

REVIEW

## Japanese funeral rites in late modernity

**Antonio L. Rappa\***

Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore, Singapore

**\*Correspondence:**Antonio L. Rappa,  
rappa@suss.edu.sg**Received:** 06 April 2023; **Accepted:** 30 May 2023; **Published:** 22 June 2023

Funerals in Japan are always a highly serious and solemn affair. Japanese funerals whether they are ancient or modern are always official activities with ancient traditional practices. Often, there are no bells, whistles, drums, or fanfare. The only exception is when the Japanese Shinto Buddhist priest beats a single and mournful drum. In 1867, Emperor Komei died and it took over a month to get him buried. This was because of political upheaval and other intervening requirements. When Emperor Meiji died in July 1912, the courtiers also had to go through several weeks of preparation before the onset of public mourning. Naturally, mourning by the immediate royal family members always took precedence. Later, when Emperor Taisho's funeral had to take place, it also took 1 month of rituals and preparations before public mourning could commence. Taisho's funereal activities followed Emperor Meiji's funeral model. Japanese funerals were also costly in the past as they are today. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a single Japanese funeral would cost at least US\$30,000 compared to a few thousand in Singapore and other Asian states. Funerals are even cheaper in Europe and North America. In Japan, each person or family attending a funeral wake would have to present to the widow or widower a cash gift of a few 100,000 yen. This cash gift is called *koden*. Japanese funeral rites are part of a set of clearly defined rituals that reflect the nature of the society and the status or class of the deceased. This article focuses on the important aspects of Japanese Shinto-Buddhist funeral rites.

**Keywords:** Japanese death rituals, funeral rites, political economy, political science, society, gender

### 1. Introduction

The kinds of complexities associated with Japanese funeral rites make any attempt to establish a comprehensive and onerous diagnosis. This is noted by an idiotic scholar named Foulk who used the phrase “mumbo-jumbo” as well to describe such native complexity. Though not completely true in many instances, one must give and take because of the stupendous amount of work already done by Japanese scholars. Given this situation, this article presents a modest attempt to begin to understand the ways in which Japanese have buried or burnt their dead over the millennia.

Beginning at the apex of Japanese society, funerals for the emperor did not always follow the past and often adapted to the changing times ever since the pre-Meiji era. The Japanese funeral rites are usually associated with the color white but

in itself often reflects the darkness of the black robes worn by the widow or widower.

#### 1.1. The Edo period

The Edo period (1603–1867) was marked by the bonds between each Japanese household and a specific temple nearby and their Shinto priests. The ceremony is followed by a 2-h-long cremation of the deceased. The ashes are then used to carefully pick up the bone fragments. The use of these funeral chopsticks for serving food and eating is strictly forbidden. Masao Fujii then reminds us of the importance of follow-up memorial services at the cemetery and in the household itself.

The Taisho Era (30 July, 1912 to 25 December, 1926) was important because three main changes took place which were different from the earlier/preceding Meiji Era (23 October,

1868 to 30 July, 1912). The three changes were as follows: (1) no more funeral processions; (2) *jitaku-kokubetsu-shiki* (farewell from the home); and half wakes rather than all-night wakes.

Overall, one could say that these three main changes in the post-Meiji era or at least during Taisho were part of a modernization process of simplification. This was in grave contrast to the relatively elaborate and grandiose funerals of the Meiji era. One ought to remember that the process of modernization of funeral rites took place gradually as more people got used to the changes. For example, in the pre-Meiji era, it was common to have outsiders attend a private funeral (*kojin-sô*) or home funeral (*jitaku kokubetsu-shiki*). In other words, it was common to have onlookers or bystanders attend a rural or urban funeral; indeed, anyone could attend any funeral and just observe. However, these onlookers and bystanders eventually were not permitted to attend these private funerals, but the entire process took several decades before finally becoming widely accepted.

## 1.2. The Pre-Meiji Era

In the pre-Meiji era, attending a funeral did not have a specific amount of time and could often involve a relatively lengthy send-off. In the Taisho era, wakes and funeral activities were limited to one or two professional undertakers with the rest of the funeral group being made up of immediate family members. This significantly shortened the time for funeral activities.

