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Platformization in the Funeral Industry

The Case of Online Funeral Discounters

Introduction

Would you order a Buddhist monk on Amazon or purchase a funeral online? This is just one of the new possibilities for a twenty-first-century funeral in Japan. The Japanese funeral industry has certainly witnessed tremendous changes in the past two decades. With digitalization affecting almost all areas of everyday life, it should not be too surprising that even death and dying are increasingly related to digital services, e.g. for end-of-life preparation (*shūkatsu*), the purchase of funerals, and grief and mourning. Research on the digitalization of death and dying has primarily focused on digital mourning practices for individuals as well as social/collective memory (e.g. Jakobs and Ziefle 2010; Kohn et al. 2012; Walter 2015; Hajek, Lohmeier and Pentzold 2016), and the digital afterlife on social media, sometimes referred to as "digital immortality" (e.g. Bassett 2015; Van Ryn et al. 2017; Öhman and Floridi 2017; Savin-Baden and Burden 2019). However, studies on the question of how the internet and its specific characteristics affect the production side of funerals are harder to find, at least in the social sciences. In his introductory textbook *Death and Dying in Germany*, Frank Thieme (2019, 159–160) quotes one study by the Federal Association of German Undertakers in 2016, which found that 35 per cent of the respondents had conducted a web-based search of a funeral home. Other than this, Thieme barely mentions the internet and, when he does, it is mainly in regard to mourning. In one notable exception, Wenzel, Wagner, and Koch (2017) deliver an economic study on the funeral industry in Berlin, Germany, based on the theory of strategic path dependence. A decisive factor in the specific case of Germany is that there used to be a funeral allowance (*Sterbegeld*) paid by the statutory health insurance to the families of every member in the case of death. Its purpose was to cover or at least partly subsidize the funeral costs. Therefore, Germans were not used to paying the entire bill for the funeral and the grave from their private funds. However, this funeral allowance was first

Published in: Martin Roth, Hiroshi Yoshida, Martin Picard (eds.): Japan's contemporary media culture between local and global. Content, Practice and Theory. Heidelberg: CrossAsia-eBooks, 2021. DOI: https://doi.org/10.11588/crossasia.971.c12878

reduced by 50 per cent in 1989 and then eliminated in 2004. These two events certainly played a significant role in breaking the existing strategic path of the funeral industry, but there were two further critical circumstances: the market entry of "discount funeral homes" in the early 1990s and the emergence and more widespread use of the internet in the late 1990s. Wenzel et al. (2017, 371) argue that while discount funerals were quite a strong market force already in the early 1990s, back then they did not yet seriously affect the funeral industry. Their disruptive potential was unleashed only when the internet became widely used:

> Although the discounters' market entry threatened the business of the incumbent funeral homes, these funeral homes' economic circumstances did not drastically change until the end of the 1990s […] when "discount funeral homes gained a dominant market position" […] by exploiting the Internet to make their offers. (Ibid., 371)

Digitalization helped the discounters in Germany to acquire new customers beyond their immediate vicinity and out-compete the old players (Ibid., 373). However, it took one more critical event in 2004, the elimination of the funeral allowance, to "intensify consumers' price sensitivity" (Ibid., 372) and break the old pattern. Similarly, analysts of the contemporary funeral culture in the United States name "lower-priced products and services purchased over the internet" as a main factor "profoundly impacting the funeral industry today" (Harrington 2007, quoted in: Cengiz and Rook 2016, 155). As we have seen in the Berlin case study, lower prices and the internet seem to go hand in hand.

We can observe a similar pattern in Japan. One of the biggest and most disruptive trends in the funeral industry is the market entry of a growing number of "outsiders" (*igyōshu*) who seriously challenge the traditional market players (Aveline-Dubach 2012). These outsiders include "private retail groups (Nankai and Hanshin in Osaka; Keikyu in Tokyo), major retailers (the Aeon Group, which aims to take a 10 per cent share of the market, and the regional retailing chain Maruhiro), and even hoteliers (Otani and Keio Plaza)" (Ibid., 12). Furthermore, consumers have overall become more cost-conscious, funerals have become smaller in size, and there is a tendency towards market concentration in the funeral industry, a process that results in the demise of many small undertakers (Ibid., 16–17).

The study of the funeral industry in the digital age is located at the intersection of sociology, economics, business, and information studies[1] and requires

1 Notably, a lot of interest in digital memorialization is published in computer science or human-computer interaction related publications (e.g. Lopes, Maciel, and Pereira

an understanding of all of those realms. This chapter is only a first attempt to find some adequate vocabulary and tools for analysis of the digitalization of the funeral industry. The underlying premise is that the digitalization of the funeral industry does not just mean that one can now purchase online what one has previously bought offline (i.e. the digital being a mere continuation of the analogous), but that digitalization has the power to permanently disrupt the market and change the culture of mourning and bereavement altogether. The reason lies in the business model of the platform, which makes use of the advantages of the online space and is nowadays used in all possible industries. Just like Uber changed the attitudes and availability of cab driving and Airbnb changed the way of accommodation, online funeral discounters are changing the way funerals are seen and conducted on a big scale.

This chapter focuses on online funeral discounters that have entered the market since the 2000s. They are commonly referred to as "cheap internet funeral companies" (*kakuyasu netto sōgisha* 格安ネット葬儀社, cf. Shūkan Asahi 2019). Since their common business model is that they do not execute the funerals themselves, but have created a network of existing funeral parlours who are bound to offer standardized funeral products to the customers, they are also known as "internet intermediaries" (*netto chūkai* ネット仲介) or "internet intermediary sites" (*netto chūkai saito* ネット仲介サイト). Throughout this chapter, I refer to them as "online funeral discounters" since their most salient feature is that they offer low-cost funerals online.

