Changing Conceptions of Death
in Japanese Society:

A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

In this paper, I would like to examine the changing conceptions of death in Japanese society from a sociological perspective. Such changes in conceptions are connected with structural changes of society. What I would like to explore a little further is this connection between conceptions of death and the social changes behind them.

Firstly, I will start the discussion by considering the conception of death in the prewar period. And I will explain its relation to the traditional family system and the wartime family–state ideology. Then, the attenuation of this conception during the high economic growth period (namely from the second half of the 1950's to the 1960's) will be explained.

Secondly, I will examine the conception of death in the postwar period till the 1980's. The trend towards the sequestration of death will be mentioned, with its relation to the aging of society, the medicalisation of death and changes in the family structure. Furthermore, regarding this sequestration, characteristics in the case of Japan will also be argued.

Finally, I will examine some new trends in death conception since the 1990's. After I trace the increase of discourse and images concerning death in the media, I will consider the trend towards the self–determination of death. And I would also like to consider the social changes behind this trend, namely, the progression towards the consumer society and the process of individualization in the family and at work. And at the end, I will also touch on the emerging tendency of rebuilding relationships in the face of death.

Introductory Remarks

Characterizing death in modern (western) society as being 'tabooed', 'denied', 'hidden', 'sequestrated', etc., has become the classic way of depicting the state of modern death. So, for instance, in the second half of the twentieth century, the French Social Historian, Philippe Ariès gave a description of tabooed death in medical institutions, funerals or everyday conversation (Ariès 1974; 1981), and the British Anthropologist and Sociologist, Geoffrey Gorer pointed out the taboo concerning the grief of the bereaved (Gorer 1965). But at the same time, both Ariès and Gorer also mentioned the growing amount of discourse and images of death in the media (to use Gorer's term, the 'Pornography of Death'). And in general, especially since the 1990's, what has also been argued widely is the revival and reappearance of death, that is to say, the lifting of the death taboo (Walter 1994; 1996). Also, Anselm Strauss, the American Sociologist who is well known for his pioneering work on the sociology of death in the 1960's, wrote about these 'paradoxes' in 'Foreword' for a book titled *The Sociology of Death* edited in Britain in the early 1990's, as follows:

These paradoxes are reflected in this timely and stimulating book. Journalists, clinicians and scholars tend to describe death and dying as tabooed subjects: yet there is an increasing literature about these

topics (empirical, theoretical or speculative, as in these pages) and one can hardly pick up a newspaper without being plunged into a debate about issues involving some aspect of dying ... (Strauss 1993: ix)

Turning our eyes to Japanese society, it is interesting to note that we can discern almost the same tendency as was found in western society, namely, the disappearance and reappearance of death in social life in the twentieth century. The aim of this paper is to describe the historical changes in the concept of death in Japan in relation to changes in social structure. Though looking similar at first glance, changes in Japanese conceptions of death have their own particular social and historical background. I would like to consider characteristic features and differences about the conceptions of death in contemporary Japanese society as compared to those of western societies.

At the outset, I would like to touch briefly on a typical example concerning the changing conceptions of death in Japan. These are the lyrics of a number-one Japanese hit song in 2007, which is called "千の風になって Sen no Kaze ni natte (I am a Thousand Winds)". This song has many exceptional points. Firstly, the singer is not a pop star but an opera singer. Secondly, the Lyrics, which were originally written in English in the U.S. and translated into Japanese, are about death and mourning which are never usually associated with hit songs in Japan. What's more, the opening lines which state that the deceased is absent at the grave are also rather peculiar, because, traditionally in Japan, the family grave is one of the most important sites for family members to mourn, remember and worship the deceased and ancestors. We will return to this song later. First of all, we will begin by considering the relationship between the traditional Japanese family (家 Ie) system and the grave system.

I am a Thousand Winds
(Author Unknown, Original English Lyrics)

Do not stand at my grave and weep;
I am not there, I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn's rain

When you awaken in the morning's hush,
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there, I did not die.

Traditional Family System and Ancestor Worship

The Relationship between Family System and Grave System

Japanese religious consciousness is often described as multireligious on the one hand, and non-religious on the other hand. These two features might look incompatible at first view.

On the one hand, it is depicted as multireligious because Japanese use rituals originating from various religions for formal customs at life events. For instance, it is common for Japanese people to take newborn babies to Shinto shrines to pray for their children's healthy future, or, to have a Shinto-style or even a Christian-style wedding ceremony, and also, to hold a Buddhist-style funeral at the end of life. But what is im-

portant to note here is the fact that the custom of 'visiting the family grave' is the most common activity among all religious behaviors. According to a survey conducted by the Yomiuri newspaper in 2005, 79.1 per cent of Japanese people said that they usually visit the family grave at certain times of the year.

Then on the other hand, the Japanese are depicted as non–religious because, in many cases, those religious activities are formal, routine rituals and are not based on the substantive belief of each religion. According to a survey conducted by the Asahi newspaper in 2003, 77 per cent of Japanese people said that they did not have any interest in religion.

Nevertheless, at least in the first half of the twentieth century, it seems that there was a more consistent, pervasive religious consciousness shared by Japanese people. In 1946, just after the end of World War II, a pioneering folklorist, Kunio Yanagita published a classic book called "先祖の話 Senzo no Hanashi (The Story of Ancestors)". Based on his fieldwork in rural communities throughout the country, he argued in his book about the common elements in religious consciousness despite the apparent diversity of religious rituals. Yanagita described following common elements in Japanese religious consciousness.

(1) Spirits of the deceased don't leave the local community after death (so they don't go to another world like heaven or hell), instead, they remain in the neighborhood, for example, in the mountains or in the forest, watching over their posterity.
(2) Spirits of the deceased return to their descendants' homes annually at certain times of the year (usually during the "お盆 obon" period, in mid August).
(3) 33 years after death, with enough memorial service, each deceased person merges into the spirit of household ancestor.