Another scholar named Liz Kenney provides an interesting view of the nature of Shinto funerals of old 18th-century Edo (Tokyo). She details to an extent the funerals of a Shinto priest and of a wealthy Shinto family from Edo. On the contrary, Rowe provides a different view, a lens that examines Japanese rituals through the perspective of funereal social spaces and columbaria. Almost all Japanese *Ososhiki* are conducted Buddhist-styled acts that end in the cremation of the deceased, whereas in land-locked Japan, it is not uncommon for local governments to ban physical burials for all religions. Modern *Ososhiki* are preceded by *Otsuya* that do not last beyond 3 h. *Otsuya* or Japanese funeral wakes used to be attended by outsiders and even bystanders, but since the end of the American occupation of Japan, only immediate family members and some undertakers spend their time at these funeral wakes.

### 1.2.1. Funeral and funeral processions

However, if we take the example of the elimination of the funeral procession, we see that, although there was already criticism of elaborate funeral processions at the turn of the century, these funeral processions were hardly removed till two decades had passed. The direct cause of the demise of the funeral procession was a result of the process of modernization and simplification.

## 2. Some reviews of the literature

Japanese Shinto-Buddhist funeral rites appear to have been influenced by earlier Korean and Chinese rites with several artifacts of earlier 6th century A.D. South Asian funeral rites. For example, Fujii claims that the Japanese today only seem to be aware of Shinto-Buddhist Japanese rites and no other rites because of its long historical influence [(1):40].

For example, Kenney (2) refers to these funeral arrangements as “mortuary rites” [(2):165]. On the other hand, some scholars emphasize the importance of understanding that funeral rites are deeply rooted in the concepts of “pollution and purification” [(3):226]. The cash gift or *koden* is not as simple or straightforward as it might appear to an outsider or *gaijin* (foreigner). Specific traditions of each family in the rural areas or in suburban and urban areas demand a certain amount of cash and may even set the expectation of the kinds of bills and envelopes that contain the cash [(4):396]. However, in this case, Tsuji is silent about how such requirements—traditional or otherwise—were discovered by his research. Neither did he nor his co-researchers reveal how the hegemony of Japanese funerals was created with the exception that there exists a group hierarchy and a level of groupism or atypical Japanese group behavior [(4):400]. Mark Rowe’s alternative view of the use of Japanese social spaces used for funerals and columbaria in modern Japan organized by *soshiki-gumi* who manufacture the tablets and coffins [(5):354]. Interestingly, he also personally observed the use of stickers in place of metal placed inside coffins when the corpse is burnt in the incinerators.

### 2.1. Kawano’s views

According to Kawano’s observations, the pre-funeral was a means of taking control of one’s fate in the sense of steering the course of one’s remaining years. Many women live till 85 years, while men till 78 years, with an average of a 5–7 years gap between married people. Modernization and better health care and medicine have prolonged human life in Japan. Yet, Kawano states research shows that some old people pray for an early death so as not to burden one’s relatives and one’s children. In the Japanese pre-funeral, the aged person gets to see what she or he may not have seen or be able to see at their actual and eventual funeral. This itself appears to me to be a weird and strange contrast to the dark and morose actual funeral, the pre-funeral being relatively more salubrious and even entertaining with rice cakes and good luck charms for all. All death researchers know that the funeral rites convey a sense of Zen. Bodiford and others note that the Zen-ness of Japanese funeral rites appears from their earlier Japanese precedents set by Dogen and others and through the power of the Zen monks for insights into the world and beyond [(6): 149-151].

## 2.2. Zen or no Zen

Zen is often known for its simplicity and power in such uncomplicatedness. Taoist or Zen Buddhist philosophy is often associated with tranquility, peace, harmony, and calm. This paper discusses Japanese Zen Buddhism and Zen funeral rites rather than Taoism which would require a separate level of treatment and preparation. Zen philosophy is like the metaphor of water. It flows, moves, and cuts. Its movement is unrestrained as it meanders powerfully across all surfaces. Water also simplifies. One way to make funeral rites simple is to reduce the number of rituals attendants to their practice. However, western Japanese scholars like Foulk who trace the emergence of Japanese Zen to the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618–906 A.D.) have analyzed the “denial of ritual” in the Zen Buddhist tradition of Japan [(7):47]. However, since he refers to Japanese culture as a mixture of mumbo-jumbo, it is perhaps best to read his work with a pinch of salt and set it at arms’ length.

