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► **To cite this version:**

Natacha Aveline-Dubach. Taking care of the dead in Japan, a personal view from an European perspective. *Chiiki kaihatsu*, 2013, 8, pp.1-5. halshs-00939869

HAL Id: halshs-00939869

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00939869>

Submitted on 31 Jan 2014

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Taking care of the dead in Japan, a personal view from an European perspective

Natacha Aveline-Dubach

Translation of the paper :

N. Aveline-Dubach (2013) « Nihon no sôsbijinesu to shisha no kûkan, Yoroppajin no me kara mite », *Chiiki Kaihatsu (Regional Development)* Chiba University Press, 8, pp 1-5.

I came across the funeral issue in Japan in early 1990s. I was doing my PhD on the ‘land bubble’ in Tokyo, and I had the opportunity to visit one of the first —if not the first – large-scale urban renewal project involving the reconstruction of a Buddhist temple and its adjacent cemetery, the Jofuji temple 浄風寺 nearby the high-rise building district of West Shinjuku. The old outdoor cemetery of the Buddhist community had just been moved into the upper floors of the new multistory temple. To ensure enough space in the new mortuary facility, graves had been changed into ‘coin-lokker ossuaries’ (ロッカー式納骨堂). I was so impressed by this drastic change, as well as by the very special atmosphere of the new crematorium – flashy royal-blue carpet and glossy wooden boxes– that I decided to edit a documentary movie on death space in Tokyo¹. A few years later, I received a funding from the French National Research Agency (ANR) to conduct a comparative research on the development of the funeral industry in three East-Asian countries, Japan, South Korea, and China. I set up a team composed by French and Japanese sinologists and koreanists² (adding to French japonologists). Although most of them were anthropologists, they agreed to focus on spatial and economic issues relating to mortuary space and services, and to conduct fieldwork in the biggest cities rather in than small villages. From 2006 to 2010, we organized several workshops and symposia at the Maison Franco-Japonaise (日仏会館). These events were followed by the publication of proceedings³ and a book in French and English entitled ‘Invisible population, the place of the dead in East Asian Megacities’⁴. In the present essay, I attempt to single out the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese funeral spaces and services based on the major results of this comparative research, while adopting an European perspective.

As in South Korea, traditional funeral rituals and customs in Japan have been shaped by the Chinese culture. It follows that, in the three countries, tending the grave is an integral part of the ancestor veneration rites, which, along with calendar rites and post-mortem rites, help to transform the deceased into ancestors. All members of the family are obliged to honor the

¹ The 52 mn documentary, edited in 2005 and entitled « To Dye in Tokyo », is accessible on the following link : http://www.canal-u.tv/video/universite_toulouse_ii_le_mirail/mourir_a_tokyo_natacha_aveline.4876

² The Japanese authors were 島根克己, 高村良平 (Koreanist) and 川口幸宏 (sinologist).

³ Natacha Aveline-Dubach (ed., 2008) 転換期に立つ葬儀業 日仏比較の視点から, working paper in French and Japanese, French-Japanese symposium at the 日仏会館, December 13, 82 p.

⁴ Edited by Natacha Aveline-Dubach and published by Lexington books in 2012. The French version was published by the Publisher Indes Savantes in 2013.

family grave at least once a year. This is performed at O-bon and during the equinoxes in Japan, and during the Qingming and Chuseok festivals, respectively, in China and South Korea. Offerings are made to the deceased and incense is burned in their memory. Such traditions are perpetuated regardless of the family's religion and the Buddhist sect (Japan) or Christian denomination (South Korea) to which they belong. Another common feature of these countries is the significance of the private sector in the supply of mortuary space, and the subsequent very high cost of graves by European standards. Even in China where consumption on funerals has been dramatically curbed during the Maoist era, the opening to the private market has been marked by a return to reckless expanding on graves in luxurious landscaped cemeteries.

