

# Maintenance and Change in Japanese Traditional Funerals and Death-related Behavior

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## INTRODUCTION

Today nearly all Japanese people hold Buddhist funerals. The Japan Housewives Association (1981) reports that, in a limited survey, the percentage of persons who held Buddhist funerals was 93.8, and that of those holding Shinto funerals only 3.9 percent (see Table 1). This big difference clearly brings out one of the key features of Buddhism in Japan.

Table 1  
Types of funerals in Japan

Religious Ritual	Number	Percent
Buddhist	423	93.8
Shinto	18	3.9
Christian	6	1.3
Other	2	0.4
No answer	2	0.4
TOTAL	451	99.8

Source: Japan Housewives Association (1981)

To understand Japanese Buddhism and this feature in particular, we must take account of its syncretic character, which is a product of its long and varied history of acculturation.

To review this history very quickly, Buddhism, after originating in India, made its way via China and Korea to

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This paper was first presented at the 10th World Congress of the International Sociological Association, 16-21 August 1982, held in Mexico.

Japan, where it was introduced in the sixth century A.D. The original forms of Indian Buddhism gradually changed as the religion was transmitted to surrounding regions and combined with aspects of local native religions. This phenomenon is clear both in China and in Korea.

The Buddhism that entered Japan was, accordingly, a blend of Buddhism and Chinese and/or Korean folk belief. In Japan Buddhism was further accommodated to Japanese culture and became more a deep-rooted ancestral cult tradition than a religion in *sensu strictu*.<sup>1</sup> This is how Japanese Buddhism acquired its syncretic character with particular reference to Buddhist rites for the dead, namely, the funeral and subsequent series of memorial rites. These are Buddhist in their ritual style, but involve in varying combinations a rich syncretic overlay of Indian thought, Confucianism, Taoism, Chinese folk customs and indigenous Japanese beliefs and practices. Structurally, they are deeply rooted in the indigenous ancestral cult tradition.

Thus Japanese Buddhism has come to play an important role alongside Shintoism in both people's spiritual and daily lives. In the typical Japanese house one may see a domestic Shinto shrine (*kamidana*) and a household Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) side by side, the belief being that the former will protect the house and the latter the family. About 80 percent of the Japanese are married by Shinto rites, and more than 90 percent, as we have seen, are buried according to Buddhist rites. We may say that Shinto's main role is connected to the joyous side of life while that of Buddhism is connected to the serious side.

Buddhist rites for the dead are so prevalent in Japanese society that most Japanese feel that Buddhism is the only religion to turn to for such rites. Historically this perception is attributable to the fact that during the Edo

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1. I have chosen to use the term "ancestor cult" rather than "ancestor worship" in this paper because, as indicated by Reid (1981, p.9), the word "worship" often has theological overtones largely informed by the Judeo-Christian tradition.

period (1603-1867) all Japanese were obliged to belong to a specific Buddhist temple, and each temple therefore had a network of supporting households, or a "temple supporters' organization."<sup>2</sup> Since that time, nearly every Japanese person has been affiliated with the same temple to which the ancestors of his or her family (*ie*) have belonged from generation to generation. The Japanese feel it natural, therefore, not only to have funeral and memorial services held for each dead member of the family, but also to have the rites performed by the priest of the temple to which one's family has long belonged.

When a person dies a funeral and a series of memorial rites are set in motion, culminating in the observance of a final memorial service held most commonly on the thirty-third or fiftieth anniversary of the death. The purpose of these rites is to change the status of the deceased from being an unstable, dangerous and polluting spirit to being a stable, protective and purified ancestral spirit. In the carrying out of funeral, burial and memorial rites there are, to be sure, numerous regional variations, but all these variations can be drawn together as expressions of a single, general type of attitude and belief found throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> This generalized type of belief and attitude is

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2. Until the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Buddhism was the de facto state religion and its temples functioned in part as agencies of the state, serving to register and control every household and its members. After 1868, when Buddhism ceased to play this role, the law calling for the temple supporters' organizations was abrogated, but in its place another law was established that until 1945 required the male head of every household to be responsible for the ancestral tablets, the grave, etc. Since this implied a continuing tie with a Buddhist temple, the net effect of the Meiji period law was to perpetuate the family temple link as a traditional custom.
  3. The people of the Amami and Okinawa islands, partly because of their distance from the main islands of Japan, and partly because of the severe policy set for Buddhism by the Satsuma feudal authority, were not required to obey the law that compelled all other Japanese households, beginning in the early seventeenth century, to establish ties with a local Buddhist temple. Accordingly, they did not develop temple supporters' organizations. In ritual perspective, however, one can observe a basic and common ritual structure. See Fujii 1977.

analyzed below.

