McFUNERALS: The Transition of Japanese Funerary Services

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Abstract

This paper examines the professionalization and standardization of Japanese funerals as an example of multi-leveled changes in practices. The term “McFunerals” (Osōgi no Makku-ka) is applied to illustrate how the Japanese funeral industry has embodied efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control in the process of mass-marketing funeral services. Commercialized funeral ceremonies are undergoing processes of specialization and rationalization. This may be viewed as a modern “risk,” to use Beck’s term, where individuals are increasingly dependent on industries and institutional structures. I argue, however, that although commercialized funeral services are not risk-free, Japanese consumers are aware of these risks and that ill-suited practices are negotiated out of the market. The new consumer-innovated funeral practices not only demonstrate shifts in values, but also how these shifts are incorporated back into commercialized funeral services by the funeral industry. The analysis of funerary practices is seen as a tripartite process between the funerary customs as experienced as habitus, the consumer innovation of practices, and the reinvention and embodiment of new ceremonies by the funeral industry.

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Vignette

In the early spring of 1995, Mr. Sakai, 52 years old, passed away at a hospital in Kita-Kyūshū, Japan. His wake and funeral ceremony took place in the Moon Rise Funeral Company where I was conducting fieldwork by working as one of the employees.

The deceased was a salaryman (or white-collar worker), husband and the father of an 18-year-old daughter. His wife was a homemaker while the daughter, Aiko, was a senior in high school, and looking forward to college in April. The deceased’s death was sudden. The incident shook the small nuclear family whose peaceful upper-middle-class lives were ripped apart along with their sense of family, warmth, and security. Aiko and her mother were traumatized: Overwhelmed, they were speechless and motionless, almost ghost-like in appearance. It was one of the quietest funerals I experienced. Before the wake and funeral, both Aiko and her mother were sitting facing the deceased’s coffin, their heads bowed low and their hands clenched on their laps. There was little conversation; even when a funeral staff member or one of the relatives tried to communicate with them, the mother and daughter would only nod or shake their heads. Because of their passive reactions, one image remained vividly in my memory.

During the last phase of Mr. Sakai’s funeral ceremony, the coffin was opened for close family members to lay flowers (wakare banru) and to say farewell. Aiko stood right over her father’s face when the coffin was opened. After a couple of minutes, a funeral conductor gently asked Aiko to step back so that the funeral staff members could replace the lid of the coffin. Unexpectedly, Aiko mumbled something and reached her arm across the coffin. Aiko’s sudden movement and resistance startled onlookers, but quickly a rush of sympathetic gazes enveloped her like a shield. The coffin had to be covered, however. It was already ten minutes past the scheduled end of the one-hour ceremony. The coffin had to arrive at the crematorium exactly at two o’clock that day. Funeral staff members begin signaling the conductor with their eyes to hurry. The hearse driver was impatiently looking at his watch. The head of the funeral staff apologized to the attendants who were waiting outside the ceremony hall to send the deceased off to the crematorium. Just at that moment, the funeral conductor wrapped his arm around Aiko’s shoulder and gently but firmly pushed her away from the coffin. Setting aside his feelings, he rushed the bereaved family members outside and moved the deceased’s coffin from the room.

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The delay totaled 15 minutes. Taking out his cell phone as soon as he got in his car, the funeral conductor called the crematorium. “I am very sorry. Sakai’s family scheduled for 2 PM was delayed 15 minutes but I think we can amend it to a 5-minute delay.” After all, even the strictest police will not stop a speeding hearse with a corpse on board.

Introduction: McFunerals as a Social Transition Model

The story of Mr. Sakai’s funeral reflects the irrationalities generated in a highly rationalized society. Aiko and her mother are forced to minimize the time spent at the departure of their loved one. Their dependency on the funeral industry for the funerary service resulted in their loss of control over a most intimate moment. With professionals taking over the funeral, the funeral industry is now accountable for the orchestration of the meaning of Mr. Sakai’s death. Hence, the underlying query of this paper concerns the relationship between the funeral industry and consumers in social transformation in Japan. This paper explores how Japanese consumers and the funeral industry, in its ongoing rationalization and professionalization, interact to create new funerary practices and new meanings of death.

