

The (Un)social Smells of Death: Changing Tides in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract: *In the face of a high aging population, decline in the rates of marriage and childbirth, and post-growth economic shifts, sociality is downsizing in Japan away from the family to more single lifestyles. The effects of this on the necro-landscape are examined here in terms of what happens to those who die all alone, untended by others (“lonely death”) as well as new practices emerging to replace the family grave and family caregivers with an alternative social model (what is called “promiscuous care”). The essay argues that, at both ends of this spectrum, smell can be used to register both the unsociality of a bad death, as well as the shifting sociality of new ways of handling the dead. (This short article is based on Being Dead Otherwise, recently published by Duke University Press).*

Keywords: *death, Japan, smell, sociality, family*

As cities modernize, they get sanitized in terms of scent. Reducing the stench from sewers and streets is a marker of civilization, as is reducing the miasmas thought to spread disease. A matter of both manners and health, residents are expected to maintain standards of bodily hygiene. And when borders slip, arousing odors, the malodorous are considered

offensive—a sign of matter out of place (Douglas 2004). But, clinging to the body with an affective charge at once unruly and direct, smell can linger. And, once having entered one’s nose from outside, it may be hard to reject. Smell is a relationship; it is “loquacious in its effect upon the senses of others” (Brown 2015: 35).

Smell is the sense most associated with lonely death in Japan. In the many accounts I have read of it and in the interviews I have done with workers who clean up the mess, smell is a constant. The hardest part of the job, as many told me, it is often what triggers the discovery in the first place (Yoshida 2006, Kimura 2015). A foul scent that neighbors or landlords notice in front of a door, this leads to calling in the police. Who, when entering, discover a corpse that may have lain there for as much as months, its decomposition spreading through tatami and floors, and to the outside in the way of maggots, bacteria, beetles, and stench. Depreciating property and angering neighbors, it is both difficult to take and difficult to get rid of. As unsocial as this feels, the smell itself bespeaks unsociality, stemming as it does from “death unnoticed by others” (*kizuite moraenai shi*)—those who die in a condition of isolation and estrangement in which they were likely living for a very long time (Yoshida 2006). Also called lonely or solitary death (*kodokushi, koritsushi*), this is an undesirable state: the antithesis of the well-tended death that is handled by others (family or kin) or by the measures put in place ahead of time by/for the

deceased him or herself. Unless someone claims the remains or handles the arrangements, these lonely dead will then wind up in plots for the disconnected (*muenbo*) as managed by the municipalities where they were found. Where, failing to receive visits at the grave, a washing of their gravestones, and Buddhist prayers offered them by loved ones, such decedent are fated to become disconnected souls (*muenbotoke*).

Deathcare as it Used to Be

The dead do not necessarily wind up where they used to in the landscape of changing endingness in twenty-first century Japan. The family or ancestral plot in the ground, attached to a Buddhist temple passed down for generations, and tended fastidiously by patrilineal kin was once sanctioned by law in a genealogical principle that sutured the family to the nation-state to the imperial line. But alongside reforms in the postwar “democratic” constitution adopted in 1947, the grave went from being a place to memorialize ancestors to a place for an individual’s eternal rest. Since then, a number of factors have contributed to dismantling this family-based mortuary system even further: urbanization and busy lifestyles, an aging population with low birth rates, decreasing rates of marriage and cohabitation, the rise of single households and single lifestyles, and economic decline starting with the bursting of the Bubble economy in the early 1990s. For many today, in a country where one-fourth live alone and more die than get born every year,¹ relying on family members to bury the dead in graves in the countryside and to tend to them after is no longer realistic.

But to be untended at death provokes the specter of disconnected souls (*muenbotoke*) who wander the earth as hungry ghosts, deprived as they are of a final resting place. As attested to by endless stories these days of abandoned graves in the countryside (as much

as 40 percent of the edifices in some rural cemeteries, (Kotani 2018)) and city dwellers whose remains go unclaimed after dying alone (the phenomenon, now rising, of lonely death² (Nozawa 2015, Danely 2019)), this is a real possibility.