#### BUDDHIST FUNERAL AND MEMORIAL RITES

*Funerals.* When a death occurs, the legally prescribed formalities call for certain actions. First, a death certificate has to be issued. If the death occurs in a hospital it is issued by a hospital doctor; if it occurs in a home by an attending doctor, or if in a traffic accident by a policeman or police medical authority. The completed form is given to the head of the deceased's family for immediate presentation to the city or ward office, even if it is midnight, Sunday or an official holiday. This office then issues a permit for the disposal of the corpse, by interment or cremation, to be carried out no earlier than twenty-four hours after the certified time of death.

Second, the body of the deceased is cleaned. This involves giving the deceased a symbolic last drop of water (*shini-mizu*); bathing the corpse (*yu-kan*) from a vessel in which hot water has been added to cold (*sakasa-mizu*, a reversal of normal practice); plugging all orifices, closing the eyes, clasping the hands and covering the face with a white cloth; dressing it in white as if for pilgrimage; laying it out head north (*kita-makura*) and face west (a position tabooed in daily life); inverting a folding screen and placing a bladed weapon near or on it; offering incense, flowers and candles; and sealing the domestic Shinto shrine with white paper in order to shield it from the pollution of death.

Meanwhile, news of the death is spread quickly to those who need to be informed, especially the priest of the temple to which the family belongs. The priest requested to officiate chants a pillow-sutra (*makura-gyō*), makes the deceased a disciple of the Buddha, and in token of his or her membership in the saṃgha provides the deceased with a posthumous Buddhist name written on two temporary white mortuary tablets. One of these is placed on the altar and the other is later taken to the tomb.

After the sutra chanting and the name bestowal follows

the rite in which the corpse is placed in a coffin which has been incorporated into an altar prepared with a black-banded photograph of the deceased, fresh flowers, fruit and other paraphernalia. Then a wake is held with all due solemnity.

At the funeral proper, held either in the home or at the temple, all the mourners are invited to solemnly pay their last respects to the deceased during the sutra chanting. Above all representatives of groups with whom the deceased was associated make offerings of incense and express their condolences in direct address to the altar. The priest, briefly recounting the career of the deceased and entrusting him or her to the hands of the Buddha, officiates at the solemn rite to guide the deceased to the other world.

Then the coffin is taken out of the altar and its lid raised. At this point some time is set aside so that immediate family members and close relatives can view the body for the last time and the deceased can be surrounded with flowers. The coffin is then nailed shut with two symbolic blows delivered by each member of the kinship group. The tool employed is not a hammer but a stone. In most cases, the funeral service takes about one hour.

Afterwards the coffin is carried by the relatives and friends to the hearse, at which time the successor of the deceased, bearing the white mortuary tablet in his or her hands as a symbolic expression of succession, addresses words of appreciation to all the mourners. Then the family members, relatives and old friends proceed in cars behind the hearse to the crematorium. At the crematorium the priest chants a sutra as the coffin and corpse are consumed by the flames. Cremation takes one to one-and-a-half hours. When it is finished the family members and relatives then gather some of the ashes and put them into an urn.

The custom is that people go in twos to pick up a portion of the ashes. The bones are handed directly from one set of chopsticks to another, this act too being tabooed in ordinary life. The urn is ordinarily installed on the tem-

porary altar in front of the household Buddhist altar for thirty-five or forty-nine days, or enshrined in the repository of the temple, until it is interred under the family tombstone.

The aim of the Buddhist funeral rite, in brief, is to separate the spirit of the deceased from the body, guiding the former to the other Buddhist ideal world, and disposing of the latter by interment or cremation.

*Memorial rites.* After this funeral rite memorial services are held, ideally on the day of the death each week for seven weeks, the last rite being thus observed on the forty-ninth day after the death.

Some of these weekly rites are now honored more in their breach than in observance, but the first (on the seventh day), the fifth (on the thirty-fifth day), and the seventh (on the forty-ninth day) are still observed in many parts of Japan. The seventh and forty-ninth day memorial services, in particular, are thought to be supported by the belief that the soul of the deceased wanders about the house or resides atop the roof for seven days or forty-nine days after death. So far as the living are concerned the period between cremation and the forty-ninth day is the time when pollution of death is thought to be at its strongest. Several obligations and taboos belong to this period, such as wearing somber clothes, abstaining from meat, shunning public entertainment, and avoiding Shinto shrines and their festivals. These taboos and obligations fall most heavily on the family and relatives, especially on the spouse and successor of the deceased.