Though religious rituals in rural communities usually follow a Buddhist–style, these elements, as Yanagita went on to point out, had already existed in ancient Japan before the introduction of Buddhism

from China and Korea in the 6th century. So, according to Yanagita, Buddhism gave some outward forms to the spontaneously arisen endemic beliefs.

In this belief system, the relationship between the dead and survivors was maintained after death, and each family took care of their own ancestor's spirit. Traditionally, every family had a family altar called "仏壇 Butsudan" in their house to worship their ancestors. And such families collectively constituted a local community which worshiped its common ancestor or guardian god in the local shrine. To use Peter Berger's term (Berger 1967) , the local community was a kind of 'cosmos' in which the deceased were treated as if they were still living, as far as the community itself continued to exist. As Syuuichi Kato pointed out (Kato et al. 1977), in such communities, 'the meaning of death was given by communities, not by individuals'.

Through the amendment to the Civil Code in 1897, a family system called "家 Ie" was introduced and the before–mentioned belief system was legally underpinned as a result. The "Ie" system was a sort of patriarchal system in which household heads were authorized to take control of family members' lives, for instance, concerning marriage and moving. The central feature of the "Ie" system was the inheritance of the family estate, including house, land, property and also the family grave by the eldest son from the former household head. If married couples did not have sons, then an adopted son took over as the head of the family. As the number of workers engaging in family–operated businesses or primary industries (the agriculture, forestry and fisheries industries) was higher before World War II, such an inheritance often meant taking over the family business. Speaking of the family grave in the "Ie" system, there would always be a grave keeper, that is to say, the household head who took care of the family grave and held memorial services for the deceased and ancestors.

The Family–State Ideology

When we consider the Japanese "Ie" system, what has to be noticed

is the relationship between the family system and the nation state building. In order to build a modern nation state, the government at that time adopted, from the early twentieth century, the before-mentioned belief system as a kind of Ideology which could enhance the people's loyal sentiment to the state. This Ideology is now called "家族国家観 Kazoku-Kokka Kan (Family-State Ideology)". In those days, this ideological thought was taught as moral education in classes at school. According to this thought, household ancestors whom each family worshiped could be historically traced back to the common ancestors whom local people worshiped in the local shrine, and furthermore, these common ancestors again could be historically traced back to the allegedly oldest of all Japanese families, namely, the Imperial household. So Japan was a nation-state which could be seen as one big family, as it were, a Family-State whose original house was the Imperial family. From this point of view, the love and respect for one's mother and father was equivalent to the loyalty to the Emperor.

During World War II, on the basis of this ideology, 'State-Shintoism', Shinto sponsored by the state became the spiritual pillar of wartime nationalism and was used to mobilize people towards war. In the last phase of the war, even young students were mobilized and sent to the front. "忠孝一本 Tyu-Kou-Ippon" was an often used expression among students, the meaning of which was that the filial devotion to parents and the loyalty to the Emperor and the state were exactly the same thing. And "Die for the nation", "Die for the Emperor", "Death for honor by 100 million" were popular slogans in wartime Japan.

Postwar Changes in Family and Social Structure

In the early 1970's, the Japanese Sociologist, Syun Inoue, in his article called "The Loss of Reasons to Die", argued that young people's attitudes towards death changed after the war (Inoue 1973). In contrast to the 'acceptance' of death among young people during World War II, he observed, the young generation in the 1970's were marked by 'denial', 'disinterestedness' and 'refusal' towards death. In reaction to the collec-

tively given meaning of death and the consequent tragedy during wartime, to talk about death officially, in other words, to talk about the social meaning of death was thought to be generally repressed and tabooed.

At least in the first half of the twentieth century, as I have mentioned before, there was a comparatively more consistent, pervasive religious belief system shared by Japanese people, as described by Kunio Yanagita. As a result of the government in the prewar period transforming this belief system into the Family–State Ideology and using it to mobilize people towards war, not only was this Ideology, but also this original belief system itself sometimes criticized in the postwar period. Though the custom and routine rituals related to the belief system still remained in daily life after the war (as in the case of 'visiting the family grave' mentioned before), the belief system itself became gradually attenuated and lost. Such a tendency was reinforced by three major changes in the family system, the employment structure and the social structure after the war.

Firstly, just after the end of the war, through the amendment to the Civil Code in 1947, the traditional family ("Ie") system, which legally underpinned the traditional belief system, was abolished. The inheritance of the family estate by the eldest son was also abolished and replaced, in principle, by equally dividing inheritance between children. In the traditional belief system, the custom for continuing the family line through the generations was crucially important, because it was the descendant's family who took care of the ancestor's spirit and the family grave. But the custom lost its legal foundation at this point.

Secondly, the custom for continuing the family line through generations lost not only its legal foundation, but also its economic meaning. The rate of workers engaging in the family–operated businesses or primary industries declined rapidly after the war. The rate of workers engaging in primary industries was 48.5 per cent in 1950, but by 2000, it became a mere 5.0 per cent (According to 'The Population Census' by the Ministry of Internal affairs and Communications). The rate of work-

ers engaging in the family-operated business was 46.6 per cent in 1960, but by 2000, it became just 16.6 per cent (According to 'The Labour Force Survey' by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications). This meant that more and more workers were becoming company employees in the industrialization of Japan (Japan moved into the high economic growth period in the second half of the 1950's). So, for family members, it became more and more unnecessary to continue the family line (in this case, succeeded the family business) through generations, for the sake of earning their living.