Online funeral discounters are feared by the incumbent funeral homes for their radical price transparency and price dumping. Their low-cost funerals are the reason for the paradoxical situation that the revenues of funeral homes are falling despite a growing number of deaths per year. In fact, demographic forecasts predict that, until 2040, the number of deaths will keep growing steadily, which has led market participants and observers[2] to call Japan a "society of many deaths," *tashi shakai* 多死社会 hyper-aged.

The online funeral discounters accelerate commercialization at a hitherto unknown pace. In the following sections, I first shed some light on the history of the Japanese funeral industry and trace the emergence of commercialization and rationalization (subsumed under the term "McDonaldization"). I then ana-

2014; Maciel and Pereira 2015). However, there is a need to look at this topic from a sociological, or ideally a transdisciplinary perspective, as well.

2 For example, the Funeral Business Fair 2016 in Yokohama used the term in its concept http://sogo-unicom.co.jp/pbs/fair/fbf/2016/concept.html (now only available via WaybackMachine). Death researcher Kotani (2014, 41; 2015, 2) describes the "society of many deaths" as the downside of the ageing society.

lyse the main features of online funeral discounters as opposed to incumbent funeral homes and discuss how they have disrupted the market. I do so by looking at concrete examples, and placing them against the theoretical background of Platform Capitalism and the updated version of George Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis. I hope that this will help illuminate some of the processes that are taking place right before our eyes and that are still ongoing.

The commercialization of the Japanese funeral: Is it really ending?

> "*The shift from community funeral rituals to commercial funeral ceremonies is manifested in the commoditization, commercialization, mass consumption, and professionalization of funerals.*"
> (Suzuki 2000, 5)

In her book *The Price of Death* (2000), Hikaru Suzuki traces the history of the funeral industry. She shows how the pre-modern community-based funeral (*sōshiki*) practiced by the extended household and neighbours was gradually replaced by the commercial funeral (*o-sōgi* or *o-sōshiki*) organized by funeral companies. While the first funeral parlour in Japan was opened in Tokyo in 1887, until the end of World War II funeral parlours mostly served the wealthy classes with their display of status in mimicking aristocratic funerary rites (Ibid., 10, 51). It was only after the war that urbanization and poverty drove common people to engage the services of commercial funeral suppliers on a huge scale (Ibid., 10, 53). Long into the twentieth century, community (*kumi*) members had still largely supported each other in funeral rituals, as had been commonplace in premodern times; in fact, funerals had played an important role in reaffirming these long-term reciprocal ties of mutual support (Ibid., 206–207). After World War II, with intensifying urbanization, these ties gradually disintegrated, and people lost both the human resources and the knowledge about how to perform funeral rituals (Ibid. 217); vice versa, funeral rituals lost their function of reaffirming long-term community ties. Common people therefore increasingly turned to commercial funeral services. Among the two main factors driving this change was the establishment of funeral companies (*sōgisha*). They played an important role for the standardization and mass-consumption of the funeral (Ibid., 56), because they started "providing comprehensive services and dominating the entire funeral process" (Ibid., 216). This constituted a competitive advantage compared to funeral parlours (*sōgiya*), which only offered fragmented services and even had a bad reputation of being unreliable (Ibid., 57). The establishment of these funeral companies was, in many cases, a consequence of a more pivotal change in the funeral system:

the establishment of Mutual-Aid Cooperatives (MAC; in Japanese: *gojokai*). The first MAC was founded in 1948 with the "objective of taking over the community members' role in funerals and weddings in urban settings where community ties had become weak" (Ibid., 54). The MAC system works in a way that members pay a monthly installment for a fixed period of time, e.g. for five or ten years, which grants them a reasonable wedding or funeral ceremony in return – much like a funeral insurance (Ibid.). Based on this system, many start-up companies were established to deliver the funerals. By 1973, there were already about 350 of them under the recently established National Wedding and Funeral Mutual-Aid Association (Zenkoku Kankon Sōsai Gojokai Renmei) (Ibid., 55). During their peak, in the mid-1980s, there were more than 400 companies (Shūkan Tōyō Keizai 2013, 57). Especially after the war, this system was highly popular, because it allowed even people from lower classes to hold affordable ceremonies with at least a minimum amount of decency. MACs are highly effective in that they foster long-term ties between funeral homes and customers (Suzuki 2000, 204, 208). This liaison guaranteed funeral companies a steady supply of customers without having to advertise their services much through other means. In Suzuki's case study, at Moon Rise Funerals in Kita-Kyūshū, for example, in the mid-1990s funerals conducted for MAC members accounted for 70 per cent: "Moon Rise has used its MAC membership as the primary means of expanding its business" (Ibid., 208). Therefore, MAC (*gojokai*) fulfilled the role of the main advertiser or the main means of establishing ties between the funeral industry and new customers. Interestingly, the social relation does not begin or end with the funeral transaction. As Suzuki shows, funeral homes and MAC sales staff have developed strategies to maintain long-term relationships with their customers. For example, MAC salespeople pay multiple visits to prospective customers, paying just as much attention to building a relationship as to signing them up for the membership (Ibid., 208). Furthermore, in order to encourage them to renew their memberships or recommend the company (word-of-mouth marketing), even after the funeral MAC salespeople and funeral professionals pay regular visits to the homes of the customers or send condolence cards (Ibid., 212). Customer loyalty is of utmost importance for the success of these post-war funeral companies. Offering both weddings and funerals under the same roof further helped to acquire and retain customers. As Goldstein-Gidoni (1997, 36) notes: "While the *gojokai* organizations offered other ceremonial occasions in addition to wedding services, their rapid growth in number during the 1950s and 1960s was strongly connected to weddings."