The forty-ninth day marks the end of mourning and the lifting of pollution. This is the day when messages of appreciation are sent to those who attended the wake and/or funeral, together with a gift in return for "incense money" received. At this time the urn of ashes is buried under the tombstone; the temporary white mortuary tablets are burned and a permanent black mortuary tablet is prepared and ritually installed in the household Buddhist altar;

and the spouse and successor may return to their usual activities and occupations.

After the forty-ninth day the deceased is integrated into the realm of ancestral spirits, but the spirit is still an unstable, polluted and dangerous being that needs to be purified and protected by a further series of memorial services. There remain three sets of rites to be held after the forty-ninth day.

The first of these is the monthly and annual deathday rite (*meinichi*). It is traditional among Japanese Buddhists to hold a short service in front of the household Buddhist altar every morning and evening before meals, offering food, incense, water, candles and fresh flowers. On death anniversaries, these daily rites involve, in addition, group repetition of a sutra selection. Until 1945 all members of the family used to participate in these services and chant a portion of the scripture, led by the family head. But nowadays, unfortunately, most family members, especially of the younger generation, pay no attention to these services.

The postwar religious tendency is thus to observe monthly and annual deathday rites in a modest way for a few years, and then to drop them. (In eastern Japan such rites are often held without a priest; in western Japan the priest often continues the custom of visiting the households connected with his temple on the deathday anniversaries and leading these monthly and annual rites.)

The second set of rites is the serial. In general these rites are held on all or some of the following anniversaries of death: the hundredth day, then the first, third, seventh, thirteenth, seventeenth, twenty-third, twenty-seventh and thirty-third (or fiftieth) anniversaries. In many parts of Japan, especially in the Jōdo Shin denomination, an anniversary rite is held in the twenty-fifth year instead of in the twenty-third and twenty-seventh years. The serial anniversary rites are generally held with some degree of pomp and splendor. The family invites close kin, intimate friends, business associates of the deceased, and neighbors. After the priest's chanting of the sutra, all of the participants

offer incense. This completes the rite. Then the party adjourns to a nearby restaurant for refreshments.

The third set of rites is calendrical. These are the rites held at the equinoxes (Higan) and the Bon festivals. The *Higan-e* service is held in all Buddhist temples on the spring and fall equinoxes. Members of the family attend the Higan-e service and visit and clean the tombstone, burn incense and offer prayer. A brief sutra is chanted by the priest at the graveyard.

Bon services take place for three or four days beginning July 13, though the time varies according to geographical region. This is a time when the spirits of the deceased are believed to all visit their homes. On the evening of Bon, people go to the graveyard carrying lanterns and welcome the spirits of the deceased. In the home, the household Buddhist altar and the mortuary tablets are dusted and polished. A special altar is set up, and all the mortuary tablets are removed from the regular altar and placed on it, together with special food offerings. The mortuary tablet of a newly deceased person is given the place of honor on the first Bon after death. Usually a priest from the family temple calls to recite a sutra in front of this special Bon altar, then goes on, visiting all the households affiliated with his temple.

In many parts of the country the thirty-third or fiftieth anniversary of death is the final individualized observance for the deceased. After this service, the individual mortuary tablet enshrined in the household Buddhist altar is either burned or enshrined in the temple repository; on this occasion a stupa made of an evergreen branch is planted on the grave. On Himejima island in Oita Prefecture the tombstone of the deceased is turned upside down on the fiftieth anniversary of death.

In and through these various actions individual identity is said to disappear and the deceased is incorporated into the collective body of ancestors, being reborn as a guardian spirit or god.



### CHANGES IN RITES AND CUSTOMS

Japanese funeral and post-funeral rites and customs have been changed considerably since World War II. Such changes can be seen first in the disposal of the dead.

With the increase of urbanization disposal of the dead has rapidly shifted from interment to cremation. Both means of disposal were legally recognized and regulated in the modern period by the "Bochi, maisō tō ni kansuru hōritsu" ("Law governing graveyards, burials, etc.) of 1884. Interment is the older of the two methods. Cremation was introduced along with Buddhism during the Nara and Heian periods (710-794 and 794-1185) and although variously accepted gradually spread from the center of the nation to the outlying districts and became the general practice.