Thirdly, because of the rapid advancement of urbanization during the high economic growth period, rural areas generally suffered from depopulation and ties in local communities also loosened. During the high economic growth period (from the second half of the 1950's to the 1960's), from approximately 800 thousand to 1.2 million people left rural areas each year and moved into the large metropolitan areas around Tokyo, Nagoya and Osaka. In rural areas before the war, as I pointed out before, there were local communities which constituted a kind of 'cosmos' and worshiped their common ancestors in local shrines. But, as a result of the declining population, it sometimes became difficult for such communities to maintain mutual-help relationships between community members. For example, before the war, funerals in rural areas were usually prepared and held, not by funeral directors, but by neighborhood groups known in Japanese as "葬式組 Soushikigumi". On behalf of the bereaved family in a group, "Soushikigumi" organized funerals and helped each other. And this group was sometimes made up of a whole community. Though such a custom still remains in daily life in some form, funerals held by "Soushikigumi" were widely replaced by funerals organized by funeral companies during the high economic growth period.

So, before World War II, the traditional belief system as described by Yanagita was underpinned by the family system and local communities, however, after the war, against the background of social changes as I mentioned above, such a belief system rapidly attenuated, losing its

social foundation. Subsequently, rituals related to the belief system, for instance, rituals for ancestor worship have also been simplified and many of the memorial services and gatherings for ancestor worship have been omitted. Traditionally such services were held every 1st, 3rd, 7th, 13th, 17th, 23rd, 27th and 33rd year after someone's death, but people became to think that only one or two gatherings were enough to treat ancestors. Also the number of family graves which have lost their grave keepers and fallen into ruin has been increasing, especially since the 1990's.

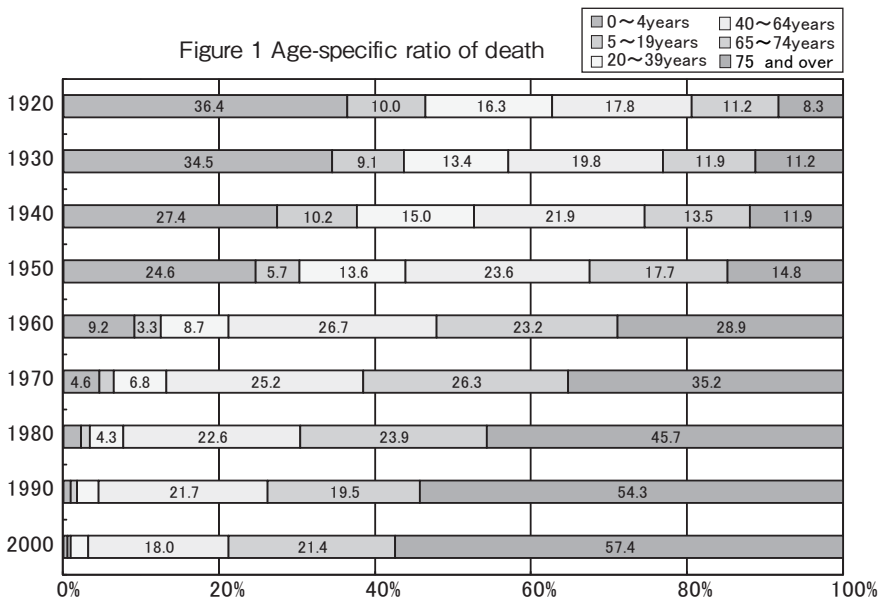## The Sequestration of Death after World War II

Death in the Aging Society

In the preceding section I considered the decline of the traditional belief system caused by the Japanese experience of World War II and I also pointed out the social background of such a decline in postwar Japan. As Inoue pointed out in 1970, the denial of death, in other words, the avoidance of thinking about the social meaning of death became the general trend in Japan after the high economic growth period. We shall now take a look at another two important social aspects concerning the 'denied' and 'tabooed' death at that time, namely, the aging of society and the medicalisation of death.

The first point to be discussed here is the relationship between the aging of society and changing conceptions of death. Population aging in Japan has been progressing rapidly, especially since the 1970's. The ratio of 65 years old and over, which was 7.1 per cent in 1970, reached 21.0 per cent in 2005. The decline in the birthrate coupled with the increase in the average life expectancy are major factors of the aging of society. And what has to be noticed concerning the increase in longevity is the change in the cause of death. In 1947 the biggest cause of death was tuberculosis and the second was pneumonia & bronchitis. Also in 1950 the biggest cause was tuberculosis, but according to the data of 1955, the

cause of death changed significantly then and cerebrovascular disease became the biggest cause followed by cancer. So in the first half of the 1950's the major cause of death changed from infectious diseases to 'adult' diseases. The major factor of this change was the introduction of antibiotics around that time. In 2005, about 30 per cent of deaths were caused by cancer and 60 per cent were by cancer, cardiac disease and cerebrovascular disease.

Furthermore, this change in the cause of death transformed the distribution of age–specific death (**Figure 1**). In the prewar period, a large number of young men, and especially babies and infants died mainly because of infectious diseases. Even in 1950, about 30 per cent of deaths were those of people under the age of 20. And one in four of all deaths were those of children under the age of 5. Also in the same year, about 30 per cent of the dead were people aged 65 years old and over. So we may say that deaths existed, as it were, widespread in all age groups in

Figure 1 Age-specific ratio of death

Legend: □ 0～4years □ 40～64years □ 5～19years □ 65～74years □ 20～39years ■ 75 and over

Year	0～4years	5～19years	20～39years	40～64years	65～74years	75 and over
1920	36.4	10.0	16.3	17.8	11.2	8.3
1930	34.5	9.1	13.4	19.8	11.9	11.2
1940	27.4	10.2	15.0	21.9	13.5	11.9
1950	24.6	5.7	13.6	23.6	17.7	14.8
1960	9.2	3.3	8.7	26.7	23.2	28.9
1970	4.6		6.8	25.2	26.3	35.2
1980		4.3	22.6	23.9	45.7	
1990			21.7	19.5	54.3	
2000			18.0	21.4	57.4	

Source: Population Survey Report (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare)

the first half of twentieth century. But in the second half of twentieth century, deaths became more concentrated in elderly people. In 2000, about 80 per cent of deaths were those of people aged 65 years old and over. And in the same year, the percentage of children who died under the age of 20 was only 0.9 per cent.

