

*The Price of Death: The Funeral Industry in Contemporary Japan.* By Hikaru Suzuki. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001. xi, 266 pages. \$39.50.

Reviewed by  
WILLIAM W. KELLY  
Yale University

Who is responsible for the transition of the deceased from his or her wonderful life to beautiful death? Is this the task of a priest? The task of a doctor? I believe it is the responsibility of the funeral professionals to beautify the deceased. They are craftsmen of happy endings who transform death into poetic art. (quoted by Suzuki, p. 121)

These are the claims of Sakuma Tsunekazu, the vice-president of the Moon Rise Funeral Company, in a book he wrote (and published pseudonymously) to explain his profession. For anthropologist Hikaru Suzuki, the words are more than predictable self-promotion. They also signal profound recent shifts in the forms of and attitudes toward death rituals in contemporary Japan, from what Suzuki terms "funeral rituals" (*sōshiki*) to "funeral ceremonies" (*sōgi* or *osōshiki*). Suzuki's insightful ethnography of Moon Rise demonstrates the role of this new service industry in shaping and responding to what are shifts in both cultural values and practices.

A rich literature in folklore and anthropology has documented the community-framed funerary rituals of earlier times. Suzuki summarizes these rites as moving the living and the deceased through four stages: attempting to resuscitate the newly expired corpse, breaking its bonds with the everyday world, assisting it to achieve Buddhahood, and finally, memorializing the spirit. The objective of these prolonged rituals was to purify

the dangerous pollution caused by death and to render benevolent the potential malevolence of the deceased's spirit. Their social form was communal, produced in a fabric of neighborly assistance and mutual aid.

Little of that ritual intent or social fabric survives in contemporary metropolitan Japan. What predominate are commercially managed ceremonies offered by private funeral companies, as part of all-inclusive service packages. Those running the rites have been professionalized and the rites themselves have been commodified. Most people no longer associate funerals with impurity and pollution, and Suzuki argues that the burgeoning funeral industry has been central in this transformation.

Over four decades, Moon Rise, the locus of Suzuki's study, has developed a prosperous funeral and wedding business in metropolitan Kitakyushu. Its mortuary division operates several funeral centers around the city, and Suzuki located herself in one of them for a period of extended participant-observation. This center seemed to average about two to three wakes and funerals a day with a staff of 20 or so.

To this fellow anthropologist, her research was an exemplary application of intensive participant-observation to a corporate setting involving sensitivity and responsibility in highly charged emotional settings. Suzuki openly explained her project and was herself surprised by the ready cooperation she received. She worked as a Moon Rise staff person and observed and assisted in all of the mortuary phases—in picking up corpses (occasionally on some unpleasant and certainly difficult calls), with the bathing, funeral, and cremation ceremonies, and in consoling family members. She interviewed all members of the company, industry association officials, and many other funeral workers, including priests, crematorium technicians, and ash collectors.

Most seemed willing to share with her much inside knowledge, which gave her a nuanced view of the professionalization of the sector. She asked a senior staff about his knack for immediately sensing how expensive a package to press upon a client; he replied that he instantly appraised “hospital, house, bathroom, kitchen, and company” (p. 75), and Suzuki recalled how he would always discreetly ask to use the bathroom upon arriving at the client's house. Sometimes the “knowledge” was ghoulish as when she sat with the crematorium staff in the control room as they explained the delicacies of managing the gas flow and temperature level. “It's like grilling a fish,” one told her; “if the fire is too strong, the corpse curls up” (p. 153, and she subsequently discovered they all loved to fish and to prepare their own grilled fish and sashimi!).

The contemporary funeral industry emerged most directly from the mutual-aid cooperatives (*kankon sōsai gojokai*) that began in the late 1940s to offer wedding and funeral services to urban residents on monthly payment plans. Funeral companies like Moon Rise, which first solicited mem-

berships in 1967, quickly came to offer a standardized and comprehensive package of goods and services, handling the corpse, arranging for cremation and funeral services, providing the coffin, altar, lotus flowers, hearse, tablets, urn, death certificate, etc. Suzuki reports that by the late 1990s, Moon Rise offered up to 21 options in packages that ranged from about US \$2,000 to \$100,000 in total cost. Its standard Mutual-Aid memberships were at the very low end, but predictably, consultations with the family after a death attempted to sell higher levels of service. About 70 per cent of its income is derived from its installment-membership base, but Moon Rise increasingly markets its services to nonmember customers.