Interment entails many years to reduce the corpse to a skeleton and then to dust. Cremation, however, reduces the corpse to ashes in a very short time. This mitigates fear of the pollution of death. For this reason, Japan's acceptance of cremation is a fact of revolutionary importance in our funeral history. In addition to mitigating fear of pollution, cremation has certain practical benefits: it makes it possible to inter the remains in less space; it prevents wild animals from damaging the remains, and it has no deleterious effect on public health. This last point, in connection with developing urbanization, hastened the adoption of cremation, for in addition to the 1884 law, which prohibited the establishment of new graveyards, a subsequent law of 1897 required that the bodies of people who died of epidemic diseases be disposed of by cremation. Together these laws had the effect of promoting the construction of crematoriums.

Table 2 shows that the proportion of bodies disposed of by cremation throughout the nation has increased dramatically from 54 percent in 1950 to 91.1 percent in 1980. Areas where cremation amounted to nearly 100 percent in 1980 were the cities of Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya and Fukuoka, and the prefectures of Ishikawa, Toyama and Hokkaido.

Adoption of cremation and the accompanying fear of

**Table 2**  
Cremations in Japan

Year	1950	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980
Percent	54.0	57.4	63.1	71.8	79.2	85.7	91.1

Source: Ministry of Health and Welfare

pollution from the body or spirit of a deceased person is connected with another change in the area of belief and custom. In rural districts the tradition is that those to be informed of a death are contacted by a pair of messengers who are not to look behind them as they carry out their task. The belief is, or was, that if a single person carried the message, or if either or both of the two messengers looked back, this would result in his or their possession by the ghost of the deceased. Nowadays, this custom of using messengers is changing.

As opposed to an earlier time for which data are lacking but when nearly all parishioners doubtless followed this custom, Table 3 shows that 58.3 percent of those parishioners belonging to the Shingon-Chizan denomination in 1978 who experienced a death in the family informed their temple in the old way, whereas 39.6 communicated their message by telephone. Utilization of this latter form of communication, following demographic changes that have separated family members and dispersed temple supporters, implies both a weakening of the old belief in possession as well as a general availability of telephones.<sup>4</sup>

Still another change connected with urbanization can be seen in the disappearance of the old custom of walking in procession to the crematorium. Almost universally, only

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4. In 1979 there was one telephone for every 4.56 persons in Japan. In rural and metropolitan areas alike, nearly every home has its own telephone.

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close relatives now go to the crematorium. Other mourners at the funeral service are dismissed with a word of appreciation, after which the close relatives make the trip by car—though they still go by one route and return by another.

**Table 3**  
Informing the temple of a death in the family

Means	Number	Percent
A pair of messengers	28	58.3
Telephone	19	39.6
Funeral director	1	2.1
TOTAL	48	100.0

Source: Shingon-Chizan Mission Work Center (1978)

Further, the funeral service, which was once universally held at home, is now increasingly conducted at a Buddhist temple hall or elsewhere. Evidence of this change is presented in Tables 4 and 5. The main reason for this change is that residences built recently in urban areas are too small to permit the holding of a funeral. People turn, therefore, to a Buddhist temple, an undertaker's funeral parlor, or to the neighborhood meeting hall.

Interment customs continue largely unchanged despite the tendency to inter ashes instead of fleshly remains. As

**Table 4**  
Sites of funeral services

Location	Number	Percent
Home	18	47.4
Home and temple	13	34.2
Temple	7	18.4
TOTAL	38	100.0

Source: Shingon-Chizan Mission Work Center (1978)

**Table 5**  
Sites of funeral services

Location	Number	Percent
Home	321	71.2
Temple	74	16.4
Shrine	2	0.4
Church	8	1.8
Neighborhood Hall	14	3.1
Funeral Parlor	20	4.4
Other	3	0.7
No Answer	11	2.4
TOTAL	453	99.4

Source: Japan Housewives Association (1981)

Table 6 shows, 59 percent inter the ashes in the grave on the same day as the funeral. The social function of interment, however, has clearly changed. Interment on the day of the funeral implies a shortening of time, a quickening of the action, and as such an adjustment to the needs of busy, widely scattered people who can gather for the funeral but cannot remain long.

