

# Funerals for the 21st Century

Across Asia, centuries of funeral traditions are being upended due to lack of cemetery space, rising costs and dwindling family sizes. In South Korea and mainland China, families are shifting from traditional burials to cremation. And in Japan, many are looking to be less of a burden on their families by choosing no-frills options, including drive-thru funeral homes and high-tech cemeteries.

AYAKO HIRONO, DEAN NAPOLITANO and NIKKI SUN

**TOKYO/HONG KONG** On a recent Saturday afternoon on the roof deck of a small ship in Tokyo Bay, 13 passengers sat in somber silence as the vessel chugged its way to the middle of the inlet. The tortured lyrics of John Lennon's 1970 song "Mother" wafted faintly from a speaker inside the boat as jets roared against a deep blue sky above.

In the water below, hundreds of brightly colored flower

**PHOTO:** Niches containing cremated remains of the deceased line the walls at the Chinese Christian Cemetery in Hong Kong.



petals floated on the surface, marking the spot where a paper bag containing the cremated remains of a passenger's family member had been tossed into the bay.

Toshiko Mori, 79, had come that day with her family to scatter her grandparents' ashes.

For more than three decades, she and her husband had painstakingly maintained the family cemetery plot. But after the local government asked them to vacate so they could reorganize the cemetery, she had to find a new place for the remains.

The family found it difficult to find a suitable plot at another cemetery, she said, and they decided against spending the 1 million yen (\$8,983) for a new one. Scattering the remains at sea seemed to solve all of their problems, however. Tokyo Bay was a respectful final resting spot for the remains of her long-dead relatives, and scattering the remains spared her -- and eventually, her daughter -- the time-consuming work of maintaining a cemetery plot. "When I die, I want her to scatter my ashes in the sea too," she said.

Mori was among three families aboard the ship operated by Blue Ocean Ceremony, a company that arranges 300 boat services a year for customers to scatter the ashes of loved ones at sea. Fees start at 50,000 yen to scatter the ashes for one person. "More people have

become aware of ash scattering in Japan over the past decade," said Kazuki Gonmori, a director at House Boat Club, which manages the voyages.

Blue Ocean is among a number of companies offering alternatives to Japan's traditional death rituals. The vast majority of Japanese people are cremated after they die, and ashes are typically placed in a pot at a family cemetery. A marker is laid, and family members are expected to care for the plot. Washing the headstone and laying flowers are essential parts of the late summer Bon festival, a Japanese Buddhist custom to honor the spirits of their ancestors.

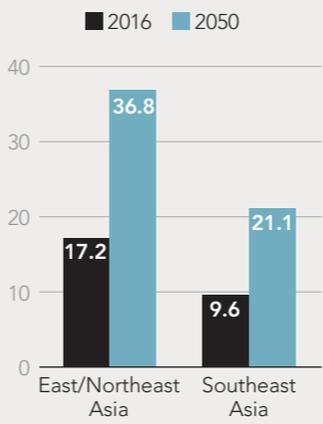
But many in Japan, an aging society where "lonely deaths" have become a national concern, are coming to the conclusion that such elaborate rituals are no longer practical in a shrinking society. "Japanese people are too sensitive to peer pressure in the community, and funerals have become too elaborate," Wakako Sasaki, an author of a book on the history of religion, said. "At the same time, there are more options for mourning these days."

The same is true across Asia, where families are changing the way they bury and honor their deceased loved ones amid rapid demographic change. About 60% of the world's