One could assume that such a change in the age–specific distribution of death also has had some effect on people's conceptions of death. Firstly, in a society with a long life expectancy, the younger the person is, the more likely they are able to keep the idea of death at a distance. As Norbert Elias put it (Elias 1985: 48), 'For a considerable sector of these societies death is a good way off.' So, the image of death is not so much something that can befall us suddenly at anytime in life, but more as something which could happen in the far–distant future. Consequently, people in such a society can forget their own death for greater part of their lives. Secondly, because of the concentration of death in older age, families and companies have become less affected by the loss of family members and colleagues. As Robert Blauner pointed out, 'As death in modern society becomes increasingly a phenomenon of the old, who are usually retired from work and finished with their parental responsibilities, mortality in modern society rarely interrupts the business of life (Blauner 1966: 379).' So, without being seriously disrupted by death, people can go about their daily lives. And as a result, death tends to be hidden away from everyday life. Thirdly, as Kiyomi Morioka suggested, social–psychological need for the existence of 'spirit' and 'afterlife' is thought to have declined (Morioka 1984). In the past, many babies, infants and young people died prematurely, but bereaved family members wanted to continue the relationship and hoped that the deceased would continue to exist somewhere in some ways. As many people become to live well into a great age, such a need can be thought to have decreased.

As a whole, we can say that the concentration of death at an older age has turned people's eyes away from death. And it has also made people more unaware of the continuity of generations, that is to say, the

relationships across generational lines between young people, old people and the deceased.

The Medicalisation of Death

As I just mentioned in the preceding section, from the perspective of the time of death, it can be said that death itself has become, in the second half of the twentieth century, concentrated in old age and generally sequestrated from younger people's social lives. On the other hand, from the perspective of the space of death, we could also say that death has generally been sequestrated from social life. The distribution of place–specific death changed altogether in the second half of the twentieth century (**Figure 2**). In 1951, 82.5 per cent of deaths occurred at home and 5.9 per cent occurred at other non–institutional places. The percentage of deaths in hospitals, clinics and other institutional places was only 11.6 per cent in the same year. In contrast to this, in 2000, only 13.9 per cent of deaths occurred at home and 2.8 per cent occurred at other non–institutional places, whereas 83.3 per cent of deaths occurred in hospitals, clinics and other institutional places in the same year. So,
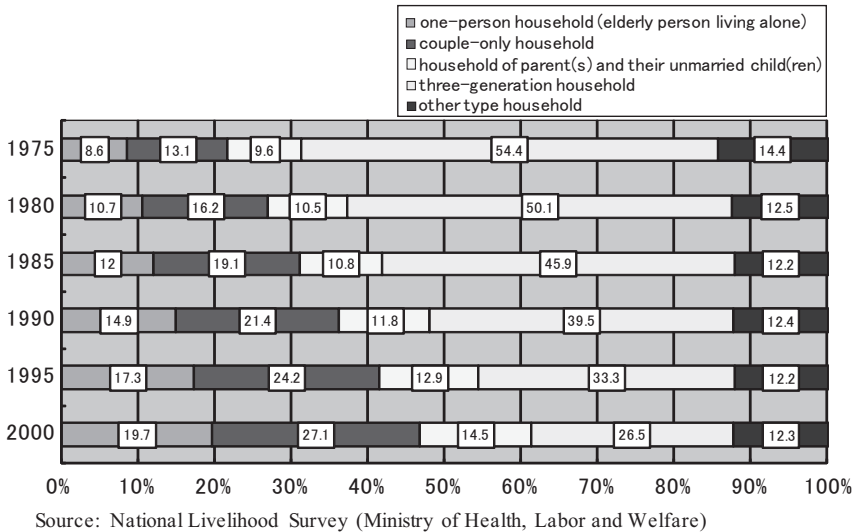
Figure 2 Place-specific ratio of death
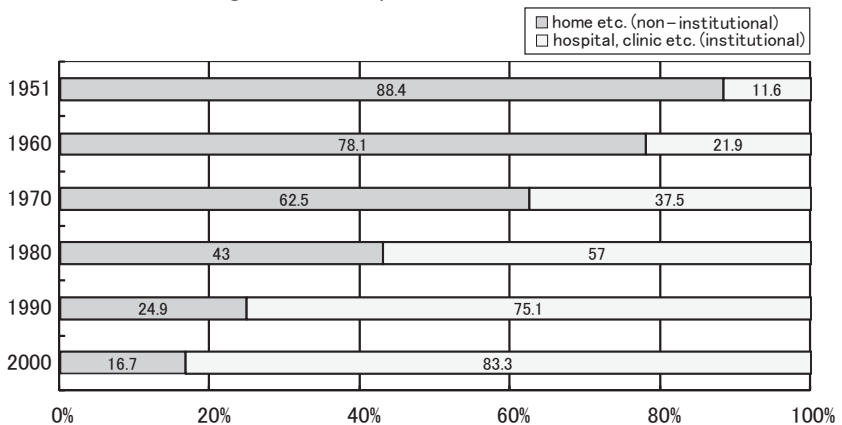
Source: Population Survey Report (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare)

we may say that death became medicalised in the second half of the twentieth century.