**Table 6**  
Interment timing

Day	Number	Percent
Funeral day	23	59.0
Seventh day	5	12.8
Forty-ninth day	9	23.1
Other	2	5.1
TOTAL	59	100.0

Source: Shingon-Chizan Mission Work Center (1978)

This and the other examples involving a shortening of time indicate a diminution of death related pollution. Table

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7 shows that the percentage of people who hold seventh-day rites on the day of or the day after the funeral is nearly the same as that of those who observe these rites on the customary seventh day. Again, Table 8 indicates that whereas half the respondents held the rites marking the end of mourning on the customary forty-ninth day, nearly as many held them on a different day, 20 percent of the total doing so on the day of the funeral.

In many rural areas it has become customary to set up seven small stupas on the gravesite and to break one stupa every seventh day, the mourning period being completed when the last stupa is broken. This custom, however, is becoming increasingly meaningless. Now all seven are left intact until the forty-ninth day. The custom has completely

**Table 7**  
Days on which "Seventh-day rites" are observed

Day	Number	Percent
Funeral day	14	34.2
Day after funeral	6	14.6
Seventh day after	21	51.2
TOTAL	41	100.0

Source: Shingon-Chizan Mission Work Center (1978)

**Table 8**  
Days for rites marking the end of mourning

Day	Number	Percent
Funeral day	7	20.0
Fifth day	1	2.85
Thirty-fifth day	8	22.9
Forty-ninth day	18	51.4
Hunderdth day	1	2.85
TOTAL	35	100.0

Source: Shingon-Chizan Mission Work Center (1978)

**Table 9**  
Storage of ashes in a Buddhist temple

Year	Requests	Remaining*
1945	7	2
1946	15	5
1947	11	3
1948	18	4
1949	14	3
1950	34	4
1951	45	12
1952	27	5
1953	18	7
1954	12	3
1955	20	2
1956	9	1
1957	11	9
1958	6	4
1959	13	5
1960	18	6
1961	13	4
1962	13	5
1963	17	9
1964	13	3
1965	13	7
1966	23	9
1967	21	9
1968	35	17
1969	23	18
TOTAL	449	156

Note: Refers to ashes remaining as of 1969.

Source: Fujii 1970, p.84

disappeared from metropolitan areas. This, too, can be thought of as a "shortening" of rituals. The more abbreviated rituals become the more vague the sense of pollution, and it appears that abbreviation of ritual tends to increase

with urban residence. In cities such as Tokyo or Yokohama, the religiously floating population (the number of people who have no temple affiliation and no grave for their dead) is on the increase. Even when a grave is needed, some postpone obtaining one for years, requesting a nearby temple to store the urn of ashes until an appropriate time (see Table 9). This tendency too may lead to, and/or result from, a weakening sense of the pollution of death.

### ANALYSIS

Two keys may be proposed by which to understand this phenomenon of abbreviated pollution and taboo-related customs as well as funeral and memorial service rites. One is the dynamics of the religiously floating population, the other the development of the funeral business.

The religiously floating population has come into being as a product of widespread shifts of population from the linear to the nuclear family. According to national census data, the proportion of nuclear families (60 percent in 1960) increased only five percent between 1920 and 1960, but between 1960 and 1965 it increased from 60 to 70.4 percent. This remarkable change was accompanied by a decrease in the number of children. In 1965 the average number of family members fell below 4.0 and has continued to decline ever since (see Table 10).

Table 10  
Average number of family members

Year	1955	1960	1965	1970	1975	1980
Average	4.68	4.13	3.75	3.45	3.35	3.28

Source: Statistical Bulletin, Ministry of Health and Welfare

Structurally, this change in family organization signifies a shift from a vertical relationship between a main house and its branches to a horizontal relationship between autonomous houses. In terms of parent-children relation-

ships the shift is from one based on duty to one based on emotional dependence. As social values oriented to the group change to social values oriented to the individual, there is a weakening of the feeling that it is essential to carry on the family name and business even if one must adopt a child to do so. This is borne out by surveys conducted every five years since 1953 by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics. One question posed in these surveys was: "If you were childless, do you think you would feel it necessary to adopt a child in order to perpetuate the family line, even if the child was not related to you by blood? Or, conversely do you think the matter is unimportant?" In 1953 some 73 percent of the respondents indicated that they "would adopt," but by 1973 people of this opinion had declined by half, whereas those who "would not adopt" increased from 16 percent in 1953 to 41 percent in 1973 (see Table 11).