What do changes in funeral practices in Japan reveal about the relationship between the Japanese funeral industry and consumers? Japanese funerals conducted by community or kinship groups are progressively more rare, while commercialized funeral services directed by the funeral industry are increasing. The distinction between the two terms, “funeral ritual” (sōshiki) performed by community members and “funeral ceremony” (osōgi) as rendered by funeral staff members is the key to understanding the shifts in Japanese funerals. What is central in the making of a funeral ceremony is the role taken by funeral professionals in preparing the deceased’s corpse, and arranging, and implementing the ceremony. A funeral ceremony can take place at different locations: in a house, a temple, or a funeral auditorium owned by a funeral company. (For example, of funeral ceremonies conducted by Moon Rise between October 1994 and April 1995, 26 percent took place at home while 74 percent were held in funeral auditoriums.) What determines the character of a funeral ceremony is not only where it takes place but also who carries out the dominant tasks regarding the deceased and the bereaved family members. The funeral industry has been taking over the responsibilities of both the community and the bereaved in large cities in contemporary Japan.

My contention regarding the commonality of the commercialized
funeral service is based on the prevalence of funeral companies belonging to Mutual-Aid Cooperatives (gojokai). The top eight funeral companies (totaling more than 15 billion yen in sales in 2002) are Mutual-Aid Cooperatives that belong to the National Wedding and Funeral Mutual-Aid Association (Zenkoku Kankon So sai Gojokai Renmei). Mutual-Aid Cooperatives (MAC) structured on the Mutual-Aid System form the backbone of today’s funeral and wedding ceremonies (Edwards 1989: 42–3). It is a system in which Mutual-Aid Cooperatives rely on the Mutual-Aid members who become prospective customers when they purchase a membership and pay monthly installments (ibid). The installment plan allows members to choose whether they would like their investments to be used for a wedding or a funeral. Members can also transfer their installments to other MAC nationwide in case of relocation. The comprehensive services of Mutual-Aid Cooperatives forced other funeral companies who did not belong to the National Wedding and Funeral Mutual-Aid Association (hereafter NMAA) to offer similar services in order to survive. The NMAA has effectively enforced the standards to which all companies that enter into the system are held. Only upon receiving the committee's permission were start-up companies provided with management assistance within the Mutual-Aid System (Zen koku Kankon So sai Gojokai Renmei 1974: 159–60).

The Japanese commercialized funeral ceremonies discussed in this paper are offered by companies associated with the NMAA as well as non-related companies. These ceremonies are continuously undergoing processes of rationalization, professionalization, and standardization of services that characterize the course of modernity. In this paper I will call contemporary Japanese ceremonies “McFunerals” (Osagi no Makku-ka) due to their characteristics of rationalization and professionalization, and their operation system that is similar to the Toyota Production System known as the just-in-time system. McFunerals and commercialized funerals are interchangeable within this framework. I am by no means suggesting that Japanese funerals are McDonaldized into global homogeneous services. This paper is about the characteristics of McDonaldization and modernity that are manifested in Japanese funeral ceremonies as-much as they are mass-produced and consumed. With these changes taking place in the commercialization of funerals, how are McFunerals responding to the needs of the customer, cultural values, and personal relationships in contemporary Japan?

I examine these questions by analyzing Japanese funeral ceremonies from two perspectives. First, I will investigate the nature of McDonaldization expressed in Japanese funeral ceremonies. Using George Ritzer’s characteristics of McDonaldization as a point of departure (Ritzer 1993), I will demonstrate how rationalization, professionalization, and standardization are at the core of Japanese funeral ceremonies. Second, I will discuss new kinds of funerals that were innovated as a reaction against McFunerals. The living funeral and the non-religious funeral no doubt the latest trend, demonstrate that some consumers are contesting the meaning of funerals offered by the funeral industry. These consumer movements are taken seriously by the industry. They force the industry to reconsider, revise, reformulate, and reinvent their funeral products and services by incorporating these trends. Some of this reinvention of McFunerals is already being marketed.