**“Holding a traditional funeral is too laborious for modern Japanese”**

**Asia's getting old fast**

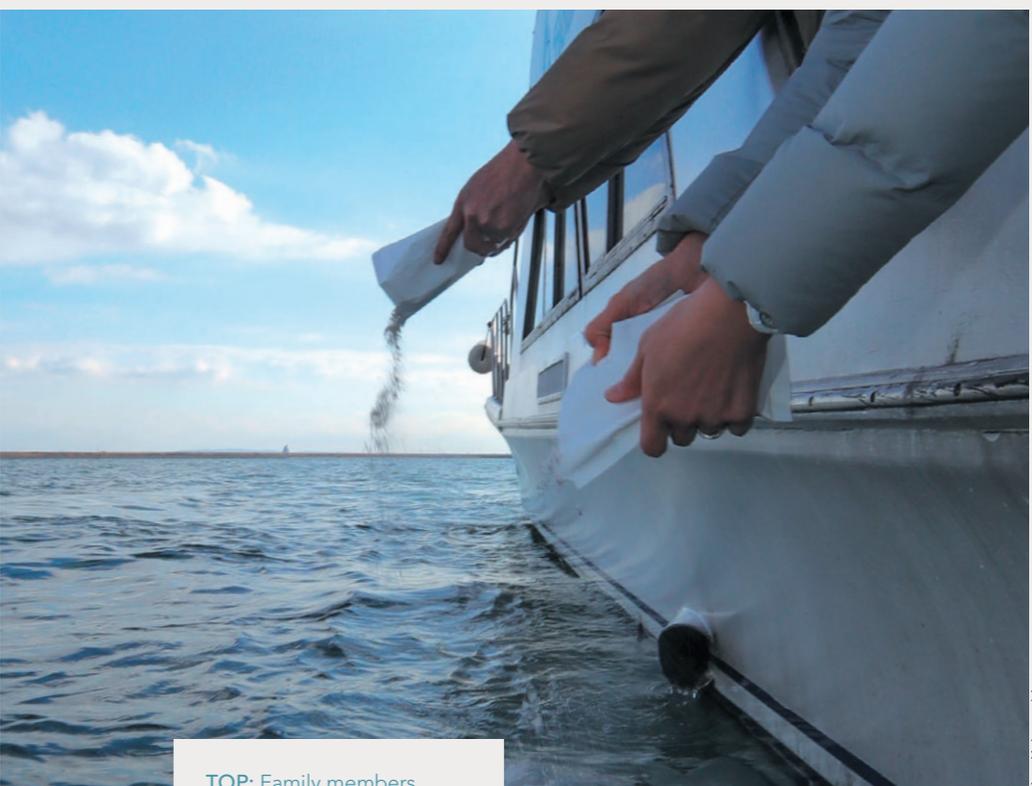
Proportion of total population age 60 or older (in percent)



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

elderly population lives in the Asia-Pacific region, and by 2050 more than a tenth of the population will be 80 or older in Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Thailand, according to United Nations data. As these populations age, centuries of funeral traditions are being upended due to lack of cemetery space, rising funeral costs and dwindling family sizes.

Mainland Chinese are shifting from traditional burials to cremation, with leases to store the cremated ashes in cemetery tombs typically expiring in 20 years. Sea burials and other types



TOP: Family members scatter ashes of a loved one into Tokyo Bay.  
BOTTOM: The Seoul National Cemetery: Packed graveyards are forcing more South Koreans to opt for cremation.

of "green" funerals are also becoming more popular in China. In Singapore, with an aging population and where the topic of funerals remains largely taboo, the Nam Hong Welfare Service Society offers free funeral services for elderly who do not have relatives or are not able to afford the

cost themselves. In the predominantly Christian Philippines, meanwhile, cremation is becoming more widespread, in part because of evolving norms and in part because it is less expensive than burials. And in South Korea, where packed graveyards are forcing more people to opt for cremation, the government is promoting "natural" burials as an alternative.

In 2016, Japan saw about 1.3 million deaths -- the largest number since World War II. The country is responding to this demographic challenge in typically imaginative ways, from drive-thru cemeteries to high-tech columbaria featuring LED-illuminated Buddhas that are activated by electronic cards.

Traditional funerals can cost 1 million yen to 2 million yen, but prices are falling thanks to no-frills services offered by new entrants, such as Aeon, Japan's biggest retailer, and internet startups offering stripped-down ceremonies. In 2015, traditional funerals accounted for 59% of the total, but last year the figure fell to 52.8%, according to Kamakura Shinsho, a funeral research company.

