

# Individual choice but not individualism: new mortuary rites in Japan

Every society faces the problem of death and the concrete issues of body disposal, funerary rites and commemorative practices. Satsuki Kawano's volume focuses on one example for dealing with death that has emerged in contemporary Japan. Her book examines the renewed custom of scattering the ashes of the dead after cremation.

Eyal Ben-Ari

Reviewed publication:

**Kawano, Satsuki. 2010**

*Nature's Embrace: Japan's Aging Urbanites and New Death Rites*  
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press  
221 pages, ISBN 9780824833725 (hardback)

TO CARRY OUT HER INVESTIGATION she focused on the Soso No Jiyu O Susumeru Kai (Grave-Free Promotion Society), based in Tokyo, which she studied between 2004 and 2006. The organization was explicitly established in the early 1990s to promote individual choice in the way a person's body will be disposed and their identity memorialized after their death. The Society both advances the acceptance of this practice in Japan and aids its 11,000 members in organizing their own ash-scattering rituals. Kawano's excellent book not only provides a rich ethnographic account of this organization, but also the social and cultural background to its activities and growth. For any student of Japan, and more widely the industrial democracies, Kawano's volume offers a model text that interweaves macro-sociological analysis, a micro investigation of a particular organization and an evocation of the voices of the actors she portrays. The volume will appeal, then, not only to Japan specialists, but to any scholar interested in death and death rites and their relation to social change in current-day societies.

Kawano's main argument is that demographic changes in contemporary Japan have led to a scarcity of ceremonial caregivers whose role is to assure the correct transmission of the dead into ancestors. The demographic changes she refers to include a move towards nuclear families and a diminishing number of children per family, increased mobility of children (rural depopulation and urbanization), the emergence of Japan as an aging society, and the commercialization of caring alternatives for the dead. This situation has led many elderly to worry about who will care for them after death and to search for alternatives that will grant them some control over their posthumous futures. While for childless persons any alternative chosen is unproblematic, there is much room for contestation, as Kawano shows, among those individuals with children and remaining spouses. In effect then, the new mortuary rite of ash-scattering is an example of negotiations over, what she calls, the generational contract: that set of (informal) agreements that set out the mutual expectations of parents

and children. This contract is enacted through the practices centered on key cultural scripts or models of a "good" or "proper death" (one that includes the circumstances of demise, body disposal and commemoration).

Framed between an introduction and a conclusion are five chapters. The introduction provides an analytical review of the practices centered on death and death rites as they are related to changing social circumstances. Especially useful is her utilization of the rich Japanese-language scholarship to build up her analysis, thus making it accessible to readers of English. Moreover, in this respect, the long historical sections that describe and analyze processes of change and continuity can be read (or assigned for reading) on their own. Kawano contends that the activities of the organization for the promotion of ash-scattering are an indicator of increased individuality, but not of individualism, in Japan. By this point she means that the new practice increases individual choice and control over personal matters, but does not disconnect between the older and younger generations.

The chapter on actors looks at the generational contract on a macro-sociological level, as it centres on the dependence of elderly Japanese individuals on younger persons for both care (for the living) and rituals for the dead. She very convincingly shows how elderly people are asserting their individual (again not individualistic) choice in terms of family or institutional care, and in terms of the practices related to their death. The next chapter, titled "Historical Perspectives", makes the point that ash-scattering has a long history in Japan (reaching back more than a thousand years), and how it has been renewed over the past few decades. I found the chapter especially rewarding since it charts the diversity of practices that existed historically, as well as the standardization of the Meiji period. The third chapter focuses on the Grave Free Promotion Society and provides a very rich set of ethnographic descriptions of organization, meetings, the effect of gender and seniority or yearly and monthly cycles. For scholars interested in Japanese organizations this section is interesting because it describes a different kind of way of organizing, where, for example, age and seniority or social status do not hold in the same manner as in the more studied commercial enterprises.