We can point out several factors which have contributed to the medicalisation of death, for example, the advances in medical technology, the increase in the number of hospitals built and beds available, and also the introduction of the health-insurance system in 1961 that covers all citizens. Nowadays, people normally go to hospital when they get serious diseases, and sometimes they are hospitalized and unfortunately, in some cases, they lose their lives in hospital. But as to whether people want to die in hospital or not is a completely different matter. According to a survey on the consciousness of elderly people (65years old and over) which was conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2002, 50.9 per cent of people would rather die at home, whereas 30.1 per cent would rather die in hospitals or other medical institutions. So we can assume that, although the majority of people would rather end their lives at home, there are some deterrent factors which have led to the decrease in the number of deaths at home. One such factor we can refer to is the change in the household structure which includes seniors aged 65 and over (**Figure 3**). As I mentioned before, there was a traditional family system called "Ie" before the end of World War II. And in this system, the eldest son was the inheritor of the family estate, and it was common for the eldest son's family, that is, his wife and children, to live together with his parents. Therefore, 'three-generation households' used to be the norm in the prewar period. In the postwar era, though such a custom of 'three-generation households' has remained, the ratio of 'three-generation households' (among households which include seniors aged 65 and over) has decreased, while the ratio of 'one-person households' and 'couple-only households' has increased.

With regard to death at home, we can assume that 'three-generation households' is more receptive, because in this type of household, most of the time, there are one or more family members who can take care of a dying person. Compared to this, 'one-person households' or 'couple-only households' are less receptive, because, generally speak-

Figure 3 The changing ratio of the types of household
which include one or more seniors aged 65 and over

■ one-person household (elderly person living alone)
■ couple-only household
□ household of parent(s) and their unmarried child(ren)
□ three-generation household
■ other type household

	one-person	couple-only	parent(s)/child	three-generation	other
1975	8.6	13.1	9.6	54.4	14.4
1980	10.7	16.2	10.5	50.1	12.5
1985	12	19.1	10.8	45.9	12.2
1990	14.9	21.4	11.8	39.5	12.4
1995	17.3	24.2	12.9	33.3	12.2
2000	19.7	27.1	14.5	26.5	12.3

Source: National Livelihood Survey (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare)

ing, there is either no one or only one elderly old person who can take care of a dying person. Given this condition, it may be no wonder that many people choose death in the hospital even though they would prefer to die at home.

Hidden Death

It was pointed out at the beginning of this paper that characterizing death in modern (western) society as being 'denied', 'hidden', 'seques-trated', etc., has become the classic way of depicting the state of modern death. And, as I mentioned above, we can find a similar tendency toward the gradual sequestering of death in twentieth-century Japanese society. During the industrialization and modernization period, the Japanese conception of death appeared to take on a similar character to that of western society. But at the same time, in Japan's case, there are some differences.

Firstly, in Japan, the social changes (for example, aging, medicali-

sation and the trend toward nuclear families) which I referred to as the social background of the changing conception of death didn't appear gradually throughout the twentieth century but appeared mainly after World War II. So in the second half of the twentieth century, Japanese society changed rapidly in many respects and conceptions of death also changed rapidly in relation to these social changes.

Secondly, in Japan's case, we can see that the denial of death originated from the denial of the wartime conception of death. As I explained before, the government transformed the traditional belief system into the Family–State Ideology during wartime and used it to mobilize people towards war. After defeat in the war, Japanese people were obliged to reject this Family–State Ideology, which consequently led to the repression of the related original belief system to some degree and to the change of the related family system. As I just mentioned before, we can say that the modernization of Japanese society (with related social changes) contributed to the gradual sequestering of death. But at the same time, we can also say that the denial of the traditional conception of death was the starting point of the modernization of Japanese society. Therefore, without tradition, death becomes commonly hidden away from society.

The Reappearance of Death since the 1990's

The Reappearance of Death in the Media

In the 1990's, there were substantial changes in Japanese conceptions of death. In contrast to the sequestration of death until the 1980's, we could find a lot of discourse and images concerning death in the media. For example, documentary–style books such as "病院で死ぬということ Byouin de Shinu to iukoto (On Dying in Hospital)" (1990) and "大往生 Daiouzyou (The Peaceful Death)" (1994) became best–selling books and both were made into movies or TV dramas. And especially in the late 1990's, major monthly periodicals made up special editions about death

several times, which had titles like "For a Happy Death", "The Preparation for Death", "Facing Death Properly", "To Die with Dignity", and so on.

One may refer to certain social trends as the factors which influenced this 'reappearance' of death in the 1990's. First of all, some medical issues became highly controversial during this period. These issues included truth–telling in cancer diagnosis and prognosis, euthanasia and dying with dignity, brain death and organ transplant. Until the 1980's, most Japanese physicians had a general policy of not telling patients the truth if they identified a terminal disease. But with the improvement in survival rates, physicians started telling the truth and emphasizing the patient's right to know details of their true condition. And after the Emperor Showa's lingering dying was aired in the media in 1989 (that is, endless daily reports on total blood transfusion), the membership of the 'Japan Society for Dying with Dignity' increased rapidly (that is, the number of people who started writing the 'Living Will', should they become terminally ill, rose significantly). The number of members was under 10 thousand in the 1980's, but then became 30 thousand in 1992, 60 thousand in 1996, and then over 100 thousand in 2002. Also a number of medical accidents aired by the media stirred up controversy over active euthanasia. Then, after a long debate concerning the definition of brain death, the organ transplant law went into effect in 1997 which led to transplantation from brain–dead donors for the first time in Japan.