McFunerals reflect the interactive process between rationalization on the one hand and the increasing individuation in Japanese society on the other. Rationalization or McDonaldization, as part of social change, is removing individuals from the traditional community life structure, forcing institutional dependency on the part of individuals. These standardizations and rationalizations are potentially harmful, in that “as this institutional dependency grows, so does the susceptibility to crises of the emerging individual situation” (Beck 1992: 133). Therefore, the new stage of modernity is viewed as a “sick society” (Beck 1992, 1999) or a “reflexive modernity” (Giddens 1991), in which risk arises ironically due to “the certitudes of industrial society (the consensus for progress or the abstraction of ecological effects and hazards) [that] dominate the thought and action of people and institutions in industrial society” (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994: 5). Although there are positive sides to this new stage of modernity, one negative element is the onset of the risk society. “[T]he spread of the informal sector and the flexibilization of labor, the legal deregulation of large areas of the economy and work relations, the loss of legitimacy by the state, the growth of unemployment and underemployment, the more forceful intervention by multinational corporations, and the high rates of every day violence and crime” (Beck 1999: 3) are some of the threats and uncertainties in Beck’s risk society. Here we need to pay attention to his idea of two shifts taking place in the world. First, the more the world seeks rational order (e.g. the pursuit of science, technology and efficient economic management), the more risks are created (e.g. financial crises and technologically induced hazards). Once these risks are created, we have a limited ability to deal with them because the original
sources of these risks are masked and the responsibility for them cannot be easily established. Second, intensive individuation occurs in the new stage of modernity due to the breakdown of the old community structure. The increase of individual autonomy implies a reflexive construct of individuals’ own biographies, where individuals are dependent on organizations and corporations for shaping their daily conduct as well as forming their overall self-identity.

Another consequence of risk society is the increase of individual risks, namely the “dilemmas of the self,” where individuals are provided with a plurality of choices in commercialized processes and yet this commodified environment fails to rescue individuals from “personal meaninglessness” (Giddens 1991: 187–208). Such is the case when an individual is faced with a death in which he/she is forced to confront the uncertainties that are usually kept under control by the prevailing calculability of daily life. I argue in this paper that although Japanese McFunerals may not completely free individuals from the modern risk of being institutionally dependent, the realization of these dangers have fed into the changes of McFunerals, whereby consumers’ preferred choices influence the transformation of commercialized funeral practices. Thus, with regard to Japanese McFunerals, the new modernization process is not a uni-directional transformation in which the funeral industry has unilateral control over shaping funerary practices. Even though the funeral industry possesses an economic advantage in both rationalizing and standardizing its services, and has a captive clientele of urbanites alienated from the community structure and forced to passively rely on the expertise of the funeral industry, some Japanese consumers are expressing their disagreement toward standardized funeral services by executing innovative funerals of their own. These consumer-innovated funerals are adopted by the media and other consumers, which in turn, forces the funeral industry to either renovate its existing commercialized funerals or lose that share of the marketplace. Therefore, the transformation of funeral practices is really a tripartite process between the habitus of funerary practices (the routinization of commercialized funeral practices), consumers who challenge the norm, and producers who must continue to incorporate consumer innovations and renovate their commercial services.

Japanese Funeral Ceremonies as McFunerals

In this section, contemporary Japanese funeral ceremonies are examined through the lens of the principles of McDonaldization — efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control. For Ritzer, McDonaldization is not simply an expansion of fast food restaurants throughout the world. What he means by McDonaldization is a process by which the principle of fast food restaurants operates in various social institutions. Ritzer derives his McDonaldization theory from Max Weber’s theory of the process of rationalization. For Weber, the model of rationalization comes from bureaucracy while for Ritzer it comes from McDonalds. McDonalds is used here as a paradigm of social change towards the elimination of irrationality and uncertainty in modern societies. Just as in Toyota’s manufacturing system, the objective is to eliminate waste, bring about “autonomation” (jidōsha) and standardize the production process, so too in contemporary Japanese funerals, which operate under similar principles of McDonaldization or the just-in-time industrial system.

In October 1994, I began my fieldwork at Kokura Shiunkaku Funeral Auditorium of Moon Rise Corporation in Kita-Kyūshū (a city with a population of about one million). I worked there for seven months (October 1994–April 1995). Donning the company’s female funeral staff member’s uniform, I observed and learned the funeral business, working my way from the very bottom, i.e. from cleaning incense pots, arranging alters, and ultimately picking up the deceased and cleansing them. The company (with 35 nationwide funeral auditoriums) had the third largest total sales among all funeral companies in Japan, reaching 20.019 billion yen (about US $169.65 million) in 2002 (Nikkei Ryutsu Shimbun 2002).

During the time of my fieldwork, there were seventeen funeral staff members, five part-timers, nine funeral conductors who worked with ten funeral assistants and two bathing professionals at the Auditorium. Although Shiunkaku, the funeral auditorium at Kokura, was my main fieldwork site, I went to funeral services carried out in homes, visited and interviewed the local competitors of Moon Rise, and gathered information from Moon Rise funeral professionals who had experiences working at other funeral companies.