In sum, MACs were established as a way to offer wedding and funeral ceremonies to impoverished people after the war; their growth reflects the need of a new urbanized lower class for affordable ceremonies. Poverty acts here as a

catalyst for a new commodity that meets new needs and responds to a change in values. With the high economic growth in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, (parts of) this lower class moved into the middle class, and salarymen's funerals came to be paid by their company (*shasō*), so funerals overall became more lavish.

In a 2003 article, Suzuki extends her commercialization argument employing the theory of McDonaldization by George Ritzer (1993), playfully calling the new standardized way of getting buried "McFuneral." Here, Suzuki argues that the existence and popularity of MACs further led to standardization, since every new funeral company, even if it was not a member of a MAC, was held against the high standards of professionalism of the MAC-related companies (Suzuki 2003, 52). McFunerals operate in a Toyotism-based just-in-time system. They are mass-produced and mass-consumed (Ibid.). This is evidence for the incorporation of the principle of rationalization as described by Max Weber, and, more recently, in the McDonaldization thesis. While Weber based his argument on bureaucracy, Ritzer built his on the fast-food chain McDonald's (Ibid., 55). McDonald's restaurants, according to this thesis, follow the four main rationalization principles of efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control (Ibid.). Suzuki (2003) demonstrates that contemporary funerals in Japan organized by funeral companies largely follow this pattern. This standardization results in homogenization to a certain degree. Note, however, that this does not mean that all funerals will look exactly the same (Suzuki 2000, 219; 2014, 11). In fact, people can customize the product, albeit to a limited extent, according to their values and preferences. Moreover, by choosing the more luxurious option, for example a more opulent funeral altar in the McFuneral, they are able to demonstrate a higher social status, thus engaging in "conspicuous consumption." Following Suzuki (2014, 11), we can refer to this as the stratification of the standardized funeral.

However, while it may have constituted an adequate response to urbanization and poverty in the immediate post-war period, over time the rationalization of the Japanese funeral started breeding discontent. This is related to the "irrationality of rationality" phenomenon that is described in the McDonaldization thesis. With knowledge about funerals being monopolized by funeral companies, the dependency on commercial services increased and so did the prices. The timing and implementation came to be controlled entirely by the funeral homes, and the bereaved were stripped of any control. Beyond expressing one's social status, the McFunerals failed to express one's individuality; they further failed to provide space and time for proper grief. To many, they became too efficient, too calculated, too rational (Ibid.). People who were fed up with such standardized funerals that followed the same pattern and were beyond their control started turning to alternative forms of funerals in order to regain some of the control. Suzuki (2003) names funeral-while-alive (*seizensō*) and

non-religious funerals (*mushūkyōsō*) as two examples for alternative funerals intended to serve as a counter-model to the standardized McFuneral. We could add natural funerals (*shizensō*), like scattering of ashes (*kaiyō sankotsu*) or tree burial (*jumokusō*). Suzuki concludes:

> From the mid-1990s, Japanese consumer culture with regard to funeral ceremonies blossomed. Japanese consumer choices did exist earlier, the rich and famous had had special ceremonies created for them, but after this period, not only could common consumers vividly express their choices but the funeral industry was forced to innovate, create new options, and address the needs of consumers. The mass-reproduction of funerals is ending today. (Ibid.)

McFunerals came under scrutiny as mass media attacked them for being too impersonal and consumers started demanding more individual forms of funerals. In numerous publications and magazines, consumers were challenged to think about how they want their funeral to be and not to rely on standardized mass funerals that much. This individualization discourse, which started in the mid-1990s, culminated in the invention of the term *shūkatsu* in 2009, which aims to bundle the activities surrounding the organization of an individualized funeral (cf. Mladenova 2020). *Shūkatsu*,[3] the activity of preparing one's end-of-life, is a media buzzword created in 2009 by funeral consultants. The word describes the practice of getting one's end-of-life in order by organizing one's funeral and grave while alive, and is essentially a content-marketing tool for different services in the funeral industry. While there are training programmes, like the Shūkatsu Counsellor Association, which enable successful participants to act as "experts" in questions related to the administrative side of the end-of-life, online funeral discounters also make use of it, e.g. AEON Life with its "Shūkatsu Fairs." Their rhetoric of *jibunrashisa*, literally "being like oneself," encourages consumers to organize their own funeral as one that "suits them." In order to achieve that, consumers are dependent on the knowledge of experts like the Shūkatsu Counselors. *Jibunrashisa* is a tricky phrase, since it insinuates individuality of some sort, while what is sold are, in the end, mostly packaged funerals, albeit customized.

In sum, we can name roughly four periods of the Japanese funeral:

1) premodern community funerals, which were common among the large majority of the Japanese population until World War II,

3 終活, not to be confused with 就活, job hunting.

2) the modern urban funeral organized with the help of a funeral parlor, mimicking the lavish rituals of the aristocracy, transforming the rituals to adapt them to city life,
3) mass-produced McFunerals that made the services of funeral companies available to the initially impoverished masses, but gradually became available for conspicuous consumption and the expression of class difference,
4) the postmodern individualized funeral that emphasizes the deceased's life and turns away from the mass-produced McFuneral of the post-war period.

However, these periods or types of funerals do not neatly substitute each other; they rather show new developments or dominant trends, while the other types still exist in the periphery. For instance, type (2), the modern urban funeral organized by funeral parlours was a new development, which was, however, practiced only by a limited number of people, i.e. the urban elites, while common people still stuck to the community funeral. Similarly, type (4), the postmodern individualized funeral, is a new phenomenon for a financial elite and certain cultural milieus, while a large number of common people and lower classes continues to make use of the mass-produced McFuneral.