But such a situation is hardly the way it used to be in Japan. Rather, people once lived in close proximity to the dead. Caring for the ancestors was both a duty and a “practice of concern” (Traphagan 2004) that embroidered everyday life: tending to the spirits at the domestic shrine (Buddhist or Shinto) by giving them offerings and prayers, including them in conversation, and remembering their favorite sake or fruit (by adding to the shrine). Then, more formally, the grave would be visited (*ohakamairi*) on key anniversaries as well as holidays—at least twice during the year (New Years, equinoxes, and *obon*, the summer season of welcoming the dead back to earth)—all elaborated in rituals, sometimes dancing and food, to commemorate, and rekindle, ties between the living and the dead. Keeping the graves tidy and neat, and the spirits suitably cared for in their procession towards becoming ancestors (or gods)—what, by a calculus of Buddhism/ancestor worship/customary practice, is pegged to take 33 years; this regimen of necro-management both symbolized, and depended upon, very specific social ties (Tsuji 2002).

A temporality of continuity marked by the family grave converged around land, religion, polity, and kin. Erected in cemeteries attached to temples where generations of a patrilineage (*iedaidai*) were to be buried in the ancestral grave (*bodaiji*), this symbol of family succession is as grounded in space as it is temporalized to be eternal (*eikyū*). As religious scholar Ian Reader describes, the family grave serves as “receptacle for the spirits of the ancestors, a site for ritual offerings to the dead, and a symbol of family continuity and belonging” (Reader 1991: 96). But maintenance of the

grave takes considerable investments of money, time, and work—all of which falls to living successors (and the women who have married into the line) who must make the grave visits and pay the annual maintenance fees. Not only is such a responsibility found to be increasingly burdensome and out of sync with the times (Kawano 2011), but also—given the high aging/low birthrate population and shifts towards single sociality—Japanese are entering what some scholars have called its “dead in the era of no family” (*ie naki jidai no shisha*) (Suzuki & Mori 2018). This means that an increasing number of Japanese can’t meet the stipulation still demanded of most public and private cemeteries that, in order to be buried there, one needs a designated someone-else to assume responsibility of tending to the grave and paying annual maintenance fees.³ This person needs to be kin, ideally the successor, who assumes the role of “chief mourner.” In the absence of this, or the failure or inability to carry out these duties (due to living successors dying out or moving too far away, for example), or the simple desire on the part of those who do have children but do not want to burden them with this task, the question then becomes: Where do the dead go—as in their physical remains, but also their souls?

Challenges to the Family Grave

Having “nowhere to go” (*ikiba ga nai*) at death was a refrain I started hearing friends and acquaintances muse about with surprising frequency around 2013 during my summers of fieldwork in Japan. Having finished my previous project on the sense of precarity infusing life prospects, employment trajectories, and everydayness amongst Japanese in the 1990s and 2000s published as *Precarious Japan* in 2013, I was reminded of what I had heard so many people describe then about having “no place that feels like home” (*ibasho ga nai*). As labor historian Genda Yūji (2013) has written, it

was the loss of not merely job, but also of purpose and belonging that troubled so many un(der)employed Japanese in the era of the “lost decade” following the bursting of the Bubble economy. Companies went under, employees got laid off, and those coming of working age were hard-pressed to find the lifelong jobs tied to the middle-class aspirations cultivated during Japan’s postwar period of high economic growth. This “Japanese dream” of enduring stability also included marriage, children, and home ownership (“my-home-*shugi*”)—an aspirational sociality that, crafted around a nuclear family with everyone working hard in their own designated roles (corporate warriors, education mamas, studious kids), fueled the nation’s miracle economy with this “reproductive bargain” (Gottfried 2009).

Redirecting national efforts away from militarism and empire-building after the war, the new investments in (post)-industrial manufacturing inspired a massive urban migration when Japanese left the villages to seek waged jobs in the cities; by 1972 70% of the population lived in urban centers and by 1975, 70% were wage laborers (versus half of the labor force still farmers in 1955) (Allinson 1997, 111). Lifestyles were radically altered, away from the land, the village, and three-generational-family life to the city, where productivity was rewarded with consumerism, and both devolved upon the nuclear family or individual rather than the genealogical line (the *ie*). Though for many urban dwellers this meant ancestral graves were now inconveniently far-away, conspicuous spending on mortuary affairs actually increased during the flush years of high economic growth in Japan. Released in 1984, Itami Jūzō’s parodic film, *Osōshiki* (The Funeral), captures this tension of a mortuary practice in the process of becoming outdated with the story of an urban couple hopelessly clueless as to how to perform the appropriate rituals for burying the woman’s father in the countryside. That the characters succeed is due to the considerable investments the couple