**Table 11**  
Adoption to perpetuate family line (percentage)

Response	1953	1958	1963	1968	1973
Adopt	73	63	51	43	36
Not adopt	16	21	32	41	41
Would depend	7	8	12	9	17
Other	1	1	1	2	1
Don't know	3	7	4	5	5
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Institute of Statistical Mathematics (1975)

These various changes have come with the storm of urbanization and industrialization that arose with the Japanese economic recovery following the Korean Incident in 1950. Modernization of the industrial structure made it possible for industry, located in the cities, to absorb great numbers of workers from rural areas. In 1946-47 the rural to urban population ratio was 7 to 3. By 1961 this ratio



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had reversed. The preponderance of once-rural urban dwellers implied the emergence of a large religiously floating population. This phenomenon in turn was directly related to the post-1961 mushrooming of new religions, some of which grew to become gigantic organizations that absorbed much of the religiously floating population.

One of the characteristics of this religiously floating population is that it has no links with any temple supporters' organization. When a family member dies, therefore, people belonging to this classification have no way of dealing with the situation. They are not in touch with a priest they can call on to officiate, and they do not know the mortuary customs handed down from generation to generation in the traditional family structure, supported as it was by the temple supporters' organization. An investigation I conducted in 1970 showed that of 1,064 households for which funerals were held in one Buddhist temple in Yokohama between January 1949 and July 1969, 964 (90.6 percent) contacted the temple because it had been recommended to them by people from whom they sought advice (see Table 12). Of the 964 sources of advice, moreover, 710 were relatives or acquaintances. Those who contacted the temple on their own initiative (5.9 percent) and those who

**Table 12**  
Motivation for contacting a Yokohama temple

Motivation	Number	Percent
Own initiative	63	5.9
Advice from others	964	90.6
Acquaintances	625	58.7
Funeral directors, cemetery teahouses, stonecutters	254	23.9
Relatives	85	8.0
Unknown	37	3.5
TOTAL	1064	100.0

Source: Fujii 1970, p. 73

did so on the advice of relatives or acquaintances (66.7 percent) amount, therefore, to 72.6 percent of the total. As for the remaining 254 known sources of advice, the majority is made up of funeral directors.

The funeral industry, it may be suggested, finds much of its support in the religiously floating population. Among institutions requested to conduct funerals in 1981, undertaking establishments accounted for 45.9 percent, and the mutual aid association (to be taken up below) for 28.2 percent, for a total of 74.1 percent. This figure contrasts sharply with that for the combined total of 7.4 percent for Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines and Christian churches (see Table 13).

**Table 13**  
Institutions requested to conduct funerals in 1981

Institution	Number	Percent
Undertaking establishments	216	45.9
Mutual aid association	133	28.2
Temples, shrines, churches	35	7.4
Neighborhood groups	24	5.1
Municipalities	16	3.4
Agricultural cooperatives	13	2.8
Labor unions	8	1.7
Others	18	3.8
No answer	8	1.7
TOTAL	471	100.0

Source: Japan Housewives Association (1981)

Prior to World War II when a person died in a rural area it was taken for granted that the family would ask a carpenter to make a coffin and that members of the community would pitch in to perform various tasks such as preparing and serving food, digging the grave, etc. The priest functioned as the funeral director, and the funeral itself was largely a community affair. Today, however, the

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funeral is private. The roles of priest and funeral director have diverged. As Table 14 shows, only 9.3 percent of the respondents to a 1978 survey denied any role for the funeral director. Particularly important is the fact that roles now generally recognized as the prerogative of the funeral director are those once performed by the community. In addition to setting up and decorating the altar, arranging the funeral program and assuming responsibility for food and drink for the mourners, the funeral director also handles such matters as providing the death certificate and scheduling the cremation, washing the corpse and laying it out in the coffin, etc.

**Table 14**  
Roles recognized for funeral director

Role	Number	Percent
Setting up, decorating altar	27	62.8
Programming funeral	5	11.6
Arranging for refreshments	5	11.6
Other	2	4.7
None	4	9.3
TOTAL	43	100.0

Source: Shingon-Chizan Mission Work Center (1978)

A related change is to be seen in the percentage of people who die in hospitals. In 1947 only 9.2 percent of the deaths in Japan occurred in hospitals; by 1975 this figure had increased to 46.7 percent. In small and medium-sized urban areas the 1975 figure was 51.1 percent. In major urban areas such as Tokyo it was over 70 percent.

Today people encounter birth and death in the hospital rather than in a family or community context. When someone dies the survivors view only the face of the corpse through a small window in the coffin lid and do not wash and dress the body in the traditional way. This is the situation that informs the modern funeral. As the roles of the

funeral director have increased, those of the priest have decreased. The priest now merely officiates at the funeral ceremony. People still taboo the word for death, but their relegation of what were once family and community responsibilities to the hospital and funeral director, not to mention their expectation that the priest will do no more than perform the proper ritual, means that they are losing touch with the mystery of life and death to which the taboo once pointed.