Studies in funeral practices and changing values towards death and dying in Japan have given much attention to new, alternative, individualized/personalized forms (e.g. Boret 2014, 2017; Kawano 2010; Rowe 2003), which challenge the McFuneral, up to the point where they predict its demise. However, while Suzuki (2014, 11) claims that "[t]he mass-reproduction of funerals is ending today," looking at the growth of online funeral discounters in the past decade I would rather say that the McFuneral is returning to its point of departure, which is: extremely cheap funerals for the masses. The level of poverty since the 1990s might not be reaching the level of poverty after the war, which, as Suzuki has shown, was one of the driving forces for the standardized, mass-produced funeral. Nevertheless, it seems as if one important factor that has favored large-scale-innovations in the funeral industry since the end of the 1990s is once again a drop in the general wealth. Here, wealth is not limited to financial means, but also extends to the question, whether people can rely on their relatives to take care of them.

As I have argued elsewhere (Mladenova 2020), individualization is often conterminous with cost cutting and relieving relatives from the burden of having to care for oneself, and has little to do with a desire for self-realization. In his study on tree burial, Boret also points out that the trend towards individualization is born out of necessity rather than personal choice:

> […] many couples to whom tree burial caters are initially the instruments rather than the agents of their choice. Most of these couples *have neither successor (i.e., a biological or adopted son) nor the financial resources necessary for the acquisition of a generational grave*. They are therefore *constrained to purchase* a non-ancestral grave. Because of their instrumentality, however, these people have consequently become agents of their own representations of death through the process of establishing a grave in the tree burial cemetery. By representing their own identity and relationships at their final resting place, such couples have given meaning to and thus become agents in the planning of their own death rites. (Boret 2017, 243; emphasis added)

Moreover, the market tends to appropriate and commercialize innovative, alternative funerary practices, turning them into the new normal (Suzuki 2003, 72). We therefore find different understandings of individualization in the funeral realm today. As I will show in the next section, individualization may also be found to a certain degree in low-cost McFunerals, only there it comes in the form of variants of a pre-defined product.

In the following section, I want to look at how the McFuneral moves into the platform, and how this differs from the post-war commercial funeral. The focus will be on the production side, not on the consumer side.

Welcome to the platform: The funeral industry goes online

Despite the individualization[4] trend in recent decades, standardization and commercialization in the funeral industry are far from over. Instead, new players enter the market tapping into the demand for cheap funerals, while at times incorporating the discourse of individualization. The actors who drove the post-war mass-production of the funeral, the MACs, are in slow but steady decline, although they still have one of the biggest market shares (an estimated 40 per cent; Shūkan Economist 2017, 34). According to Shūkan Tōyō Keizai (2013, 58), nowadays only 70 per cent of the once over 400 companies are left, and several of them are in the red. Besides not having reacted well to the deflation in the 1990s, their reputation also suffered several blows, with customer complaints and legal cases filed against horrendous contract cancellation fees of up to 15–20 per cent and hidden costs that were to be paid for a funeral on top of the advance deposits (Ibid., 57). Most importantly, both MACs and independent (non-MAC) funeral homes (*senmon sōgisha*, approx. 50 per cent market share;

4 Boret (2017, 237ff) prefers to speak of "personalization" instead of individualization; I cannot go into a detailed discussion of the terms subjectivation, individualization, and personalization in this paper, but I do acknowledge that there are significant differences.

Shūkan Economist 2017, 34) came under scrutiny for having an opaque pricing structure. They are now challenged by business outsiders (*igyōshu*) entering the funeral market, whose biggest selling point is price and product transparency (Shūkan Tōyō Keizai 2013, 61–62).

Who are these "outsiders"? Shūkan Tōyō Keizai (2013) divides them into three types: 1) the peripheral industry (*shūhen gyōkai*) that is somewhat related to the funeral industry, e.g. stonemasons, Buddhist altar craftsmen, and flower companies;[5] 2) outsiders coming from other, unrelated industries (*igyōshu*); and 3) start-ups (*venchā-kei*) – new companies that previously had nothing to do with funerals whatsoever. This phenomenon strikingly differs from funeral parlours in the Meiji and Taishō eras, which initially grew out of craftsmen shops, who sold coffins or funeral ornaments and were therefore directly linked to the funeral (Suzuki 2000, 51). Today's newcomers have such diverse backgrounds as retail, tech, economics, law, publishing, wedding, and even railways (for examples see Shūkan Economist 2017 and Shūkan Tōyō Keizai 2013). Despite lacking experience in the funeral and grave industry, based on their business and tech expertise, they bring innovations and, most notably, a particular business approach to the field. One of the most striking innovations is the hitherto largely untapped potential of digital platforms.

The Japanese funeral business is a relative latecomer to information technology, especially to the internet (Shūkan Economist 2017, 23). In the first years of the twenty-first century, most funeral homes did not even have a homepage (Ibid., 33). This is why online marketplaces (*netto chūkai saito*, literally: internet intermediary sites) had a carte blanche to enter the digital niche and change the balance of the market. They took funerals online by applying business principles like cost transparency, cost-performance, scaling, and clear product development. They introduced a business mentality into an industry that indeed had been commercialized before, but was still placing special emphasis on interpersonal relationships to achieve long-term customer loyalty and an individual solution for every customer without a clear price tag (with a purported possibility of high-cost funerals). Their respective business models might differ in detail, but there are three common features.