make: both in financial outlay and also the sincerity of effort to adhere to traditional custom around the ancestral grave. In the end, the family patriarch has been properly tended to and everyone seems relieved. And yet, teetering on the edge here, is the sense of how unsustainable all of this is—this family-based mortuary practice requiring so much labor, money, and time.

Indeed, thirty years later, when I first started hearing Japanese acquaintances and friends across age, gender, and living situation mention not the security or preservation of the family grave, but their uncertainty and anxiety over where precisely they (or loved ones) would wind up, something had changed. Having “no place to go” (*ikiba ga nai*) seemed to mirror the socio-existential precarity of the post-Bubble moment when, in the face of economic decline and job irregularization (40% of jobs today are irregular versus regular with the benefit of job security), marriage and birthrates also declined—a diminishment of the long-term temporality so prized in the postwar moment of rising middle classness (Tsuji 2021).

Consider, for example, a childless couple where the husband is a second son (thus not eligible to enter his family grave due to the rule of primogeniture), the two want to be buried together but have not purchased anything yet. Meanwhile, sick and all alone, the woman’s mother lives far away but refuses to move in with them as she is the sole care provider for her husband’s soul (resting in his own family’s grave). What will happen to the mother, and what will become of her remains and those of her husband’s (and his ancestors) once their caregiver is gone, are worries that keep this woman up at night.

Or the single, middle-aged woman living in Tokyo who tends to the family grave where her parents are buried. Without siblings or successors of her own to maintain it, this grave will fall into neglect after she is gone: not an

enviable state for her ancestors, nor a situation she desires for herself. Rather than enter what will become a forsaken grave, the woman is considering an array of alternative options. These include an urban columbarium where, for one set price, her remains (as well as those of family members should she have the family grave emptied and re-interred here) would be cared for, and all the spirits receive the service of “eternal memorial” (*eitai kuyō*; giving Buddhist prayers for the deceased) from Buddhist priests on staff.

Or the aging couple with children and grandchildren whom they don’t want to bother with the upkeep of a grave or visitations to it. As they cannot enter his family’s grave (he’s also a second son), and have limited means (he lost his private business in 2008 and is still working a part-time job), they are seeking something basic, such as interment in an urban columbarium, for the two of them. Though concerned, their attitude is less worried than matter-of-fact.

What I learned from these cases, and so many more I encountered in the seven summers of ethnographic fieldwork I did between 2013 and 2019 about changing attitudes and practices regarding the dead in Japan, is that the family/ancestral grave is no longer the de facto choice for an increasing number of Japanese. And, rather than clearly known and settled upon in advance, many, if not most, of those I discussed this with were either not sure where their remains would wind up, or had spent considerable time, labor, and sometimes money in the activity of searching for (and ultimately deciding upon) the most suitable ending arrangement for them.

As the sociological nexus of family that once shouldered the care and memorialization of the dead is now waning, either other arrangements need to be made or one runs the risk of becoming stranded at death. This is a situation that evokes a spectrum of reactions. At the one

end, and in the face of rising rates of both lonely death and unclaimed remains in Japan, some have pronounced the country's failure to adequately honor its dead to be a national crisis—a sign of its sociological devolution into a “society of disconnection” (*muen shakai*), as an NHK special in 2011 on the subject concluded. Religious scholar Mori Kenji (2014) concurs, seeing relationality itself to be at risk in this age of what he calls “refusing/absent others”—of people lacking intimate others to take care of them and of people also “refusing” to take care of anyone else. As Mori sees it, this is a situation that is dissolving what once stood as sacredness, and soul, around cultural traditions and practices that nurtured the humanity of the dead. At the other end, as held by feminists Ueno Chizuko (2012) and Inoue Haruyo (2012), for example, the coming apart of a familial system brokered on patriarchy, hierarchy, and biases/demands of various sorts represents an opportunity to not only make other mortuary arrangements than the patrilineal family grave, but to also rejiggle the sociality on which the entire system of belonging and care has been structured. When the family has been so heavily tasked with the responsibility of social reproduction, this unduly burdens those assigned the caregiving role (women) and excludes those outside the familial net (those unmarried, divorced, or estranged from kin). Better, as feminists elsewhere have proposed, to make care (of others including the dead) more “promiscuous” by extending it (by other provisions such as state-funded social welfare) to anyone/everyone beyond the social rubric of family alone (The Care Collective 2020:40). In this sense, leaving the old family system behind and having the freedom to choose somewhere/something else besides the family grave, signals not the dissolution of Japanese humanity but its recrafting along more inclusive, emancipatory lines.