According to a survey by the Japan Consumers' Association, average total funeral ceremony expenditure fell to 1.96 million yen in 2016, from 2.31 million yen in 2007.

The full-service Japanese funeral, which typically includes an all-night wake, funeral service and cremation, is slowly



**12.4% over**  
**25%**  
Projected increase in percentage of Asian population age 60 or older between 2016 and 2050

Source: U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

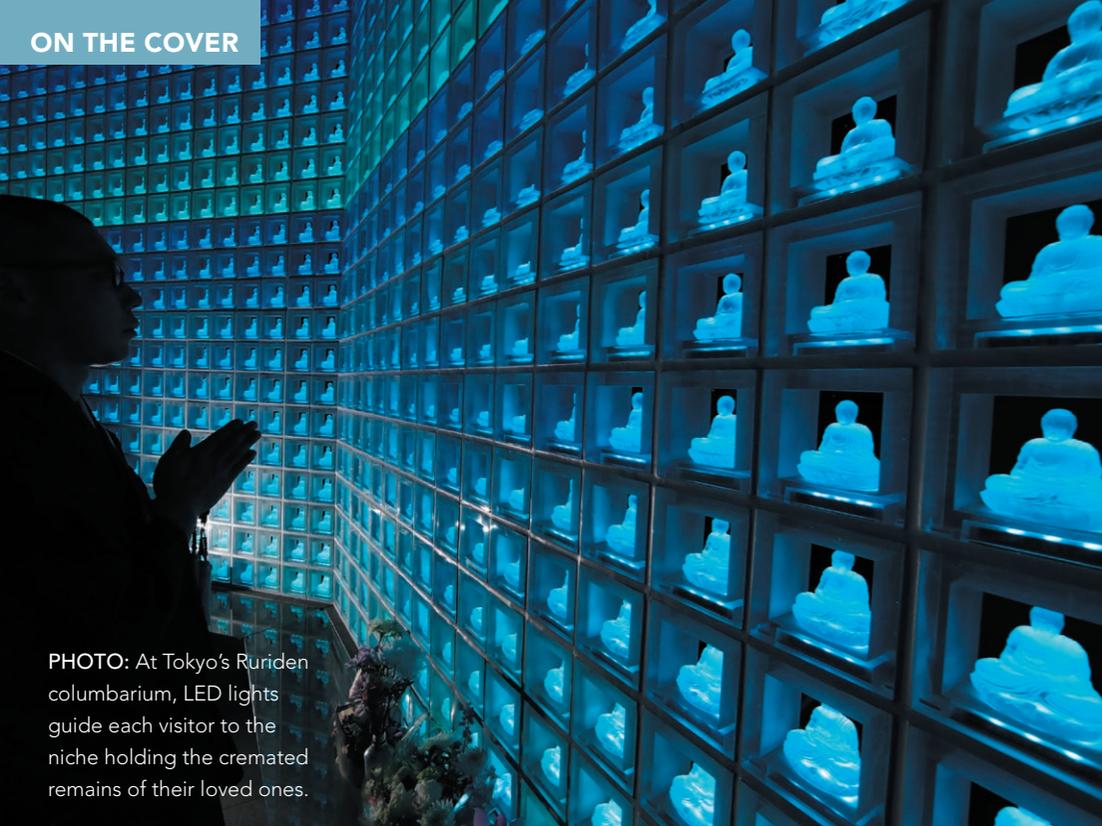
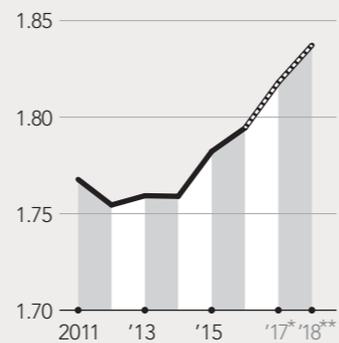


PHOTO: At Tokyo's Ruriden columbarium, LED lights guide each visitor to the niche holding the cremated remains of their loved ones.