The first common feature of online marketplaces is that they do not themselves conduct the funerals, but instead contract existing funeral parlours from across the country. This means that they use the existing funeral infrastructure

5 One example for a flower company-cum-funeral operator is Hibiya Kadan (https://www.hibiya-lsp.com/) – after all, the centerpiece of the contemporary funeral is the altar richly decorated with flowers, with more flowers expressing a higher social status (Shūkan Tōyō Keizai 2013).

and optimize it in various ways. Firstly, they optimize product and pricing by defining a product with several variants and customization possibilities and by attaching a fixed price tag to them. Customers can easily browse through the limited (but seemingly endlessly customizable) options and quickly select the one that suits them best. The locally contracted funeral home that is selected then has to implement the funeral for the pre-agreed fixed price. This means that the customers do not select a particular funeral home, but a certain product variant – a type of standardized funeral. Thus, funeral homes become interchangeable, since they are supposed to offer a certain standardized product across the country, which is defined by the platform. When selling these funerals, they act more like a franchise than like an independent company.[6] This, in fact, does not differ much from the MAC system.

One of the new companies that apply this model is AEON Life, a subsidiary of AEON, Japan's major retail company operating more than 300 outlets across the country. With AEON's funerals, launched in 2009 and handed over to the subsidiary in 2013, customers do not select a funeral home through the platform, but a product, which they are guaranteed to receive at that price by the funeral home ultimately executing the funeral. The online marketplace makes profits through commission fees. It is worth looking at AEON's product definition, since this is a key to their growth. AEON has divided its funeral product into several different components, from the collection of the body (*o-mukae*) and the laying out (*go-anchi*) on the day of death, to the ritual placement of the body in the coffin (*nōkan*), the wake (*tsuya*) and a farewell ritual (*o-wakare no gishiki*) on the second day, to the "farewell ceremony" (*kokubetsu-shiki*), another farewell ritual (*o-wakare no gishiki*) and the cremation (*kasō*) on the third day.[7] The variants of the AEON funeral are then determined

6 This is proven by the fact that the intermediary company invites customers to report to them immediately if the executing funeral homes unexpectedly charge them additional costs, so that they can intervene. In some cases, additional charges are levied by the funeral homes, and this is accepted by the platform, but this is stated in the fine print.

7 While these components may look like a traditional ceremony, some of them were invented in modern times and are now being rationalized by funeral homes and discounters. Bernstein (2006, 150) notes for example that *kokubetsu-shiki* was invented in 1901 as an alternative form of the religious *sōgi*. Nowadays, both terms are mostly used without distinguishing them (Ibid. 151). When we talk about the "traditional funeral ceremony" in Japan, we tend to think of premodern practices. However, those were diverse and by no way unified across the country or different social strata. The traditional Japanese funeral, if there is such a thing, is maybe described best as the "Japanese way of death" (Bernstein 2006, 6) that developed since the Meiji era. It incorporated some old rituals, invented new ones (e.g. the hearse, see Rowe 2000) and turned them

mainly by selecting and de-selecting components as well as by the number of people. For example, one can have just two out of eight or all eight out of eight components. Figure 1 shows how the five main product variants are constituted: the "family funeral" (*kazokusō*), which is the best-selling variant, the one-day funeral (*ichinichisō*), cremation only (*kasōshiki*), the general plan (*ippansō*), and the non-religious cremation only plan/direct funeral (*chokusō*).

The product variants are referred to as "set plan" (*setto puran*), a term reminiscent of mobile phone contracts or restaurant menus rather than funerals. This comparison is probably not so far-fetched, considering that different courses in a restaurant follow the same principle of selecting and de-selecting different components. Therefore, we can say that the individualized funeral here comes in five clearly defined sets, which are the outcome of thorough product development, following the definition of several target segments. After all, in marketing and product development, personalization boils down to defining a limited number of target segments and their respective products that suit their needs best. After choosing one of the five set plans, one can further customize the plan by adding some optional features and "upgrading" the funeral. In AEON's terms, this is expressed in the categories "standard" and "select." At all steps, prices are clearly indicated. The product set-up is that the basic or standard product is the most inexpensive and the one with the fewest features. Through customization, one can "individualize" the basic product. Therefore, the basic product is extremely cheap, but can become more expensive with certain add-ons, with the most expensive product being the most "individual" one. This is how individualization is (ostensibly) built into the very fabric of standardization. In this context, *jibunrashisa* ("suiting oneself") is only possible within fixed parameters and results in the expression of status.

Second, the internet intermediary companies optimize the use of facilities. In fact, one particular company, Yorisou (formerly Minrevi), pioneered the idea of exploiting the unoccupied time of funeral facilities. Founded in 2009 as an online comparing platform for dentists (歯科レビ) and funerals (葬儀レビ), the company became aware of the demand for affordability and cost-transparency in funerals and launched the product "Simple Funeral" (*shinpuru na o-sōshiki*) in 2013. It was later rebranded "Compassionate Funeral" (*yorisou o-sōshiki*). The goal is to offer "low-cost funeral service with clear (*meiryō*) pricing and content" across the whole country (Yorisou 2021). The key to cost cutting

into mass practices (e.g. cremation, see Berstein 2006, 67–90). New trends also affect the ways of dying: for example, the practices of embalming and encoffining (*nōkan*) were not traditionally part of the Japanese funeral, but became popular after the release of the internationally acclaimed movie Departures (J: Okuribito, 2008, by Takita Yōjirō).

Figure 1. AEON Life funeral variants (AEON Life 2021).

is by chartering funeral facilities during their idle time, i.e. when they are not otherwise booked. Just like AEON, Yorisou does not own brick-and-mortar-facilities, which reduces their costs significantly. However, their business model slightly differs from AEON's.