With regard to the funeral industry, particularly important is the growth of what I referred to above as the "mutual aid association" and which now may be identified by its full name: the All-Japan Mutual Aid Association for Weddings and Funerals. This association started in a small way in the city of Yokosuka in August 1948. Born during the immediate postwar years when people were hard put to earn enough to live on, it began as a means whereby funeral and wedding directors could sell their services to people who paid membership fees and were thereby entitled to draw on the pool of funds to lighten their expense burdens for the two most expensive rites, weddings and funerals. In 1971 it applied for recognition as a company to which people could subscribe on a nationwide basis under its present name. In October 1973 a meeting was held of the six member establishments of the national association. The number of member establishments increased dramatically in 1974 and 1975. During this two year period alone, over half of the present total of three hundred fifty-four establishments joined the national association (see Table 15).

So far as funerals (as opposed to weddings) are concerned, it is to be noted that only funeral directors join the national association. The funeral directors are generally proprietors of shops selling Buddhist altar fittings, flowers or photos, or of shops that rent formal wear or do catering. Ordinary people merely subscribe and contract for installment-plan payments in anticipation of weddings and funerals. As of 31 March 1981 (see Table 16) the three hundred fifty-four member establishments had on their

Table 15

Increase in member establishments, by area  
of the All-Japan Mutual Aid Association  
for Weddings and Funerals

Area	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	Total
Sapporo	-	7	6	3	1	2(2)	1	0	3(3)	23(5)
Sendai	1	9	2(1)	3	1(1)	1(1)	0	1(1)	6(6)	24(10)
Tokyo	1	37	38(1)	10(4)	8(4)	10(2)	3(1)	2	9(4)	118(16)
Nagoya	2	12	19	2(1)	4	4(4)	1	2(2)	1(1)	47(8)
Osaka	2	6	13(1)	12(1)	2	3(3)	0	4(4)	0	42(9)
Hiroshima	-	6	8	1	0	2	3	0	3(3)	23(3)
Shikoku	-	7	6	1	0	5(3)	2(1)	1	1(1)	23(5)
Fukushima	-	18	8	6	9	3	5(2)	2(2)	1	52(4)
Okina wa	-	-	-	-	-	1(1)	0	1(1)	0	2(2)
TOTAL	6	102	100(3)	38(6)	25(5)	31(16)	15(4)	13(10)	24(18)	354(62)

Source: Data adapted from figures provided by the All-Japan Mutual Aid Association for Weddings and Funerals

Note: Figures in parentheses represent newly-formed enterprises

Table 16  
 Contracts and advance payments of All-Japan Mutual  
 Aid Association for Weddings and Funerals, 1973-1981

Year	Date	Contracts	Change	Advance payment	Change
1973	31 Mar	4,267,000	--	24,325,645,000	--
1973	30 Sep	4,621,000	+8.3%	30,731,582,000	+26.3%
1974	31 Mar	4,995,000	+8.1	34,491,883,000	+12.2
1974	30 Sep	5,455,000	+9.2	40,412,216,000	+17.2
1975	31 Mar	5,984,000	+9.7	47,466,280,000	+17.5
1975	30 Sep	6,571,000	+9.8	58,543,293,000	+23.3
1976	31 Mar	7,170,000	+9.1	72,456,522,000	+23.8
1976	30 Sep	7,815,000	+9.0	85,382,454,000	+17.8
1977	31 Mar	8,173,000	+4.6	102,190,572,000	+19.7
1977	30 Sep	8,841,000	+8.2	122,294,779,000	+19.7
1978	31 Mar	9,216,000	+4.2	143,283,605,000	+17.2
1978	30 Sep	9,888,000	+7.3	167,234,367,000	+16.7
1979	31 Mar	10,334,000	+4.5	191,941,877,000	+14.8
1979	30 Sep	10,991,000	+6.4	218,790,613,000	+14.0
1980	31 Mar	11,497,000	+4.6	246,201,926,000	+12.5
1980	30 Sep	12,136,709	+5.6	276,969,480,000	+12.5
1981	31 Mar	11,870,000	-2.2	307,800,000,000	+11.1

Source: Data adapted from figures provided by All-Japan Mutual Aid Association for Weddings and Funerals

Notes: 1. "Advance payments" represents net accumulation after cancellations.