Secondly, certain social incidents can be seen as factors which had an impact upon people's conceptions of death. In January 1995, the Great Hanshin Earthquake occurred around Kobe, one of the megacities in Japan which killed more than 5000 people in one night. This earthquake led to a heightening of people's awareness as to the importance of NPOs and volunteers (not only in aiding relief activities, but also in general) and it also made people think about the meaning of life. Also in March of the same year, the sarin gas attack on Tokyo's subway system by members of the religious cult called 'オウム真理教 Aum Shinrikyo' occurred in which 12 people were killed and more than 5000 people were

injured. The members of the cult could actually be called religious fanatics, but at the same time, many of them were well-educated people, seeking their own truth for their own reasons. So, in a way, the incident also provided people an opportunity to re-examine their own conception of death, namely, how they should conceive the meaning of life and death. Also, since the late 1990's, particularly since 1998, the number of suicides has noticeably increased (**Figure 4**) and suicide rates per 100,000 reached 25.9 in 2007. This rate is ranked in the top 10 among countries in the world and is more than twice as high as those of the United States and Australia, and three times as high as that of the United Kingdom. After the burst of asset-inflated bubble economy, corporate downsizing became the common management strategy in the 1990's. Furthermore, several major banks and securities companies went bankrupt in 1997 and 1998. Such an economic downturn seems to be a major cause of the increase in the suicide rate, especially among males. But at the same time, as I will argue later, we should also consider more fundamental changes in the social structure of those times.

It is such medical and social issues which we just looked at, that

Figure 4 The yearly change of the number of suicides
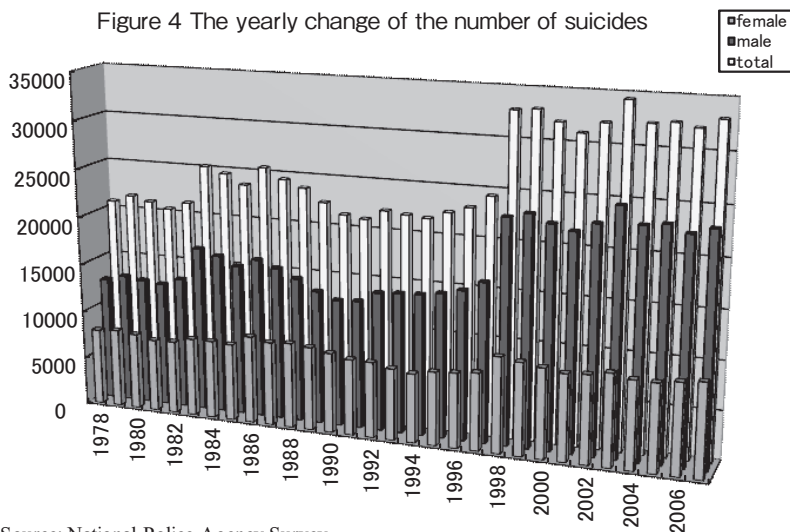
Source: National Police Agency Survey

seemed to influence the 'reappearance' of death in the 1990's, namely, the increase of discourse and images concerning death in the media. Such discourse and images included not only serious arguments in non-fiction literature and magazines, but also novels, TV dramas, movies and music, central themes of which were death and bereavement. For example, a novel called "世界の中心で、愛を叫ぶ Sekai no Tyushin de Ai o sakebu (Shouting Love at the Heart of the World)" published in 2001, which was a story about a young boy bereaving the loss of his girl-friend and his subsequent ten-year search for the meaning of life. This book sold more than 3 million copies (becoming the number-two best-selling book in 2003). It was made into a movie and TV drama and became hugely popular especially among the younger generation. Also, a TV drama called "僕の生きる道 Boku no Ikiru Michi (My Way of life)", aired in 2003, was a story about a young teacher diagnosed with a termi-nal disease. This drama had a huge audience and the title tune called "世界に一つだけの花 Sekai ni Hitotsu dakeno Hana (The One and Only Flower in the World)" became the number-one hit song in 2003. And an-other example is the number-one hit song in 2007, "Sen no Kaze ni nat-te (I am a Thousand Winds)", which I mentioned in the beginning.

As I also mentioned at the outset, Philippe Ariès and Geoffrey Gor-er pointed out the growing amount of discourse and images of death in the media which Gorer called the 'Pornography of Death'. According to Gorer, such pornography is even enjoyed furtively and engenders furtive excitement (Gorer 1965). In the case of the Japanese, it is partly true that those images and representations concerning death in the me-dia has engendered a kind of enjoyment of death in a similar way, but at the same time, we can say that they also show some guidelines for peo-ple, namely guidelines on an acceptable style of dying or a proper way of grieving (Walter et al. 1995). In other words, through such discourse and representations, people seem to have learned almost subconsciously how people should behave as a dying or bereaved person and how people should relate to each other in the face of death. So what seems to be most common and emphasized in this 'learning' is, mainly, the self-de-

termination and self-control concerning death, dying and bereavement.

The Self-Determination of Death

As I mentioned before, since the 1990's, some medical issues such as truth-telling in cancer diagnosis and dying with dignity have become highly controversial. We might say that the issue is the problem of self-determination of death and dying. When patients are not informed of the true condition of their disease and are controlled by medical staff, he or she is deprived of their right to determine their own way of life until death. But it is those patient's lives, not the lives of medical staff, which matters most. So, it is argued, all information should be given to the patient, no matter how painful it might be (sometimes such information may include the sentence of death). And if the patient does not want to be kept alive in a terminal or vegetative state, their right to determine their own death, it is also argued, should be recognized. Writing a 'Living Will (Advance Directive)' is a measure to guarantee this right.

