, the *gojokai* of Hamamatsu are in a competitive stance and have not formed any cooperative organization.

Let us examine the background to and the reasons why the *gojokai* have grown so quickly. First of all, the *gojokai* have offered inexpensive funerals and utilize a monthly fee investment system. These organizations, which originally tended to offer the simplest funeral services have, in response to the increasing wealth of modern Japanese society, come to offer the most complete service. In other words, the monthly fee pattern best fits the life style of modern urbanites.

Secondly, the monthly fee method made it possible for the *gojokai* to make funerals a marketable item. This is much different from the traditional methods of undertakers. Undertakers refrained from active advertizing,

which seemed to welcome the arrival of misfortune. In contrast, the *gojokai*, by introducing the monthly fee method similar to paying for life insurance, made it possible to actively “sell” funeral services. In fact the *gojokai* salesmen usually attempt to sell marriage, funeral, and other ceremonial occasion services as a package, and avoid soliciting for funerals alone.

The third point is the professional attitude of the *gojokai* employees. The *gojokai* make special efforts to educate their employees through the use of seminars on laws, insurance problems, and other information concerning funerals, the problems accompanying joint ownership, and so forth. In this way these employees are well aware of local customs and the expected form of funeral services, and can help plan such things as the altar ornaments with confidence. The chief mourner can readily trust these employees to take care of things properly. Thus the employees of the *gojokai* play the role formerly occupied by the town elder, and parlay their skills as funeral directors. In this sense the *gojokai* has become the agent for diffusing a new pattern for funeral services.

The professional attitude of the *gojokai* employee is reflected in the cultivation of specialized knowledge and techniques, but is also revealed in their attitudes. The Hamamatsu Kankonsōsai Gojokai lists the following five guidelines for their employee’s attitude:

1. Take pride in your work.
2. Be graceful in your use of words.
3. Take responsible action.
4. Always be humble and diligent.
5. Be sincere in all things.

Of these five articles I would like to emphasize the first two. The very first article reveals an attempt to encourage the idea that employees of this company are the same as other companies. This article was written by the management to encourage employees to plan and perform funeral ceremonies with a professional attitude, to encourage (in the words of the manager) “those employees which may be suffering from an inferiority complex”. In fact, the *gojokai* provides both wedding and funeral services as a package, so in this sense the work of the those in the funeral section and those in the wedding section is the same. A recent topic of discussion at the headquarters of the *gojokai* is the establishment of a classification of “funeral specialist” [*sōsaishi* 葬祭士], like a nutrition specialist, which would correspond to a funeral director in the United States. In the United States, funeral directors have all graduated from college, having specialized in the field of mortuary practices, and thus their social status is relatively high.

However, even if one takes pride in one’s work, the funeral business is a

special kind of service and involves various restrictions. For example, one cannot greet the customers with the usual "Thank you for coming," or "Please come again." This indicates one of the difficult aspects of the funeral business and underlines the necessity for article number two. In short, one must choose one's words carefully. One must be properly polite, respectful, choose comforting words, and avoid imperative mannerisms. Instead of referring directly to "the corpse", one should refer indirectly to "the deceased" or "the one who has departed". One should make manifold use of indirect and vague phrases such as "Please excuse our inadequacies." This attitude is also emphasized in article four in the exhortation to be humble. The employees have, since 1979, acted as masters of ceremony at funerals where they must be particularly careful about their choice of words. This attitude is important not only in the choice of words but also in acting correctly and politely, and taking care in the choice of proper clothing. One must be dressed in the proper black mourning suit with a black necktie, yet avoid the impression of being merely a subordinate employee. Here is where a professional attitude is made manifest.

In this way a professional attitude is taking root among those involved in the funeral business, especially those employed by the *gojokai*. These people, acting in the stead of the chief mourner, feel a noble responsibility to make sure that this last ceremony in a human being's life (his or her death) proceeds smoothly and is commemorated properly. As mentioned above, a manager of a *gojokai* referred to some employees as "tending to have an inferiority complex," but this does not describe the present situation. Many of the employees of the *gojokai* tend to be younger people, and not a few find meaning in their lives through such work. For example, the circumstances of the chief mourners are always different, leaving much room for exercising one's talent for planning. Even the younger employees can work without getting bored. The work is not restricted according to seniority, and the salary levels are not bad.

The background of and reasons for the rapid success of the *gojokai* have been outlined in the three points discussed above. However, it must be pointed out that even such a seemingly successful enterprise as these *gojokai* do face some difficult problems. The fact is that these *gojokai* have a very difficult time in areas where the nonprofit organizations have a strong base. In towns such as Yūtō or Maisaka, *gojokai* handle only one funeral a year, if that. The altar fees in 1980 were ¥7,000 in Yūtō and ¥15,000 in Maisaka, while the fees charged by *gojokai* range from ¥30,000 to ¥120,000. As the altar fees clearly indicate, it is very difficult for even *gojokai* to survive in areas with a healthy nonprofit funeral services organization.

## Notes

1. *kankonsōsai gojokai* 冠婚葬祭互助会: lit. “mutual aid associations” for ceremonial occasions such as coming of age, wedding, and funeral ceremonies. *Gojokai* were originally unstructured mutual aid societies through which neighbors would participate and cooperate to help those in need. In context of this article, *gojokai* are professional businesses which deal in ceremonial occasions, namely marriage and funeral services, and are structured like insurance companies. Families become members of these associations and pay a monthly membership fee in order to have the association organize and provide marriage and funeral services at a discounted rate when the need arises.
2. A local term referring to the small altar left in the home after the funeral. This altar is not removed until the forty-nine day period (seven times seven weeks) after the deceased’s death is past.
3. Spirits of the dead who are not properly buried or have no one to give them a proper burial and after care.

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