> According to a study conducted by the company itself, funeral homes operate at about 30% of their capacity, and are idle 70% of their working hours. By making use of these hours when they are empty, we can offer 'Simple Funerals' at such a low price. The funeral home prioritizes its own business during its busy hours, and can accommodate 'Simple funerals' during the off-hours. (Shūkan Economist 2017, 33)

Yorisou currently contracts around 1,000 funeral homes across the country (PRTimes 2020). Another company with a similar business model, Uniquest, has 900 partners (Shūkan Economist 2017, 33), and AEON Life has 600 funeral parlors (*sōgisha*) and more than 4,000 associated funeral halls (*sōgijō*) (AEON Life 2021). What these companies offer, therefore, is an easier and cheaper access to the existing funeral infrastructure, which is why they are also referred to as "funeral discounters." While this may be convenient from the perspective of the customers, it has several downsides for the specialized funeral homes. First, by participating in this intermediary business model, they are involuntarily turned into independent contractors (*senmon sōgisha no ukeoi gyōsha-ka*) or subcontractors (*shitauke-ka*), who bear the responsibility of delivering a certain product at an extremely cheap price, which gets additionally reduced by commission fees of 15–30 per cent (Shūkan Economist 2017, 35; Yamamoto 2020). This leads to a downward spiral of unit prices, in which, ultimately, small- and medium-sized funeral homes cannot compete and go bankrupt in considerable numbers (M&A Online 2019). Second, when using the same hall for differently priced funerals, the customers that pay a higher price may feel like they get ripped off. MAC members, for example, may feel that they are treated unfairly compared to customers of online funeral discounters who pay considerably lower fees to hold a ceremony at the same funeral home (Shūkan Dayamondo 2020, 27–28). This, in turn, further accelerates the price dumping.

Yorisou has further launched some other funeral-related digital services, taking its radical price transparency to the extreme and showing that operating as a platform does not mean that one cannot make use of other platforms at the same time. With the notorious product "O-bō-san-bin" (お坊さん便), literally "monk delivery," people could order a Buddhist monk via Amazon for a fixed fee of ¥55,000. This offer not only got Yorisou a complaint from the Japan Buddhist Federation, for putting a price tag on Buddhist services, but also a lot of publicity – inasmuch as any publicity is good publicity. However, it is not as if the other internet intermediaries did not launch similar services.

AEON Life also optionally offers to introduce customers to a Buddhist temple and has attached clear price tags (again, defining four different products) to the monk's services (https://www.aeonlife.jp/expense/option/buddhistpriest/). Similarly, the competitor Uniquest offers an optional "fixed-price monk arrangement" (*teigaku no o-bō-san tehai*) (https://www.osohshiki.jp/plan/temple/). They were not spared from public criticism either. Already in 2010, only several months after launching its funerals, AEON was itself criticized by the Japan Buddhist Federation, which complained that AEON's practice of displaying a fixed price for Buddhist services was like "trampling on the original spirit of Buddhism" and "giving the impression that the temple is trading the posthumous names (*kaimyō*)" (Asahi Shinbun 2010). Receiving this criticism, they initially removed this price tag, but it since reappeared. This shows that with their radical pursuit of price transparency, the online marketplaces hit and are slowly pushing a taboo in the Japanese funeral order.

The Japan Buddhist Federation was not the only entity to voice criticism in light of the cheap deals. For example, the Consumer Affairs Agency (Shōhisha-chō) reprimanded Uniquest for advertising its "Small Funerals" as "fixed price" and "no additional fees," when in some cases, additional fees did in fact apply (Asahi Shinbun 2018). In the past, funeral rituals performed by Buddhist monks had been compensated not with an honorarium, as the "fixed price offerings" now can be understood, but with donations or offerings (*o-fuse*), which depended on one's financial possibilities. With the burst of the bubble economy and the detachment from Buddhism, this practice began losing its legitimacy with large parts of the population. Online marketplaces like AEON Life, Yorisou and Uniquest broke a taboo by resolving this uncertainty surrounding the "price" of Buddhist funerary services. With their biggest selling point being clear and transparent pricing and low-cost options in a market that used to apply a rather oblique pricing structure (cf. Aveline-Dubach 2014, 12), the public was particularly concerned with the question of how such cheap funerals could be sustained. As it turned out, in the case of "Small Funerals," it could not – the funerals were, in fact, more expensive, since the displayed price did not reflect the final cost.

Third and most obviously, the marketplaces make the products available online. They offer the funeral homes a means to acquire customers via the web without having to invest in an elaborate online infrastructure or in SEO. The marketplace then acts like a platform, in certain regards comparable to platforms like Uber, Airbnb or Amazon. Even if online funeral marketplaces do not share all characteristics with platform companies, it is worth comparing them in order to notice some of the specific tools that they use, which turn their product into something different from just the online version of previously offline services.

Ritzer and Miles (2019) claim that digitalization has intensified McDonaldization, because the digital platforms actually implement the principles of McDonaldization (calculability, efficiency, predictability, control) even better than McDonald's itself. For example, in the case of the Japanese online funeral discounters, both predictability and calculability increase due to the policy of radical price transparency and the "what you see is what you get"-mentality applied in the display of available services. By affording little to no own physical infrastructure (aside from servers and an office for a small number of employees),[8] they are able to cut the price of a funeral to a bare minimum and still generate profit. This is possible because as a re-seller they can sell more funerals than one funeral home alone. That same lack of an own physical infrastructure means that expanding the business and thus generating more profit (i.e. scaling) is relatively easy, since it is possible to do that at little to no additional (= marginal) cost (Srnicek 2018, 48). Online funeral discounters do not enable hyperconsumption like Amazon, Uber or Airbnb do (Ritzer and Miles 2019, 12), at least not by the same customers, since funerals cannot be consumed endlessly by the same customer. However, they do somewhat succeed in "maximizing opportunities for consumption" (Ibid., 6) since they make it possible that more funerals are booked through their platform, so that, in sum, more funerals are purchased on their marketplace instead of on other marketplaces. This underscores the tendency towards market concentration, which is inherent to platform capitalism (Srnicek 2018, 11, 48), although they are still far from dominating the market.[9] Online platforms are further likely to offer on-demand services. Traditionally operating 24/7 hotlines, funeral homes have always been on-demand, and are thus especially prone to shifting into the online platform.