New Ways of Caring Promiscuously for the Dead

One day, sitting at a lunchtime get-together sponsored by an alternative burial society in Machida, close to Tokyo, the woman next to me told me that she had decided to be buried here, rather than the family grave of her husband's, because “those ancestors there? I don't know them.” Having saved her own money for this from a part-time job, she told me she was doing this for herself and preferred her own final resting place to that of the family she'd married into: a dis-connection that signaled, to her, a connection of another sort.⁴ “Ending Center,” an NPO, was started in 1996 by Inoue Haruyo, with plots within (but not affiliated with) a Buddhist cemetery beautifully set within cherry trees, that are “free” to anyone, non-dependent on having a successor or kin, by paying the one-time membership fee. In addition, the to-be-deceased can attend activities, workshops, and get-togethers like this one held at its ancillary meeting place (a home donated by a member called “One More Home”) that fosters what Inoue calls an “inclusive relationality” (versus that formed around kinship or locale that excludes those who don't belong) (Inoue 2012). As they do today, members call one another “grave-friends” (*hakatomo*), eating the lunch that one of them has brought from home, and, at another event staged weeks later, learning how to “design funerals by oneself” which ends in a hands-on demonstration customizing coffins with material and manga characters. Energy suffuses the room that day, and gales of laughter in this activity of preparing one's endingness—an animation I noticed in any number of events/workshops/symposia/or fairs devoted to endingness that I attended. This liveliness in the preparedness/preparation for death reflects a shift both in temporality and sociality of mortuary planning—an anticipatory doing in the present (i.e. by/for oneself) versus expecting that someone else (i.e. kin) will handle this in the future at one's death. I call

this “necro-animism” and consider it one dimension of the shifting tides in attitudes/practices related to death in Japan today. But, along with this and as another dimension, is a greater reliance on self-responsibility (*jiko sekinin*), and the support of transactional, commercial facilities to assist in operationalizing death-management—financial/human resources that are certainly not available to everyone.

This is all part of a burgeoning new “ending industry”—of businesses, initiatives, and products—that has arisen over the last twenty-five years in the face of changing demographics and the rise of an aging/more singular population less likely to have, or want to burden, family for handling mortuary arrangements, all of which go under the umbrella of “*shūkatsu*” (literally ending activity).⁵ This includes everything from *shūkatsu* counselors, support teams, and handbooks to one-stop funeral operations, urban columbaria, “corpse hotels” (where corpses await what can be long delays for crematoria), ash scattering, and new-style mortuary and postmortem arrangements of various kinds. As in the account of Ending Center above, not all who are drawn to this do so because they lack family or a family grave: those seeking out alternatives to the family model can be singles, childless couples, families, and all of the above looking to move remains from ancestral graves in the countryside to facilities where they will be given “eternal memorial” (*eitai kuyō*) by a Buddhist priest on staff. Following lifestyle trends in post-Bubble Japan towards minimalism (*danshari*), the desire these days is for simplicity and convenience at life’s end as well, and choices for this now abound in the new marketplace given endingness. Expenditures on all this are way down since the 1990s, and the fashion in funerals has gone from “formal” to more “family-only” and, increasingly, “direct burial” (when ashes go directly from the crematorium to interment