The next chapter is about the scattering ceremonies themselves. It takes readers through the various preparations for the rite (including the grinding of the bones so that the remains can be scattered in the wind or dispersed in mountain forests). It also includes a description of three actual ceremonies that took place and that Kawano documented (she provides some black and white photographs to enhance her analysis). These concrete depictions are important because they further underline the diversity found within a common practice. The fifth chapter is again an excellent analysis of family relations as they are played out in and around the scattering of ashes. She focuses not only on the changing patterns of intergenerational relations, but also on the ways in which various aspects of the practice of ash scattering are contested. Indeed, in this chapter and throughout the volume, Kawano is careful to clarify that the practice is sometimes criticized for being selfish. The volume's conclusion reiterates her main thesis about the new practice as one example of greater choice for the elderly, but not a disconnect from younger generations.

I found the volume to be very well written, theoretically sophisticated and well placed in comparative frames. While this is a book about Japan and a Japanese expression of the new alternatives emerging in aging societies around the world, it will appeal to a wider readership.

Eyal Ben-Ari is a professor at the department of Sociology and Anthropology, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (feba@netvision.net.il).

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Left: Nuclear power plant in Belgium. Photo: Reproduced under a Creative Commons licence, courtesy of Koert Michiels.

a commercialized market. The country also suffers from the lack of technological innovation, to the point that renewable energy is limited to a handful of technological applications, such as solar PV. Consequently, China's renewable energy sector is only successful in certain rural areas where costs are relatively low. Similarly, Japan's nuclear sector is also facing challenges. In light of the unstable foreign relations between China and Japan, it remains unclear how energy cooperation between the two countries will fare. Without benefiting from China's buying power, Japan's capacity of nuclear power generation is far from fully tapped. The Fukushima earthquake and its aftermath, which occurred after the publication of this volume, clearly added to the dismay of Japan's nuclear energy sector. In the Netherlands, the development of renewable energy is also thwarted by institutional inadequacies. Interest groups in conventional energy sectors wield significant power to contain the growth of the renewable energy sector. As the emphasis on renewables is placed on technology research, instead of on social barriers, much of the Dutch renewable energy development remains in laboratories.

These chapters invite a serious look at the contemporary fade of low-carbon development throughout the globe. The current trajectory of energy-use points to a future situation in which carbon intensity will likely increase. In other words, in the absence of reliable and stable supplies of renewable energy, shortages in oil and gas compel nations to switch back to coal, which emits more greenhouse gas per unit of consumption.

However, as the chapters suggest, the development of renewable energy faces more institutional barriers than technological ones. It follows that low-carbon development should be treated more as a process of social and political change than a process of industrial and technological change.

The two parts of the volume weave together a story of energy policies that is at once global and domestic, socio-political and technological. The breadth of the chapters is indeed laudable. However, with its limited space, the volume inevitably leaves out relevant topics that are equally important. For example, the development of energy efficiency measures in the transportation and building sectors have witnessed tremendous gains in recent years. The extent to which gains in energy efficiency might bring fundamental change to the global energy outlook deserves more attention. In addition, the chapters focus on governmental actors in the analysis, which is a legitimate realist orientation. However, the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is widely documented in the realm of energy and environmental policies. NGOs are often times seen as the bridge between national or regional governments. Interested scholars should pay no less attention to the reality of multi-track diplomacy that involves citizen groups and many other non-state actors.

Overall, this edited volume is a testimony of the globalized era, in which energy policies must be contextualized in a broader picture of global interplay. However, the title of the

book, *The Globalization of Energy*, deviates from the conventional understanding of globalization as the flow of goods and services per se. Instead, the book brings together studies of the socio-political dynamism that either promotes or prohibits the global flow of energy. It is therefore more about policies, geopolitical contention and domestic conditions in the globalized era – consequences of and reactions to globalization. Globalization is taken as a given, and therefore is not the subject of the volume. Thus, interested readers should not be distracted by this slightly deceptive title.

This book would be a suited starting point for scholars doing research on the effect of energy shortages on international relations, or conversely, the effect of international contention on energy policies. The collection exhibits the breadth that is necessary for a systematic understanding of the issue. This volume is also ideal for specialists in Chinese or European domestic energy policies who wish to explore the international implications of such. Thought-provoking as it is, the chapters invite readers to further explore the issues and stakes that comprise the contemporary scene of international energy diplomacy, not only between China and the European Union, but on a truly global scale.

Yifei Li is a doctoral student in the sociology program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests include environmental sociology, urban sociology and community development (yifeili@ssc.wisc.edu).