However, the Japanese funeral industry gives evidence to a much more innovative and diversified supply of mortuary space and services than the two other countries. While the dead are nowhere to be seen in Seoul and Shanghai, they mix peacefully and openly with the living in Tokyo. Even the central areas, one can catch sight in various places of cramped Buddhist cemeteries riddled with *sotoba*. When cherry trees are in bloom, public cemeteries become crowded picnic sites where people share sake with their dead relatives or friends. Such a casual regard for the dead is astounding from both Western and Eastern (at least Chinese and Korean) point of view. It is undoubtedly a driving force of innovation in the mortuary market. However, innovation has been recently fostered by new factors that I would like to raise here. These factors are threefold: aging and individualization of funerals; Persistence and flexibility of sacred space in the urban fabric, and cross-fertilization of ideas from various players.

1. Aging and individualization of funerals

Japan's 'advanced' aging society is facing new problems such as “muen botoke 無縁仏” due to a lack of descendants able to take care of the graves. Other factors such as the changes affecting the family, whether through a change in the balance of power (emancipation of women from the authority of in-laws) or the emergence of new bonds (unmarried couples, homosexuals, etc.) also converge to break the conventional way of addressing funerals through the *ie* 家 system. Individuals are now stamping their personalities on graves, as well as on funeral and memorial services for the dead. Indicating one's preferences entails planning for death in advance. The individualization phenomenon is consequently accompanied by a trend for pre-death consumption. The future deceased, who are living increasingly longer, invest their time in organizing their own funerals and looking for a grave, thus sparing their descendants the need to carry out these tasks while simultaneously asserting their personality through their choices. The most representative burial system among these new trends is the “pre-need communal grave,” creating new types of communities whose members are tied through affinity—the decision to be laid to rest in the same grave—and no longer by blood or marriage. Such post-mortem pairings rely on pre-mortem means of socialization that provide comfort to isolated individuals during the final stage of their life. Good examples of these pre-need innovative graves are the “Monument of Moorings,” 舫の碑 launched in 1990 by the Kudokuji Temple (Toshima-ku), the “Society of Bonds” 縁の会 managed by the Tochoji Temple (東長寺 Shinjuku-ku), and the “Cherry blossom grave” 桜粗墓地, a cherry tree combined with multi-confessional extended rites in the Izumi Joen cemetery 泉浄苑. Located in Machida-shi, the latter is managed by a private company and operates in the name of a Buddhist community. It was the first to develop the ‘cherry-tree grave’ in April 2005, consisting of a communal burial space (100 plots) and 250 individual spaces able to

accommodate one to five people, all situated underneath two cherry trees. Ashes are placed in a small 25cm by 25cm space in the earth and the names of the deceased engraved on a plaque. This grave has received much success. Other cemeteries have since adopted the ‘cherry tree’ communal grave, including some public cemeteries, which supply them at a much lower price (in Yokohama for example). This interest for ‘green burial’ reflects a growing awareness of environmental issues in the Japanese society (as in South Korea too), as well as a demand for cheaper burial plots emanating from elderly people without descendants. But the concept of “pre-need grave” is a truly Japanese innovation that relates on the distinctive way people address death in this country.