Efficiency and Predictability

The first two features of McDonaldization with which I begin my analysis are efficiency and predictability. Efficiency is the search for the optimum means to an end, while predictability implies the minimization of inaccuracy. Although I present the examples of efficiency and
predictability in the singular voice of an observer, I am aware that while some practices may be efficient and/or predictable for both parties, others will be efficient and/or predictable only for the industry or the bereaved. Heightening the efficiency and predictability of a given situation is the driving force of the rationalization process in its goal of decreasing uncertainty and limiting negative consequences. However, as the following examples illustrate, commercialized funeral practices in Japan may not necessarily address the needs of the consumer.

In the context of commercialized funeral ceremonies, efficiency can be observed throughout its stages but especially when the deceased is first picked up and at the consultation for ceremonies. When a death occurs, the first task of the bereaved is to call a funeral company. On the other end of the line, a funeral staff member makes initial inquiries and records them thoroughly. A staff member opens the conversation with a formal sympathetic greeting, such as “I am very sorry for the loss of your family member” (konotabira mikotomi gosha sho samade shita). Immediately after this line, however, the staff member quickly switches to a business-like manner. “I apologize for the inconvenience, but I need to ask you several questions concerning the deceased.” Following the name, gender, age, address and phone number of the deceased, the name and contact information of the chief mourner, the place where the deceased passed away, the time of death, whether or not the deceased was a Mutual-Aid Cooperative member (gojokai-kaiin), the deceased’s religious affiliation, and what kind of a coffin the bereaved desires, are all asked within 10 to 15 minutes.

Among the most important information required in order to pick up the deceased is the selection of a coffin and the deceased’s religious affiliation. If the deceased or the bereaved is a MAC member, there is a specific set of funeral materials including a coffin that are provided in accordance with the membership fees paid. A MAC member can simply have the complementary coffin or may purchase one of the more expensive coffins that are often suggested by the funeral staff. The deceased’s religion and sect determine the type of coffin cover (kau oei), the braided-twine decoration, other attachments (i.e. a sword), and the deceased’s garments. For example, for the Buddhist Nichirenshōshū sect and for Shinto believers, a coffin cover that has a silver striped design on white background is used instead of the colorful ones used for other Buddhist sects. Being able to gather these items efficiently not only demonstrates the experience of the staff member but also embodies the professionalization that I will discuss later.

As soon as the materials are collected and loaded onto a van, funeral staff members pick up the deceased from a hospital. The uncoffined deceased is transported to his/her house or to the funeral hall. In more than half of the cases in which a person has died in a hospital, the funeral professionals are asked to take the body home first. The deceased may have expressed feelings of homesickness while hospitalized, or the family has missed the deceased and wishes the family to be united once again. This process is cumbersome for the funeral staff members because of the number of trips they have to make and the waiting time that is created. In order to structure this inefficiency into a meaningful efficiency, they often use this time for funeral consultation with the bereaved. For the bereaved, however, this denies the whole purpose of bringing the deceased home, by disrupting the family reunion.

A consultation (uchiaiwa or uchiwai) between a funeral staff member and the bereaved is an approximately one-hour meeting in which the total cost of the wake and funeral ceremony is determined. A funeral professional visits his customers with a heavy black briefcase full of pamphlets and sample photographs that are significant tools for decision-making. The productivity of a consultation, however, is largely due to the use of the efficient order form (mitsumorisho), which is divided into multi-layered categories and sections for the wake and funeral. The form is divided in such a way that even a less experienced funeral staff member can smoothly navigate through the process and aid customers in their decision making. The form lists items in a chronological and hierarchical order beginning with the price of altars that correspond to the name of the wakes and funerals. The selection of these altars is preceded by a funeral professional showing the photographs of what he considers to be the appropriate size for the deceased and his family. The altars for the wake and funeral are the largest expense and the remaining orders are middling to smaller items such as the ashpot, flowers, gift items, and cards. Each individual item is shown either in photos or in pamphlets that clarify the cost ranges and variations in form. When all the items are chosen by the bereaved, the time of the wake and funeral are decided. The time of these rituals does not solely depend on the preference of the deceased’s family, but are negotiated with the priests and with the funeral company’s availability of funeral halls.

Making decisions for funeral items allows both the funeral staff and consumers to predict the size and the scale of the funeral ceremony. For consumers, the ceremony becomes even more predictable with the
them when the coffin is opened, and who carries what items during the shukkan (departure of the coffin). These are just a few examples in which the preparation of funeral professionals allows contemporary funerals to be predictable, and ready to be served to the deceased’s family members.