In his 2017 book on Platform Capitalism, Nick Srnicek presents an insightful taxonomy of (mostly US-American) platforms, which can serve as a useful heuristic device to gain a deeper understanding of online funeral discounters. In this taxonomy, online funeral discounters share most features with the fifth and last type, the lean platform. "In each of these areas, the important element is that the capitalist class owns the platform, not necessarily that it produces a physical product," he writes (Ibid., 34). I already discussed this element in detail: the online funeral discounters do not own their own physical infrastructure. Instead, they make use of the (idle) infrastructure of pre-existing funeral

8 AEON Life, for instance, had only 36 employees in total in July 2016, but operates in the whole country (source: interview with a representative).

9 It is estimated that online funeral marketplaces have a market share of 5–8 per cent (Yamamoto 2020).

homes. However, they do not just offer a platform where funeral homes could advertise their own services. Rather, they define intangible products, which have to be put into practice by the contracted funeral homes. In a sense, they "impose" the products, which they have defined, on the funeral homes who have agreed to work with the online marketplace under these conditions. This leads to a further standardization of the funeral, which has already been an element of pre-digital McDonaldization (see Ritzer and Miles 2019; Suzuki 2000, 2003), but now occurs at an accelerated speed and larger scale. Srnicek (2017, 2018) differentiates between the product platform, which owns the assets it rents out, and the lean platform, which does not own assets: "Zipcar owns the assets it rents out – the vehicles; Uber does not. The former is a product platform, while the latter is a lean platform that attempts to outsource nearly every possible cost" (Ibid., 45). In this regard, online funeral discounters are more similar to lean platforms like Uber and Airbnb: "'Uber, the world's largest taxi company, owns no vehicles […] and Airbnb, the largest accommodation provider, owns no property.'" (Ibid., 48) Since these are asset-less platforms, Srnicek also refers to them as "virtual platforms." However, in the case of AEON Life, there is a quite real and large retail company behind the funeral services provider. Uniquest and Yorisou rather fit the description of lean or virtual platforms. Srnicek adds:

> Yet the key is that they do own the most important asset: the platform of software and data analytics. Lean platforms operate through a hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced. All that remains is a bare extractive minimum – control over the platform that enables a monopoly rent to be gained. (Srnicek 2017, 48)

This is the case with online funeral discounters. In order to run their business, they require a minimum amount of assets, yet are able to extract the minimum of commission fees. They control product, design, and marketing and with their nationwide reach, they have a high negotiating power. In this sense, they are not doing much more or differently than the MACs in the post-war era, but they have managed to cut the costs, make prices more transparent than them (although there have been some negative examples) and, most importantly, to cater to a demographic that is more comfortable with booking an on-demand funeral online than having to deal with door-to-door funeral home staff whose purpose is to build a long-lasting, stable relationship with customers living in the area.

Predictably, the phenomenon is not unique to Japan. In fact, the platform principle seems to be applied to funeral industries around the world and others have drawn comparisons between such online funeral discounters and lean

platforms of the so-called sharing economy. An article in *The Guardian*, for example, introduces an Australian funeral operator, George Inglis, who originally came from a completely unrelated field – sales – and makes excessive use of outsourcing, in a similar vein to the Japanese online funeral discounters introduced here (Hunt 2017):

> "If you'd told me years ago I'd be in the funeral business, I've probably have had you committed." In a change in direction in a 25-year career in sales, Inglis set up Picaluna funerals, serving the Sydney and central coast region of New South Wales, in September last year. It has no chapels, no hearses – no fixed infrastructure at all, in fact, and no permanent staff. Instead, Picaluna outsources all of the services involved with conducting a funeral – "sort of like the Uber of the funeral industry", says Inglis. (Hunt 2017)

Similar to the Japanese case, Inglis was also confronted with a funeral industry that was "confusing and costly." When applied to the funeral business, the lean platform model of Uber and Airbnb seems to cater to the need for cheap and price-transparent funerals.

Conclusion

> This ninth edition of *The McDonaldization of Society* is in many ways the most important and dramatic of all the revisions. […] From its inception in the early 1950s, and for several decades beyond that, the heart of the McDonaldization process lay in brick-and-mortar structures devoted to consumption (most notably, of course, the fast-food restaurant). However, its center has increasingly moved to the digital world, especially its consumption sites (most importantly, Amazon.com). While for the foreseeable future the vast majority of consumption will continue to take place in brick-and-mortar structures, an ever-increasing amount of it will occur online. (Ritzer 2019, 14)

Something has changed in the standardization of mass-consumption – after all, there must be a reason why George Ritzer (2019) introduces the ninth edition of his book *The McDonaldization of Society. Into the Digital Age* with the dramatic statement that it "is in many ways the most important and dramatic of all the revisions." Between the first edition of his book in 1992 and the most recent edition in 2019, much has changed in the ways consumption works and, while there is certainly some continuity, there is reason to believe that digitalization does not simply intensify and accelerate commercialization and standardization, i.e. it is not a mere augmentation of "brick-and-mortar" services (Ibid., 16). Instead, digitalization takes consumption to another level,

with new qualities that differ from how consumerism worked until the 1990s. This argument holds true both for the US, for Germany, and Japan.