As one might predict, this new service sector has made itself indispensable because of family dispersal, the attenuation of neighborhood ties, individual longevity, and a weaker transmission of appropriate cultural knowledge about how to handle death and its ceremonial and interpersonal requirements. Suzuki generally avoids evaluating whether this trend has been beneficial to the bereaved and to the population generally, and focuses instead on the process by which this new service industry has arisen.

Chapters 3 and 4 detail the several stages of the funerary process in which the funeral companies have made themselves essential. Most critically is the handling of the deceased body. The longstanding belief was that a person dies twice, once when the body expires and again when the corpse is cremated. In the past, there were rites of attempting to resuscitate the body after expiration; now, Suzuki discovered, the deceased is handled as if alive—in being transported from the home or hospital, in being bathed, and during the wake.

The Moon Rise staff are always on duty and quickly assemble a set of items (coffin, death garments, stationery, dry ice, candles, incense, etc.) when a call comes from hospital or family. Because most deaths are now in medical facilities, often the first stop after picking up the corpse is at the deceased's home. The body is then brought to the Moon Rise funeral center, a complex of funeral halls, tatami rooms, and other waiting and preparation rooms.

What is clear about the wake and the funeral service that follows is how peripheral the priests have become in the funerary process. Both ceremonies are run deftly by Moon Rise staff. The funeral in fact is orchestrated by a "conductor," affiliated with Moon Rise, who advises the family on monetary donations, posthumous names, the funeral speech of the chief mourner, the handling of the incense money, and most other details. The priests, who seldom know the deceased, are relegated largely to bit-actor roles, chanting sutras, offering a Buddhist story, and leaving quickly. In part, this reflects one of Suzuki's larger analytical points—that neither the family nor the funeral professionals now consider the deceased to be impure, in stark contrast to earlier beliefs. The funeral industry has effected a trans-

formation, lightening the atmosphere and the attitudes surrounding the corpse.

Cremation at the municipal crematorium immediately follows the funeral ceremony, and Suzuki leads us through this somber and highly charged setting (pp. 113–18). Most crematoria are highly sanitary and efficient, with tasteful furnishings. One of the intriguing details is that the chief mourner must press the red button that incinerates the corpse, although Suzuki notes that this only actually moves the coffin into the inner chamber and the technicians actually ignite and carefully monitor the incineration from a hidden computer control panel. (Moreover, tensions and anxieties over pushing the button have now modified procedures to require that two mourners jointly press it!) Enough of the bones to fill the urn are picked up under the guidance of the conductor; the remainder are later dumped in the back and taken discreetly to a country landfill by private contractors, who boasted to Suzuki of the glorious cherry blossoms from their landfill trees (pp. 165–66). Afterward, the family usually returns to Moon Rise to hold what had been “seventh-day memorial services” (*shonanoka*).

Thus, the contemporary funeral has been severely truncated—two or three days generally from death to final mourning. The all-night wake is now an hour and a half, as are the funeral and cremation. Mourning previously lasted 49 days until the “lifting of pollution”; the official period is now the day of the funeral itself. And much like wedding ceremonies, the funerary process has been standardized, although this does not mean it has been made uniform. That is, the elements of the funeral process are increasingly similar, but degrees of lavishness vary widely by costs borne by the family and the status of the deceased. Suzuki has some memorable portraits of several of these ceremonies, including funerals of an elderly grandmother, a company executive, a young Korean mother, and a prominent Chinese businessman, all of whose circumstances give very different emotional and social tones to the increasingly standardized proceedings.

Chapters 5 and 6 step back from the ceremonies themselves to profile and analyze the funeral professionals. Crucial to the industry’s growth has been the public’s acceptance of its professional status. The Moon Rise president told Suzuki that when he started, people simply called him “undertaker” (*sōgiya*), but now they address him as Mr. Undertaker (*sōgiya-san*) or Mr. Moon Rise.