without any ceremony at all).⁶

But, driving the ending market is another desire as well: not to wind up as untended remains at the end—becoming not only a disconnected soul but also the material rot of a lonely death that smells both morally and socially offensive. The affective pungency of this was brought home to me by a manga about “Mr. Solitary” (Kojirō-san) that accompanied a book written about lonely death by the man who started a new genre of business in 2002 to “straighten up” (*katazukeru*) the remains of the dead. His own company, Keepers, launched what is now something of a boom in *ihinseirigaisha*: companies that sort through, clean up, and dispose the personal possessions left behind in homes of the deceased. What differentiates these from older style disposal services (*benriya-san*) hired to haul out unwanted belongings is that the work is done with both order and respect and workers are said to “tend to the feelings” of the bereaved. A job of sorting through the homes/possessions of the deceased that once would have been handled by family can now be contracted out to a commercial service, with laborers serving as a “substitute family” as the promotional material claims.⁷ Keepers has been highly successful, and clientele are increasingly signing up for postmortem clean-up for themselves ahead of time: what is called “*seizenseiri*” — handling one’s (mortuary) affairs while still alive. Making sure, in other words, that one doesn’t leave, nor become oneself, matter out of place upon death. But for those who do turn out this way, leaving the mess of decomposition behind, cleaning this up is also a task that falls to *ihinseirigaisha*. “Special clean-up” with hazmat suits and ozone machines is a job that constitutes about 20% of his business, Yoshida told me. And it was based on his intimacy with deaths unnoticed by others, that Yoshida wrote a book about this experience; he’s also started a NPO to work towards the prevention of the phenomenon.

In the book, *Koritsushi: Anata wa daijōbu?* (Solitary death: Are you alright?), Yoshida lays out strategies for ensuring one doesn't wind up all alone at the end. He also provides an anatomy of those who do: 80 percent of the lonely dead are male; their mean age is sixty; most are retired, laid off, or unemployed; they frequently live alone and are estranged from family, kin, and spouse, whether by divorce or death.⁸ To illustrate, we are given the case of Mr. Solitary that, a composite drawn from actual cases, is a cranky recluse who dies badly all alone.⁹ But striking about the depiction given this by Yoshida is the graphicness with which the opprobrium of the decomposing corpse is shown. The scene of discovery goes on for pages, accompanied by a haze representing the smell laced by small figures of maggots and bugs. A reader can't help but feel disgust. As does Mr. Solitary himself who, having come back as a ghost, now hovers over the scene, witnessing the landlord who discovered the body, his estranged son filled with both sadness and bitterness at not reuniting prior to death, and the neighbors banging at the door demanding something be done about the stench. The story ends with Kojirō-san now full of regret at all the distress and inconvenience he has caused. The story is used in the book to make a message both about suturing connections with others so as not to wind up all alone at the end, but also about being prepared in managing one's ending affairs (such as signing up for one's possessions to be handled by an *ihinseirigaisha*) ahead of time so as not to inconvenience others in death. Becoming both social (in life) and responsible (about one's death): social responsibility, as it were, as in reconfiguring sociality around the living as well as the dead.

Besides being a successful businessman, Yoshida is a public speaker on the merits of advance death planning as well as prevention against lonely death. He routinely uses his DVD of Kojirō-san to illustrate both these messages, which one woman, hearing his civic forum in

Yokohama, called a real wake-up call. It inspired her to pare down all her goods, make her ending plans immediately, and then embark upon living life to its fullest until the end—not particularly with, for, or taken care of by her family, though she admitted to having one.

But what about those who don't manage what she does: who die all alone, in homes that need to be cleaned up and fumigated by others, leaving spirits and remains untended by anyone else?

I end with the story of another clean-up worker who attends to just such cases by preserving the mess that never got ordered or arranged ahead of time. A woman in the business who is unusual for being one of the manual laborers who does clean-up on site (*genba*), Kojima Miyu started working for To-Do when she was 22, inspired, as she relates in her book (2019) by having had a father who died disconnected from her, and everyone else—a bad/lonely death. Finding some sort of solace or meaning in doing the work of clean-up herself, Kojima soon started crafting dioramas of the scenes of lonely death she encountered in doing her job. Taking photos ahead of time, then spending a month replicating the interiors in miniaturized detail, these preserve what she, but few others, have seen. The toilets, tatami mats, living rooms, and kitchens where someone once lived, then died, all alone—replete with blood splashes strewn throughout. Her aim, as she told me in interview, is to not merely clean up, and hence eradicate, the disorder left behind in these homes, which is the work she does for To-Do. Rather, she wants to humanize it and those who died there by looking at, rather than away from, their scene of death, which she accomplishes through crafting her dollhouses, staying with the smell if not literally then figuratively. It is a gesture, as she explains in the book, to get Japanese people to see what she does with the interiorities of homes where people die so socially bereft. Without others.