What is more, the conception of self-determination as a basic principle appears not only regarding death and dying, but also funerals and burials. For example, since the 1990's, "葬送の自由を進める会 Sousou no Jiyuu o susumeru Kai (The Grave-Free Promotion Society of Japan)" has promoted "自然葬 Shizensou (Natural Burying)", which means the scattering of cremated remains at sea or in the mountains. This movement emerged against the backdrop of postwar changes in family structure which I referred to earlier, but it also embodies, by implication, the idea of self-determination of burial. By that I mean, being freed from the traditional family grave which is related to the prewar family ("Ie") system and from traditional Buddhist formality, people can now freely determine the way their remains are disposed of. Generally speaking, such a trend towards self-determination of death has appeared not only in such practices concerning death, but also in discourse and images concerning death in the media which I mentioned just before. The title of the TV drama in 2003, "My Way of life" is symbolic in this respect.

Neither persisting in the pre-modern tradition nor being controlled by professionals in a modern way, self-determination and personal choice seems to have become the leading guideline for people in the face of death.

It would be untrue to say that such a trend towards self-determination has appeared only in arguments concerning death and dying. Rather, this has been a general trend underlying changes in many social areas since the 1980's. I will now take a look at two structural changes related to this trend in Japanese society ever since then, that is, the progression towards the 'Consumer Society' and the process of 'Individualization' in the family and company.

Firstly, Japanese society in the era of high economic growth (that is, from the second half of the 1950's to the 1960's) has often been depicted as a 'Mass Society' from a social theoretical point of view. Rapid industrialization brought about a new and different lifestyle based on mass production and mass consumption. In those days, a word, "三種の神器 Sansyu no Zinngi (three holy objects)" in family life was often used. This word originally means the three sacred emblems of the imperial family, but in this case, it meant a (black and white) television, an electric refrigerator and an electric washing machine. So generally speaking, at that time, people wanted to have the same commodities as their neighbors had.

However, in the 1970's, as the penetration rates for households of the "three holy objects" reached almost 100 per cent and that of the car or the air conditioner also has reached more than 50 per cent, the shift from mass production to high-mix low-volume production (the manufacturing of a wide variety of products in small quantities) became necessary to sell the products in many industrial segments.

And in the mid 1980's, there was a famous debate about the 'End of Mass Society' among scholars and marketing managers, in which some commentators depicted Japanese society as a consumer society. So, it was argued, people now wanted to become 'somebody' who was different from others, not 'anybody' who was similar to others (Murakami

1984). And a measure for such a self-realization was the consumption of a wide variety of commodities and the coordinating of those goods in an individualized style. During the same period, social theories on consumer society (for example, that of Jean Baudrillard) and theories on postmodernity (for example, that of Jean-François Lyotard) were introduced to Japan. But what has to be said is that the reception of those theories at that time was one-sided. Those theories were not used to criticize some characteristics of the consumer society (for instance, the fragmentation of self-identity), but instead, were used to legitimate the status quo. So in the consumer society, it was argued, people had become to live more freely on the basis of their own personal choices and could also lead their lifestyles in more individualized ways. Since then, it might be argued, the trend towards self-determination has emerged as an extension of such a structural change towards the consumer society.

Secondly, the process of 'Individualization' in the family and company can be referred to as a structural change underlying the trend towards self-determination. In the past, especially in the high economic growth period, Japanese society was often characterized by such terms as 'groupism' or 'group-centered orientation' in contrast to western individualism. From this point of view, Japanese companies at that time were considered as a kind of community which replaced weakening local communities. Japanese-style management, which was comprised of the lifelong employment system, the seniority based (pay and promotion) system, the enterprise-based welfare and the enterprise union, was characterized then as a community-like system protecting employees for their entire lives. And employees, in their turn, worked as a "会社人間 Kaisya-Ningen (company man)", sacrificing themselves for the sake of company.

Such characteristics had changed gradually since the late 1960's. The word, 'Privatization' was used at that time to describe the emergence of a new lifestyle in which people wanted to enjoy leisure and consumption in their family lives rather than become a company-first

person. To put it simply, people began to think the family as more important than the company or the nation in their lives.

But since the 1980's, a further change in family life has emerged with the term, 'Individualization'. Firstly, because of the increase in the ratio of unmarried people in contrast with the decrease in the ratio of 'three-generation households' which I mentioned above, the percentage of 'one-person households' has increased since then. The rate of 'one-person households' rose from 19.5 per cent in 1975, 20.8 per cent in 1985, 25.6 per cent in 1995, up to 29.5 per cent in 2005 (According to 'The Population Census' by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications). And even in the family, lifestyles and time schedules of family members have become differentiated and individualized, so, as a result of that, 'Hotel-like households' or 'eating alone' have become widely-discussed phenomena.

Also in the company, the process of individualization became a remarkable trend especially in the 1990's. After the collapse of the bubble economy and above all, after the amendment of the Work Dispatch Law in 1999, more companies have become to employ more part-time, temporary workers instead of offering lifelong employment. Besides, more companies have also started to introduce the merit or performance based system instead of the seniority system. Nowadays, for most employees, companies are not the community-like group as before. Now, more and more workers have become individualized, and have to shape their careers by themselves, taking self-responsibility for their own actions.

To get back to the original topic, the trend towards self-determination of death which has emerged since the 1990's can also be thought to be connected with the process of the individualization of people's lives in the family and the company.

Individualized Death without Tradition

In the beginning of this section, I referred to some medical issues and social incidents in the 1990's as factors which had a direct effect on

the changing conceptions of death in Japan. It might be said that, in re-action to these issues, the trend which I called 'the reappearance of death' has emerged since the 1990's. And in this 'reappearance', namely, the proliferation of discourse and images concerning death in the media, we can find a particular trend, that is, the trend towards self-determi-nation of death and dying which served as the leading guideline for peo-ple thinking about death. I pointed out that this trend is not limited to areas related to death, but should be regarded as part of a more general trend towards self-determination in many social areas. And I took up two structural changes related to this more general trend, namely, the progression towards the 'Consumer Society' and the process of 'Individ-ualization', as factors which underlie the trend towards self-determina-tion in general and which also lead towards the self-determination of death.

