Satsuki Kawano, *Nature's Embrace: Japan's Aging Urbanites and New Death Rites*

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LIKE many aspects of Japanese society, the Meiji imposition of "standards" seems to have created something of an image of homogeneity, both internally and externally, in various aspects of Japanese society. Mortuary practices seem to be no exception to this pattern and Satsuki Kawano's book is a very well organized and

written discussion of changing practices through the Sōsō No Jiyū O Susumeru Kai (Grave-Free Promotion Society, or gfps), which would literally translate as "the society that promotes freedom to choose mortuary practices" (90), a group she studied from 2002–2004. Essentially, this is a well-crafted monograph focusing on one of many, many groups that make up the fabric of Japanese society, but it is also an excellent presentation of adaptation in the face of continued urbanization, depopulation of the non-metropolitan areas, and an aging society, among other factors.

The book is divided into an "Introduction" and six chapters which rather neatly bring us from the "introduction" of the gfps to a social context she calls "The Actors" through a historical background and to a more extensive discussion of how the target society is actually organized and operates. Kawano then rather poignantly describes some of the actual scattering ceremonies, giving the reader a very clear "picture" of what people involved experience. Finally, she neatly places the whole adaptation into the context of a rapidly changing modern Japanese society.

Her "Introduction" looks at death, death rites, and social change, in particular reviewing the rather extensive literature on aging and dying in Japan, as a means of looking at social adaptation. She sets up the argument that the gfps activity of scattering ashes is a marker of increased individuality (not individualism) and increased dependence but not a lack of connection by the deceased-to-be with the younger generation.

"The Actors" looks at "traditional" intergenerational dependence, with the older generation depending on the younger generation to maintain mortuary rituals, especially in the middle of the Showa period. She also lays out alternative choices to family-based support systems such as nursing homes, then moves to a discussion of elders as "users and choosers," finishing by bringing back the discussion of memorial practices.

"Historical Perspectives," the title of the second chapter, is a bit disconcerting since her opening line in the "Introduction," is "This book is a story of people producing a new mortuary rite" (1). If it is a new mortuary rite, then what kind of historical perspective can one have? The answer, of course, is a lot. Kawano finds roots of the scattering of ashes back to the Asuka period 1,400 years ago, and brings them up to the modern periods. The more recent past, of course, is the most important and this chapter provides a very solid basis for her further discussion. The other critical component of this chapter is the establishing of the wide variety of mortuary rites across Japan up until the standardization, more or less, of the Meiji period. In the postwar Showa period, the most common mortuary practice, the interment of cremated remains in family stone graves, was established. This standardization is an excellent example of the "invention of tradition." She also provides an excellent discussion of the various ways of thinking about mortuary practices using the concept of "cultural scripts."

Kawano's third chapter is a classic examination of her target population, the members of the gfps. This is a solid presentation of a social group that follows a pretty standard approach. The one point where Kawano's focus shifts from a kind of standard discussion is her focus on age, an obvious function of the purpose of

the group. This chapter also provides a very solid foundation for what follows.

The fourth chapter deals with the preparation and rationale for scattering ceremonies and takes the reader through the process. Kawano then presents three vignettes of actual scattering ceremonies, giving insight to the actual "reality" of the folks involved. She then draws conclusions on what this reflects in modern Japanese society, providing a bridge to her next chapter.

The fifth chapter deals with the impact on family relations of the practice of scattering ashes. The role of the elderly, the deceased-to-be, is clearly shifting in modern Japan and the mortuary practices of the past may or may not work in the present. What does this mean to the people involved? "Death, family, and community" is one of her subtitles and it rather ably sums up her discussion, particularly with her following discussion of the weakening of the stem family in Japanese society.

Her conclusion is her thesis. Scattering ashes, rather than maintaining "traditional" mortuary practices, reflects an adaptation to a change in Japanese family structures tied into aging and depopulation. Elderly people in Japan are more numerous, live longer, and have a more active roll in "using and choosing" than they did previously. This does not necessarily mean a disconnection from the younger generations and should, in any case, be seen as only one of many possible ways to adapt.

There is much that is very positive about this monograph and, at least for me, only three rather minor criticisms. Because it is probably better to end on a positive tone, I will briefly note what I see as negative. A very minor, but irritating, point is the lack of kanji anywhere in the book. I literally had to go to the web page of the glyphs to find out what the kanji were. To be fair, I expect that this is an editorial policy of the publisher, not the decision of the author. The second point has to do with visual images. I really liked the very few pictures provided and wish there had been more of them, particularly of the scattering ceremonies, although I realize that taking pictures in such an environment is difficult. The third slightly negative point has to do with tone. I felt, quite often, that I was being lectured to with explanations of things that were, again to me, sort of obvious.

This third point, however, can also be seen is a positive light. Because she does go "back to basics," this book may well be accessible to folks with less background knowledge of Japan. It will certainly be more accessible to Japanese reading in English where her thesis can have more of an argumentative component. I suspect a fair number of Japanese would immediately dismiss the scattering of ashes as yet another negative example of "Western hegemony." By putting in the social history and context in great detail, Kawano probably will be able to avoid that criticism.

There are a lot of things about this book to like. It is a very solid, well written, and well crafted presentation of an example of a major shift in Japanese society, changes in the family and generational relations connected with depopulation, and an increasingly aged society. It avoids the simplistic forms of analysis where changes in mortuary styles (and a lot of other things) are simply said to be the effect of depopulation and aging. These are critical factors but Kawano is successful in bringing in the full complexity of modern Japan, at least of the population she is examining.

John Mock
Temple University, Japan