But now. Not entirely, unseen and alone, any more.

In disaggregating care from the social hands that once provided it, and according care to the “dead without family,” this is an example of promiscuous care (The Care Collective 2020, 40). Performed in the face of smell.

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Notes

¹ This makes Japan a “mass death society” (*kashi shakai*) with a population that has been decreasing since 2011.

² There is no official tally of the nationwide total of such deaths. Mainichi Shinbun reported in 2020 that 538 such deaths had occurred in Tokyo and Osaka in the three-year-period since 2017. But as the proportion of aged in the population rises (30% over 65 now, predicted to rise to 40% by 2040, and an increasing number of these living alone—about one-third now), the number of lonely dead is expected to rise as well. Also, for those who die disconnected, their remains are increasingly unlikely to be claimed by kin: 3.3% of total deaths in Japan nationwide. Unclaimed remains become the responsibility of municipalities both to handle and to bury: what has spurred some municipalities to start instituting measures to help aging seniors sign up ahead of time for ending arrangements. The first of these was started in Yokosuka City by Kitami Takayuki, vice director of the independent support division of welfare at Yokosuka City. As he told me in interview, Yokosuka (with a population of 410,000) had 51 such deaths in 2017 where, in 50 of those cases, kin could be located but “refused” to accept responsibility for burial. I thank Kitami-san for sharing with me the above statistics and details about the “my ending plan” initiative instituted in Yokosuka City.

³ And the system of patrilineal-based graves is based on primogeniture, so is limited to only first-sons, as well as sharing the same family name, so excludes divorced women who, after changing their name at marriage, now can’t enter either the marital or natal grave. The family-based mortuary system thus bears its own sets of exclusions, hierarchies, and biases, and has never been inclusive of everyone.

⁴ Inoue, the head of Ending Center, told me that 10% of those who buy plots there are married women, doing so to avoid entering the graves of their husbands’ families: what she

calls “post-death divorce” (*shigo rikon*).

⁵ “Ending activity” would seem to be derived from another well-known activity, “job-hunting-activity” (*shūshoku katsudō*) that college and high school students engage in one year before graduating. In both cases, the “activity” is embarked upon to secure something for the future: a job for youth and a final resting place for aging seniors.

⁶ Formal ceremonies (*ippansō*) were once the norm but by 2017, constituted only slightly more than half (53%), with more than a third (38 per cent) being the most streamlined of all (direct, *chokosō*), and family-only ceremonies (*kazokusō*) becoming increasingly popular. Also, in terms of new graves, in 2011 85 per cent of these were family-style and in the ground (*ippanhaka*) averaging \$16,770. But by 2018, only 41 per cent were buried this way, and the cost had gone down (to \$14,130) (ENDEX 2017).

⁷ These quotes come from promotional materials for Keepers; and also the interview I conducted with Yoshida Taichi.

⁸ Since Yoshida wrote his book (in 2010), those who die by lonely death seem to have become much more varied, including more women (who, living longer than men, constitute a higher percentage of the senior population) younger people (often dying by suicide) and others. Yoshida ends his book, in fact, reminding his readers that everyone/anyone is at risk of dying disconnected. And this is the message too of the recent dystopic movie, *Plan 75*, that showcases the case of an aging woman who, all alone, signs up to be voluntarily euthanized—a state-sponsored instantiation of lonely death.

⁹ Scholars (in Religion, Anthropology, Death Studies) largely concur that a bad death comes from dying socially alone, in violent/painful/sudden circumstances, and not having one’s affairs in order (see, for example, Stonington 2020). By contrast, a good death is more socially and physically orderly: being surrounded by loved ones, having the appropriate (religious/financial/psychological) matters in place, and, ideally, dying without undue pain.