Ken Kobayashi

**Japanese funeral business sales**  
(in trillions of yen)



Includes altars, photos, tools, dry ice, vehicles, gifts, others  
\*Estimate \*\*Forecast  
Source: Yano Research Institute

becoming rarer. Families are having smaller and shorter funerals -- a reflection of the fact that elderly Japanese often outlive many of their friends and family members.

"Holding a traditional funeral is too laborious for modern Japanese," said a spokeswoman for Kamakura Shinsho.

**BURIALS GO GREEN** James Wong Wing-kwan, a 67-year-old retired civil servant in Hong Kong, scattered the ashes of his mother at a remembrance garden in the city's Diamond Hill district a few years ago.

"My mother always loved gardening. I think she'd be happy to be surrounded by flowers and grass," Wong said, adding that he spent about \$30,000 Hong Kong dollars (\$3,835) to hold a Christian-style funeral.

The ritual was simple compared with the grand funeral his father had 20 years earlier. That ceremony lasted for days, and his father's ashes were placed in a private columbarium. The family paid HK\$160,000 for the niche.

"I think the purpose of traditional Chinese-style burials was to make a show for those who are still alive," Wong said. "It has nothing to do with the dead," he said, adding that many people have the perception that the way their family members are buried shows how prestigious a family is.

"I have told my wife that I want a sea funeral after I die," he said.

In Hong Kong, the business and traditions surrounding death,

**15%**  
**Decline in average spending on funeral ceremonies between 2007 and 2016 in Japan**

Source: Japan Consumers' Association

funerals and burials have evolved over the past couple generations. In a city where land prices are among the highest in the world -- a parking space sold last year for HK\$5.18 million -- much attention is focused on rising costs and the scarcity of space to either bury the deceased or place cremated remains in a columbarium.

The style of funerals has changed, said Chan Chi-chun, an expert on Taoist funeral music,

who added that the form has simplified and the "duration of the ritual is getting shorter." Previously, Chan said, the general path for a deceased person was from hospital to funeral home to cremation or burial. Some people are now skipping the funeral home because of high costs and sending the deceased directly to a crematorium, he said.

Ng Yiu-tong, chairman of the Funeral Business Association in Hong Kong, told the Nikkei Asian Review that the prices for a standard funeral -- excluding a niche in a columbarium or a burial plot -- has increased from between HK\$20,000 to HK\$25,000 a decade ago to roughly HK\$55,000 today.

"Holding a funeral has become much more expensive nowadays," Ng said, adding that the cost of renting a room at funeral homes has risen the most.

As Hong Kong's population ages, the number of deaths will increase steadily over the coming decades, according to the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department. The government forecasts the percentage of the population age 70 or older will

grow to 28.4% in 2066 from 10.6% 2016.

As in Japan, the vast majority of the deceased in Hong Kong are cremated. But there is a problem over what to do with cremated remains because there is a shortage of supply of niches at columbaria. The waiting list can be years, and the government is working to increase the supply of regulated columbaria.

To address those issues, the government is promoting "green burials," in which ashes can be scattered in designated remembrance gardens in cemeteries or at sea.

But deceased people not encased in tombs or niches present challenges for cultural traditions such as the Ching Ming festival, a spring event commonly known as tomb-sweeping day, where family members show filial piety to ancestors by visiting gravesites, cleaning headstones and leaving gift offerings.

"That is how you continue this connection with ancestors," said Chan Yuk-wah, an associate professor in the Department of Asian and International Studies at City University of Hong Kong. "They need this connection either to show their concern and love to their parents and grandparents or to expect a blessing for good fortune," she said.

But green burials deny families the ability to gather at burial tombs or columbaria for such worship. In response to that problem, the Hong Kong government has set up a website

where families and friends can create web pages with photos, videos, biographies and guestbooks for visitors to write tributes and add virtual "offerings."