Within Moon Rise is a regular staff of 17 (of whom 15 are men) and 5 part-timers, who assist in seating and serving at the ceremonial functions. Another division of the company (“Party Pros”!) supplies conductors (*shikaisha*), who orchestrate the proceedings, and funeral assistants, who attend directly to the family and guests. To her surprise, Suzuki discovered that the regular staff were rather well paid and well educated (12 were university graduates).

Beyond Moon Rise employees and contractors are other industry workers such as the cremators and ash collectors and the priests (chapter 6). This new professionalism and its proliferating division of labor have spawned a stratification of status and some mutual frictions, which Suzuki is careful to tease out. The conductors, priests, and regular staff esteem themselves and elicit deference by virtue of their more inclusive handling of the corpses and their provision of comprehensive services to the bereaved.

Even more interesting to me, though, was the curious mixture of professional pride and shame that most of the professionals evinced. Over and over, Moon Rise and other mortuary workers told Suzuki of the pleasures of being appreciated, of receiving frequent expressions of gratitude from their "customers." At the same time, the occupations are still somewhat tainted. Several younger employees avoided telling their parents they worked in the Funeral Division (allowing them to think they were in the Wedding Division), one woman was forced to quit by her parents, who feared for her wedding chances, and a number of Moon Rise staff were embarrassed that they always smelled of incense (and that this easily identified their job to others). Perhaps this paradox can be resolved because this is a service industry that in the abstract may retain a grim and dirty image among the population, but as individuals encounter the service professionals at moments of personal emotional trauma, many find a surprising and welcome degree of concern, knowledge, efficiency, and—well—service.

One very popular innovation in the mortuary process has been a bathing ceremony, for which Moon Rise contracts an independent company to bring in portable equipment and whose staff assists the relatives in a formal washing of the corpse after pick-up and before the wake. Chapter 7 analyzes the bathing service in order to convey a central argument of the book about how products are transformed into commodities as a force that drives cultural change. The bathing ceremony revitalized an older practice but expressed the rather different intergenerational relations of an era of mass longevity, equal inheritance, and attenuating family ties.

Serendipitously, Moon Rise began to offer the bathing service just after Suzuki began her fieldwork, so she could observe the extended course of marketing, in which salespeople were trained, literature prepared, sales pitches honed—and in which customer responses, often lukewarm, forced adaptations and revision. This left her with an appreciation of the contingencies by which a good or service, a "product," only becomes a "commodity" when it is actively accepted. Of course, the bathing ceremony, indeed the whole industry, has great potential for unfair advantage—playing on and profiting from grief and remorse—but Suzuki is generally sympathetic to the funeral workers and charitable about their motives.

The emergence of the bathing ceremony recalls the invention and assertion of the Western wedding cake into the Japanese wedding ceremony, as

analyzed by Walter Edwards.<sup>1</sup> The difference is that Edwards used a cultural analysis of how the cake was placed into a symbolic grid, while Suzuki interprets the bathing ceremony as a successful case of commodification. Indeed there is much here that resonates with other analyses of Japanese service sectors and the dynamics of consumption, like Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni on the Kobe wedding halls, Diana Bethel on an old age home, and Brian Moeran and John McCreery on advertising agencies.<sup>2</sup> Suzuki alludes to this, although she chooses not to press the comparative analysis. Her study, though, will be an important and revealing case for those who do wish to use ethnography for a fuller interpretation of the commodification of life services in late capitalist Japan. This is a very appealing and provocative contribution, succinctly developed and full of insight.

1. Walter D. Edwards, "Something Borrowed: Wedding Cakes as Symbols in Modern Japan," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1982), pp. 699–711.

2. Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni, *Packaged Japanese: Weddings, Business and Brides* (Richmond, Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Books, 1997); Diana Lynn Bethel, "Life on Obatsuteyama, or, Inside a Japanese Institution for the Elderly," in Takie Sugiyama Lebra, ed., *Japanese Social Organization* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), pp. 109–34; John McCreery, *Japanese Consumer Behavior: From Worker Bees to Wary Shoppers* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000); Brian Moeran, *A Japanese Advertising Agency: An Anthropology of Media and Markets* (Richmond, Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 1996).