## 2.3 On Bodiford

On the other hand, Bodiford shows that Zen funerals are very different from their Shinto-Buddhist counterparts although both contain many similar somewhat related elements. For example, the body of the deceased is washed, shaven, and then placed naked in a “round coffin in an upright seated position as if engaged in meditation” [(6):151]. This is very different from the closed-coffin practice of many Thai Buddhist funerals attended by the author in Thailand, for example. But, of course, one cannot really compare modern Thai Buddhist funerals with Japanese Zen funerals because of the long historical interlude. Zen Buddhist funerals date back to the time long before the Edo period. Nevertheless, the comparison between the two strikes an interesting cultural contrast; the Zen tradition follows the Larger Vehicle or Mahayana form, and the Thai Buddhist tradition follows the Theravada or Lower Vehicle tradition. This is all according to the Sutras. The daily life and activities of Zen priests were introduced in a large 1,000-page volume by Ishikawa Rikizan through Bodiford’s English translation. Ishikawa Rikizan’s rejection of some perceptions of Zen Buddhism as a singular truth was also discussed [(8):121].

## 3. Conclusion

### 3.1. Japanese cemetery park (*Nihonjin bochi kôen*) in Singapore

Singapore or *Syonan-to* is the “Japanese name” for the *Shining Light* of the South. There is still more research to be done

on the Japanese minority in Singapore today and over the past 100 years as most of the narratives and scholarly works focus on the British colonial government, its lackeys, and its sycophants. For example, the presence of Japanese funeral rites in Singapore over the past 100 years has hardly been studied but is too overwhelming to be researched in a single book, let alone paper. Nevertheless, we have tried to take a snapshot of that political reality.

The Japanese Association of Singapore maintains the largest Japanese cemetery outside Japan in a place called Lorong Chuan Hoe in Hougang Estate, Singapore. Hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians including Singaporeans died at the hands of the Japanese Imperial Army (JIA) as well as the *Kempetai* or secret police. Such unnecessary killing and torture strike a weird and dark contrast to the simplicity of Japanese rituals, Shinto-Buddhism, and tradition. Zen funeral rites were described in terms of the simplification of reality. There is a heartbreaking story that is unknown to many Singaporeans. Many young Japanese underage girls died at the hands of their Japanese masters as well.

Tagajiro Fukaki was a famous Japanese pimp. Young Japanese girls from 12 years old onward were forced by their debt-ridden family members including their parents. These underage prostitutes were known as *karayuki-san*. Tagajiro Fukaki and others like him lived off the immoral earnings of the bodies of these young *karayuki-san*. Driven by guilt and remorse, Tagajiro Fukaki decided to donate a sizeable piece of land that he owned to establish a cemetery for the *karayuki-san* who died from abuse, malnourishment, or physical exhaustion from their forced labor. Fukaki finally received approval from the British colonial government in 1891. At the end of World War II, Japanese civilians and soldiers were also buried there in addition to the *karayuki-san*. Before 1969, the local Japanese had a special memorial erected to commemorate the war dead, and *Nihonjin bochi kôen* continues to be maintained by the Singapore Japanese Association today.

In Singapore, we have seen that, over one century and two world wars, there was much immense suffering among Southeast Asian people. The Chinese suffered the most, while the Malays took the side of the JIA and *Kempetai* as policemen and guards. The former did not suffer as much as the Chinese who had aided the war effort against the Japanese all over Asia including Manchukuo. *Syonan-to* was anything but a *Shining Light* and like other places in Southeast Asia such as the Death Railway in Kanchanaburi, Thailand; many more hidden stories are slowly emerging from the woodwork of the coffins of Japanese funeral rites.

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