"Chinese people do not see death as the termination of life," said Steve Cheung, a teaching assistant in the Sociology Department at the University of Hong Kong who has studied the topic of funerals. "People still maintain connections with the living, and religion is much more infused in cultural practices."

Betsy Ma, who runs a funeral-service company in Hong Kong called Sage Funeral Services, said just 10% of her customers chose green funerals for family members when she started her business in 2011. That figure is now 60% to 70%.

The least-expensive green-funeral option her company offers is HK\$9,800, which includes a death certificate, cremation and other basic services but does not include the use of a funeral parlor. A traditional Taoist or Buddhist funeral can run as much as HK\$55,800, which includes the cost for a ceremonial room.

In a modern twist, Sage also makes gemstones -- which can be

set in jewelry or a memorial book -- containing a portion of cremated remains, so families can honor their loved ones even without a tomb.

Ma said her business had a bumpy start, and some people

**\$2,875** **\$7,029**  
**Increase in price of standard funeral in Hong Kong over past decade**

U.S. dollars Source: Funeral Business Association (Hong Kong)

PHOTO: A man places flowers beside a niche at the Diamond Hill Columbarium in Hong Kong.



Shinya Sawai

even chastised her for encouraging people to bring human ashes home, which, while common in the West, is believed to be ominous by some Chinese people. "I always tell these people: 'If you believe people become ghosts after they die, would you prefer the ghosts of your parents wandering on the street or staying with the family?'"

**CHANGING TIMES** Japan's first funeral home equipped with a drive-thru option opened recently in Nagano Prefecture, allowing busy mourners to pay their respects to the dead in as little as three minutes. Guests use a tablet to register their names, then give condolence money to a staff member and offer incense.

The funeral home said the idea was to make it convenient for seniors and disabled people to attend funerals. "Amid the aging of society, funerals also need to respond to the changing times," said Kenji Takehara, president of Takehara Juken, the developer.

Some are alarmed by the move away from the traditional way of honoring the dead, including Joji Inoue, a 44-year-old priest at Tokyo's Shodaiji Temple. "A funeral is an important ceremony for accepting the death of their loved ones," Inoue said. "If you just cremate the body and let go,



Ken Kobayashi

**TOP:** Flower petals mark the spot where ashes were scattered in Tokyo Bay. **BOTTOM:** Time-crunched mourners can be in and out of this drive-thru funeral home in Nagano, Japan, in just three minutes, but ease of access for the elderly and disabled is the main objective here.

it means only a body treatment without mourning."

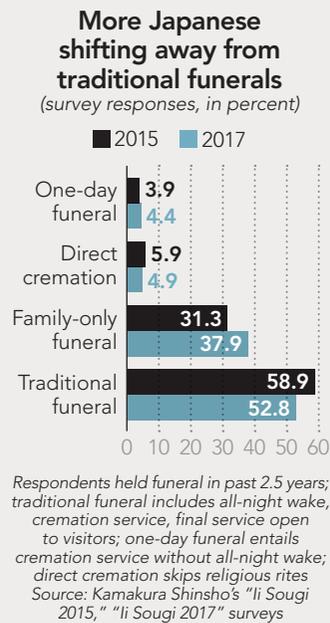
Yet practical concerns can overpower arguments about maintaining tradition. Like many older Japanese, Hisao Suzuki, Mori's 77-year-old brother, does not want to pass the burden of tending to his gravesite on to his family. He has decided to have his ashes scattered at sea, too. "I will leave my remains to my niece, Toshiko's daughter, when I die," he said.

Scattering Suzuki's ashes will save his niece from having to take care of the family's stone tomb in the Tokyo suburbs or paying membership fees to the temple.

"She will have to handle all of our ashes, but she will be free from having to take care of our cemetery plots," he said. "She has to manage her own life." **N**

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Kyodo