2. Data was modified in 1981.

books 11,870,000 contracts for such payments, and the total of advance payments received amounted to 307,800,000 yen (approximately \$1,338,261,000 calculated at ¥230 to US \$1). If one assumes, conservatively, that each family in Japan has subscribed for two "shares," this leads to the inference that six million (one of six) families have subscribed to the association. This inference finds a degree of support in research data published by the Japan Housewives Association (1981) to the effect that 28.5 percent of their members participate in one or more associations.

Some 3,500-3,600 funeral related establishments, including referral agencies, are listed in Japanese telephone directories. Of this number, one well known body is comprised of people whose families have been in the undertaking business for several generations. In 1955 these

funeral directors organized the All-Japan Funeral Directors Cooperative. As of March 1981, this cooperative claimed a membership of thirty-nine cooperative associations made up of some 1,300 establishments.

The formation of cooperatives in the funeral industry has exerted considerable influence on traditional Japanese customs. One such influence is the standardization of altars and funeral wear. If this standardization is linked to the tendency to reduce the priest to a limited ritual role, it becomes clear that denominationally specific symbols and practices are giving way before a general wave of homogenization.

#### CONCLUSION

The emphasis the Japanese people now place on recently deceased kin as opposed to remote ancestors is connected with a tendency to hold an elaborate funeral and abbreviate the subsequent series of memorial rites. This tendency, in turn, is tied up with longer life spans. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, in 1980 the average life expectancy for Japanese men was 73.32 years and for women 78.83 years. In 1955 these figures were 63.60 and 67.75 respectively. This in turn increases the income earning years of the heirs and makes it possible for them to honor the deceased with an elaborate costly funeral.

In an earlier paper (Fujii 1970) I analyzed the dynamics involved in the renewal of a temple supporters' organization that served to link a religiously floating population and a particular temple where funeral rites were performed in cooperation with a funeral director. In this case the temple formed ties with only one generation, people of fixed abode. The ties, therefore, were not necessarily hereditary. It is at least possible that the persons who chose to form ties with this temple did so because they held in memory a clear image of their deceased parents and grandparents and wished particularly to pay respects to them.

To be considered by way of conclusion, however, is the

question of the reasons for the survival of memorial rites despite the social changes that seem to jeopardize them.

One reason for their survival is the continuing belief in the spirits of the dead. The newspaper *Asahi Shinbun* published on 5 May 1981 the results of a survey that include reference to this matter. To the question "Do you think that people's spirits continue to exist after death, 60 percent of the respondents answered in the affirmative, 30 percent in the negative, and the rest gave no answer. Of the belief affirming 60 percent, 34 percent identified themselves as having no religious affiliation, 25 percent as having a religious affiliation, and 1 percent as "other." It appears, therefore, that belief in some kind of spirit existence after death is maintained by many Japanese people, whether or not they have ties with a religious organization. The persistence of this belief is doubtless one reason for the continuation of memorial rites.

Another reason for their survival is the continuing custom of giving "incense money" (a condolence gift) as a traditional form of mutual aid. In some cases these gifts are stipulated by ordinance. According to the regulations of the National Personnel Authority, when a civil servant dies, incense money in the amount of two months' salary is paid to the heirs. In addition, each person who attends a wake or funeral generally offers a gift of incense money. (Smaller gifts, under a different name, are offered on the occasion of each memorial service.) Consequently, when a funeral director accepts a request to arrange a funeral, he is generally thought to scale his charge to an estimate relating to the total amount of incense money that can be expected.

In 1981 the Japan Housewives association published the results of its research into people's attitudes toward funerals and their costs. People who thought these costs "appropriate" amounted to 25.4 percent, while 72.6 percent found them extravagant" or "wasteful." The latter group objected in particular to the cost of floral tributes (19.1 percent), altar paraphernalia (18 percent), catered food and



drink for condolence offering neighbors and visitors (14.9 percent) and gifts sent in return for incense money received (17.2 percent). The custom of sending a return gift to those who present incense money is thought burdensome by many. Only 3.4 percent thought it "a good custom"; 44.4 percent took the passive view that nothing can be done about it because it is so widespread, and 43.2 percent thought it should be abolished. In practice, however, 93.4 percent of those surveyed indicated that they too "sent return gifts." For the majority, therefore, there is a gap between attitude and behavior, between what they think about this custom and what they do about it. The tendency is to subordinate private ideas to group expectations. So long as this attitude prevails, the customs associated with funerals and memorial rites can be expected to continue.

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