**Calculability**

The third feature of the McFuneral is its calculability. The primary cost of Japanese funerals can be calculated from the size of the altar, as well as other selections such as flowers, ashpit, return gifts, and food items. The larger the altar size, the larger the funeral hall required, which in turn, necessitates a greater quantity and better quality of items commensurate with the altar. Thus, one can quantify a funeral by the size of the funeral altar, which reflects the social position, age, and gender of the deceased and the social status of the family. While I was writing my Ph.D. dissertation, I found a story in a funeral column of the *Asahi* Newspaper that read as follows:

A twenty-eight-year-old housewife, a resident of Shinagawa-ku, Tokyo, was flabbergasted by her father-in-law’s funeral last month. Her father-in-law was 81 years old and a retired vice president of one of the largest companies in Tokyo. Her family wanted to have a simple funeral (for him), but the funeral company, which had conducted their mother’s funeral three years earlier, told them that “it is not proper to have a smaller funeral for one’s father than for one’s mother.” As a result, they purchased a 2 million yen (about $20,000) coffin, which was the most expensive one the funeral company had. Moreover, the head priest of the Buddhist temple reminded them that “At your mother’s funeral our two priests provided services and received a donation of 1.5 million yen.” Consequently, her father-in-law’s funeral had three priests instead of two and they paid 2 million yen for a donation. The total cost of the funeral including a posthumous name and a coffin was close to 10 million yen (about $100,000). She says, “One can imagine [what funeral professionals will say] when our turn comes; they will explain [to our children], ‘for your grandfather’s funeral your father purchased the most expensive coffin…” Nowadays, “no funeral is necessary for me” is our family slogan.” (Asahi Shinbun 1998)

As one can observe from this story, funeral altars have become increasingly stratified over the years. Moon Rise has 21 different prices for funeral altars, starting at ¥60,000 and ranging up to ¥10,000,000. The price varies according to the design and size of the altar, the number of chrysanthemums on the altar, and the decorative rock gardens beside the altar. For
example, the cheapest altar, which is 72 inches in length, has two pair of small chrysanthemum pots and comes without a decorative garden. The most expensive altars, in contrast, are “special altars” (tokubetsu shidōn) priced between 3 and 10 million yen and made especially for a particular funeral (often company funerals). Special altars are made at the auditorium hall and use thousands of flowers. The altars are placed on a pyramid-like stage with a large (about 3 ft × 5 ft) framed photo of the deceased placed at the center. Altar prices also vary according to the type of flowers used. Most of the flowerpots are filled with chrysanthemums (traditionally used in Japanese funerals), but as the price rises above ¥60,000, plenty of nontraditional flowers (lilies, roses, carnations, irises, daisies, and other flowers associated with weddings or celebrations) are displayed.

A small altar (less than ¥360,000) will likely be arranged in a tatami room or at home, whereas a hall is necessary for an altar that costs more than ¥420,000. For altars more expensive than 2 million yen, the ceremony will take place in the largest auditorium hall. The size of an altar also prescribes the number of funeral professionals at a ceremony and the quality and quantity of bouquets that decorate both sides of the coffin, making clear to funeral-goers how much money has been spent.

The calculability of funerals led to the standardization of ceremonies. The standardization has stratified materials at different price levels, which in turn has enabled customers to purchase the product that matches the deceased’s and their own social standing. The situating of oneself and others on a single hierarchical scale is part of the process of overall homogenization. Mass consumption of commercial funerals that provide a standardized measurement or reference point has created what Wilk calls “structures of common difference,” which are “built through processes of commoditisation and objectification that ... produce an appearance of artificiality and homogeneity” (Wilk 1995: 118). The point is that a homogeneous structure coexists with differences, and moreover, homogeneity expands its differences. The consumption of different variations within a common apparatus creates a homogeneous culture because the diversity in commodities and services is “not of content, but of form” (ibid.). Once the mass consumption of funeral ceremonies made commercial ceremonies a cultural norm, contemporary Japanese were compelled to purchase services in order to save face in front of their colleagues and friends. In this way the mass consumption of funeral ceremonies serves to express differences within a common structure. Underlying the principle that produced the structure of commonality, however, is the standardization of funerals in which funerals are calculated, measured, and ranked.

Control: Professionalization and Standardization

The shift from community funeral rituals to commercial funeral ceremonies is manifested in the commoditization, commercialization, rationalization, and professionalization of funerals. Because “commoditization lies at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural, and social factors” (Appadurai 1986: 13), various elements such as the migration of families into cities, the increase of nuclear families over households of extended kin, and the progress of work specialization have contributed to the transition. I believe, however, that the all-inclusive handling of the corpse by funeral professionals was pivotal to the change. The commercialization of the treatment of the physical remains (removal of the deceased, encoffining, transportation of the body to a crematorium) contributed to the rationalization of the concept of death, funeral professionalization, and the formalization of ceremonies into standardized services.