While Ritzer and Miles briefly consider renaming McDonaldization "Amazonization" (Ibid., 11), they conclude that the rationalization processes described by McDonaldization apply to digital sites even to a higher extent than to brick-and-mortar structures. By comparing online funeral discounters with other platforms within Platform Capitalism, some salient features have become apparent. One central point should have become clear: although offering their services online does help the companies achieve significant levels of scaling – by making their services available to customers across the entire country they can achieve substantial growth without increasing the input of resources equally substantially – "platformization" means more than simply going online. Rather, "platformization" includes a certain business model that entails the radical outsourcing of assets, optimizing the use of the existing infrastructure instead of investing in a new one, elaborate product definition and marketing, price transparency, and the pursuit of the lowest possible price. Profound knowledge and experience in the field of funeral rituals is not at prerequisite for starting such a business, which explains why the main drivers of this new development are start-ups, companies from the peripheral industry (*shūhen gyōkai*) and outsiders (*igyōshu*). The innovation in this segment of the funeral industry does not come from new extras, but from the definition of a new product (or a re-definition/optimization of an existing one): the low-cost, fixed-price, customizable funeral available across the country. With this new product, they react to a growingly impoverished society, proving that necessity is the proverbial mother of invention.

By putting a price label on what was previously a non-transparent deal, these online funeral discounters severely disrupted the market. Just like Airbnb severely disrupted the hotel business all around the world, so Uniquest and the like disrupted the funeral business in Japan. The established funeral homes come under pressure and have to adapt to the new cost-consciousness among the consumers. Similarly, established companies in the hospitality industry were challenged by Airbnb and had to change their products and advertising, especially when Airbnb moved into the higher-priced segment. The fight for market shares even led to travel companies like TUI or hotel chains like Mariott copying the Airbnb business model and building their own platforms in order "to save what can be saved" (Hecking 2019). Interestingly, while Airbnb started out as a platform for cheap accommodation for young people, it gradually became more expensive and professionalized (Ibid.). I have shown above how online funeral discounters similarly manage to bridge the gap between low-cost funerals and the demand for individualization, which is attainable through additionally charged customization.

Following Ritzer and Miles (2019), we can conclude that the online funeral discounters are, in a way, completing – or carrying to the extremes – a process that started in the post-war period: the radical commercialization of the funeral. They manage to incorporate the growing demand for "individualized" (*jibunrashii*) funerals, while still being disproportionately cheap. Despite having only a small market share as of now, their lean platform business model leads to a downward spiral of prices and affects the funeral industry as a whole. In effect, they change the rules of the game and force the rest of the funeral industry to adapt and to reinvent itself. Where this pressure for innovation will lead the Japanese funeral industry is unclear; but it will certainly continue to be a fascinating field to observe in the years to come.

Several questions remain for future research. According to Srnicek, platforms "are an extractive apparatus for data" (Srnicek 2017, 34), with data having come "to serve a number of key capitalist functions: they educate and give competitive advantage to algorithms; they enable the coordination and outsourcing of workers; they allow for the optimisation and flexibility of productive processes; they make possible the transformation of low-margin goods into high-margin services; and data analysis is itself generative of data, in a virtuous cycle" (Ibid., 30–31). It would be interesting to investigate whether and how online funeral discounters collect, analyse, and use data or what other features they share with – and how they differ from other platform companies.

Further, qualitative research at contract funeral homes of the platforms could ask how they see their role, how well the intermediary system works for them, how they see the future of the funeral business and how their customers respond to the double price structure.

Another question that should be addressed is whether and how these ultra-cheap online discount funerals change the attitudes that people have towards death, the deceased, or the funeral rite, and how this relates to philosophic or religious perspectives on the end-of-life.

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Comment By Goki Atoyama

This chapter examines a new-style funeral industry in Japan and offers a recent history of the existing Japanese funeral industry while introducing previous research on this theme. The work successfully shows how the business has developed and the role of outsiders in its development. However, as the author also mentions in the conclusion, I also think this research misses arguments about the history of Japanese traditional funeral culture to enhance the discussion of how the online platform has a considerable impact on Japanese funeral culture. I think this work is exceedingly important given that the world has been gripped by the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020 and, consequently, it became difficult to mourn each death. Under such circumstances, we have seen the use of online funerary tools in the deaths of Covid-19 virus patients. I think that we must reconsider the relationship between death and digital technology, and this chapter makes a good start in this regard.

Comment By Luca Bruno

Dorothea Mladenova's contribution, "Platformization in the Funeral Industry: The Case of Online Funeral Discounters", is a seldom-seen perspective on the digitalization of one of the most corporeal matters of the human condition,

death. “Platformization in the Funeral Industry” focuses on “online funeral discounters,” intermediary companies relying on “a network of existing funeral parlours who are bound to offer standardized funeral products to the customers.” What I found most interesting about Mladenova’s work is her account of the progressive standardization of funeral practices driven by ever-encroaching digital technologies. Standardization is juxtaposed with an apparent increase in the possibility of customizing one’s ceremony, selected from what is a standardized list. Price is transparent, responding to the need of an ever-impoverished society. Beyond strictly economic aspects of these practices, what stems from platformization is the stabilization of choice along known and repeatable avenues: *everybody* gets the same options. No deviations from the prescribed courses are permitted. While the selection is abundant, there is no option beyond what is provided. There is nothing outside the platform, it seems, and works like Mladenova urge us to shift our gaze from products themselves, be it a video game, a hotel stay, or a funeral, to the platform.