At this point, what I would like to emphasize is that this trend to-wards self-determination of death in Japan can not be interpreted sim-ply as a result of the importation of western individualism to Japan. It is certainly true that the way of thinking about death in contemporary Japan has been influenced by the western style of thought, particularly American, especially concerning medical issues. Yet, it seems that the concept of self-determination changed its meaning in the process of re-ception into Japanese society. In a Japanese context, what the self-de-termination really implies is not so much the respect for the rights of the individual, but rather, giving individuals options to do what he or she likes even though the choices themselves could be very difficult.

I mentioned earlier the denial of the wartime conception of death in the postwar period, which led to the loss of the traditional belief system concerning death. It might be argued that this denial and loss has led to the trend towards self-determination of death. In other words, without a shared conception of death, people now have to make sense of suffer-ing and death individually, and are forced to do so, on their own respon-sibility. When we consider the increase in the number of suicides since the late 1990's, we should not overlook such fundamental changes which

gradually emerged in the second half of the twentieth century.

From this point of view, it seems to be too simple to say that 'the reappearance of death' since the 1990's literally means the lifting of the death taboo. It is true that, through the proliferated discourse and images concerning death in the media, people have become to think and talk about issues related to death and bereavement more openly than before. And in this sense, we could talk about the lifting of the death taboo. However, since the leading guideline for people overall is the self-determination of death, what people think and talk about is mainly their own death and bereavement, but not the death and bereavement of others. To put it differently, despite 'the reappearance of death' in the media, there still remains a tendency among people to avoid committing to relationships with the dying, the dead and the bereaved. We can even say that this avoidance of commitment to such relationships arouse anxiety towards hidden death, and to repress this anxiety, people tend to rely on discourse and images of self-determination of death in the media.

Yet at the same time, there is another symptomatic tendency concerning death and bereavement, that is, a tendency towards building and rebuilding new kinds of social bonds in the face of death. For example, with the spread of the Internet, it has become possible for patients suffering from fatal illnesses to communicate online, even if they are bedridden. On websites and blogs where many people participate, patients suffering from the same illnesses can share information about their conditions, medical treatments and facilities. They can also encourage and comfort each other from their own experiences. Sometimes such electronic communication can be more frequent and deep (involving thousands of people), compared to communication with people around them in the real world.

And another example is mutual-help groups for the bereaved. In these groups, people who have lost their spouse, or parents who have lost their children meet periodically and talk about their experiences. Though they know each other only through such meetings and, in most cases, don't know much about each other, these groups provide them

opportunities to give expression to their grief. In mutual-help groups, what might bring comfort to participants is not a communal ceremony, but expressing and sharing each other's individual's grief.

As I mentioned before, in the prewar period, there existed the religious belief system shared by people in local communities. But in social networks as we can find on the Internet or in mutual-help groups, people don't share such a common belief system. Such networks are not so much communities, but rather a communication forum for individualized people, where they can express their opinions and feelings individually. Their views may be diverse, multiple and sometimes, even conflicting. However, it would be inappropriate to say that they act entirely in an independent and autonomous way when participating in these networks. It might be said that they are acting on the principle of self-determination, but nevertheless, there exists social bonds between them. Neither in traditional communities nor self-determination, can we find in these bonds the alternative possibilities for rebuilding relationships in the face of death.

Concluding Remarks

At the beginning of this paper, I touched briefly on the lyrics of a number-one Japanese hit song in 2007, "I am a Thousand Winds". The original lyrics were written in English in the U.S., and were also read at the first memorial service for victims of the September 11 attacks. Regarding the Japanese translation of these lyrics, I pointed out earlier that lines which state that the deceased is absent at the grave are actually at odds with the traditional family grave system. In the traditional system, the family grave is supposed to be the most important site for family members to remember the deceased and ancestors. So, on the one hand, the fact that this song became hugely popular could mean that people were attracted to its liberating feeling, namely, the feeling of freedom to imagine more freely about one's own afterlife, without adhering to tradition.

But, on the other hand, some other lines which state that spirits of the deceased are existing in nature fit in well with the older conception of ancestor spirit in Japan. As described by Kunio Yanagita, it was believed that spirits of the deceased remain in the neighborhood, for example, in the mountains or in the forest, and then return to their descendants' homes once a year.

In this context, it is quite interesting to note the slight modification of the lyrics in the Japanese translation. In the original version, spirits of the deceased are considered to exist in nature, as 'winds', 'the sunlight' etc. However, in the Japanese version, the phrase, 'waking you up (in Japanese)', 'watching over and protecting you (in Japanese)' are attached to words like 'birds' and 'stars'. This means that, in the Japanese version, spirits of the deceased are regarded as beings who care about and help the bereaved, as older ancestor spirits used to do. So it might be argued that what arouses people's sympathy in this song is not so much the nostalgia for the traditional belief itself, but rather, a renewed image of continuing social bonds after death, combined with the traditional image of death.

Certainly, this song is just a popular song and its popularity will surely wane. People's sympathy towards this song is basically a temporary phenomenon. But at least, one can read in it people's hopes and longings, and thus, the trend towards the future. In an age of secularization, detraditionalization and individualization, what people want to rebuild is, to put it simply, the relationship which extends beyond the boundary of life and death. And the fact that the lyrics of "I am a Thousand Winds" was originally written in English indicates that people's longing for such a relationship even extends beyond the borders of nationality and culture.

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