2.Persistance and flexibility of sacred space in the urban fabric

As stated above, Tokyo is endowed with a large number of cemeteries. This situation results from the historic role of Buddhist communities in population control during the Tokugawa period. Just as the Catholic in Europe, Japanese Buddhist institutions enjoyed a monopoly over death space and part of funeral services, and thus developed a lucrative mortuary industry. But by contrast with Europe where modern states put cemeteries into the public realm, Japanese Buddhist Temples maintained their funeral business even though they lost their monopoly after the Meiji renovation. Not that the Shinto clergy ever managed to challenge them. Distinctive Shinto funerals were created in the Meiji period, and a few Shinto cemeteries have even been recently developed in Tokyo’s suburbs, but the strong reluctance of Shinto beliefs towards impurity (穢) has keep these religious communities away from death matters. The state was much more involved, in particular during the first half of the 20th century. Quantitative objectives for the creation of public burial plots in Tokyo over a fifty-year period were established at the beginning of the 1920s. Owing to these initiatives, Tokyo’s centre has large public cemeteries opened to all types of religions, and acting as ‘green lungs’ just like public parks. However, the involvement of the Tokyo municipal government stopped in the 1970s, much before it could realize its quantitative objectives. Only a few suburban municipalities such as Yokohama and Chiba still show an active involvement in the provision of burial lots. It follows that most of the burial supply in Tokyo is currently provided by Buddhist communities, or private companies (dominated by monumental masons and to a lesser extend by real estate developers⁵) operating in their names as ‘shūkyō hōjin’ 宗教法人. Unlike Shanghai and Seoul where all reference of death in the central zones have been erased by dictatorial regimes⁶, Tokyo has kept full memory of the various stages of its funeral history. But it has come at a price. To urbanize new suburban zones and conduct renewal projects in urban areas, developers had to deal with existing private graves (in rural areas) and Buddhist cemeteries. This was addressed by transferring and grouping the private graves through land readjustment projects in the suburbs (土地区画整理事業), and by reconstructing the temples and their adjacent graveyards, in some cases far from their original site. For the latter case, as the redevelopment involves the provision of new office space, the cemetery would not be visible; it would either be removed behind the new temple/office building, or converted into a nōkotsudō and transferred indoor as in the

⁵ Private foundations 財団法人 are also allowed to develop cemeteries but there are few cases.

A good example is the ‘Fuji reien’ 富士霊園, the biggest in Asia, launched in the 1960s by a Mitsubishi foundation.

⁶ In the case of Seoul, this policy started during the Japanese colonization period.

case I mentioned above. From an European point of view, such a radical transformation of sacred space is unbelievable. But it seems fully consistent with the amazing flexibility/high turn over of building construction in Japan. The fact that Buddhist communities are not reluctant to take part of the ‘property game’ should not been surprising given their long experience in the mortuary market and the need to compensate their decreasing financial revenues in a secularizing urban society.

3. Cross-fertilization of ideas from various players

In this market poorly regulated by the state, private players are free to design innovative types burial lots and funeral services to meet the rapidly evolving consumer’s demand. However, innovation in the Japanese mortuary industry is fostered by a driver that goes beyond the conventional rules of an open market. This driver is an overall cross-fertilization of ideas from three major players: Buddhist communities, private operators, and NPOs. Buddhist communities are growingly faced with individual needs that challenge the traditional *ie*-based grave and funerals. To satisfy these customers, they have come up with a brilliant idea, which consists in disentangling religious services from the supply of burial lots. By offering ‘eternal commemorative prayers’ (永代供養), they have paved the way for the development of a wide range of individual burial lots, including ‘green graves’ and ‘pre-need’ communal graves. Owing to the ‘eternal’ nature of religious services, burial lots can be sold for short periods of time (10 years, more usually 30 years), thus breaking with the traditional ‘eternal’ grave. Needless to say, this new supply also addresses the excessive cost of funeral space and services. Private companies managing cemeteries in the name of Buddhist communities contribute to this innovative approach by bringing their knowledge in marketing and grave/property businesses. Their interaction with the civil society through NPOs action enables them to design tailor-made solutions to the diversifying needs of their customers. NPOs have recently played a growing role in the mortuary business by promoting new values. Advocating the decrease of carbon footprint, they support the development of graveless funeral practices and green burials. They are also taking an active part in the conception of ‘pre-need’ graves and the development of ‘eternal’ multi-religious ceremonies for lonely souls. For example, the successful cherry tree communal grave has been developed by the NPO ‘Ending Center’. The scattering of ashes is promoted since 1991 by the NPO “Grave-Free Promotion Society” (葬送の自由を進める会), and other graveless practices are developed in the form of micro-containers of ashes (accessories, pendants) or small objects (plaques, diamonds) made from the ashes of the deceased (手元供養品).

These funeral practices stand as forerunner and are far from being disseminated at massive scale. However, the situation is changing rapidly, to such extent that already 20 to 30% of the mortuary ceremonies held in Tokyo are ‘direct funerals’ (直葬 single tribute paid at the crematorium during the cremation). By no doubt, the Japanese mortuary industry will keep its innovative stance and move beyond the *ie*-based grave system.