Community funerals reflected the participants’ fear of death, which they believed caused the release of malevolent spirits. The ritual’s purpose was to usher the deceased’s spirit safely to the other world and to strengthen family ties as well as the relationship between the deceased’s family and community members. In contrast, in contemporary funeral ceremonies, the widespread use of cremation and the comprehensive services provided by the funeral industry have significantly diminished the concept of the impurity of death. Today, the funeral industry treats the dead as “alive” until the time of cremation. While the performances of funeral rituals served to protect the living from death pollution as well as to protect the deceased from evil spirits, the funeral ceremony centers on the beautification of the deceased’s life and memories. In fact, treating the deceased as if alive is one of the keys for funeral professionals. It is in this context that the anecdote I heard from my colleague becomes significant. One of his ex-colleagues was fired as a result of mishaps in handling the deceased. While this ex-colleague was transporting the deceased and his family from a hospital to the funeral hall, the back door of the company van opened and the coffin slid onto the street and fell open, the deceased landed face down on the pavement with the upturned coffin beside him. Apparently the back door of the van had not been securely locked. The family members were furious. Enraged, they shouted at the professional that he had injured the
deceased, who was almost hit by a car following closely behind. The funeral professional knelt on the pavement, touching his forehead to the ground, and apologized to the family in continuous bowing. The family's ire did not dissipate, however, until the managers had apologized and offered to pay for the entire funeral.

The notion of the living dead has replaced the concept of impurity to such an extent that a cremator was once confronted by an angry chief mourner who blamed the cremator for his mother's death. Beside the door of the chamber that leads to an incinerator, there is a red button. This button represents the ignition button that initiates the cremation. The chief mourner was asked to push the button, but he and his family members declined to perform the act. Many mourners hesitate to press the button because they perceive their action to be the final death sentence for the deceased. Being obliged, the cremator pushed the button. The outraged chief mourner yelled at him, "You are killing my mother!" The cremator had to apologize for "killing" his mother.

These episodes demonstrate the role of the funeral industry in transforming the meaning of death. Professionals negate the concept of impurity and death pollution by performing routines that imply the living state of the deceased. It is these performances in their extremity, making one believe the deceased is still with the living, that began to alleviate the notion of impurity. Inasmuch as the concept of impurity functioned to unite community members, providing an alternate view and rationalizing death has allowed the funeral industry to command authority over funeral practices.

The rationalization of death and the treatment of the corpse are the pillars in the construction of professionalism. The stratification of the funeral profession depends on the extent to which a professional handles the deceased and the bereaved. The differentiation is perceived in fine gradations determined by task boundaries and power distinctions.

At Moon Rise, where I worked, funeral employees are divided into funeral staff, bathing ceremony professionals, conductors, female partners, funeral assistants, a hearse driver, and an accountant. The major responsibilities of the funeral staff members are to pick up the deceased, enclofthin them, conduct consultations, market funerals, and assist in the performances of funeral ceremonies. The nature of their occupation categorizes them as both blue-collar and white-collar workers. Their specialized knowledge in the treatment and the transferring of the corpse is physical and even gruesome at times. At the consultation, however, they are salesmen marketing the largest funeral the deceased's family can afford. What makes their position higher than the rest of the employees is their involvement with the corpse. What ranks them lower than other businessmen is the very reason that ranks them higher within the funeral industry. They are respected when handling the deceased because it is fundamental to the production of commercialized funeral services. Sometimes funeral professionals have to pick up deceased people who committed suicide or were in an accident. Their specialized work is not only greatly appreciated by the family members but is respected among funeral professionals, and their status ranks the highest among funeral professionals.

Funeral conductors rank second to funeral staff members. Although they are not involved in the handling of the corpse, they have the most intimate relationship with the deceased's family from the beginning to the end of the funeral. A funeral conductor is a guide and mentor to the deceased's family. As discussed earlier, a conductor prepares chief mourners and family members for the wake and funeral ceremony by providing rehearsals. Any questions a family may have are answered and necessary instructions are given. The very success of the funeral ceremony depends on the funeral conductor because it is the conductor who must not only prepare the bereaved, but orchestrate funeral staff, partners and assistants, hearse driver, and cremators to perform each of their specialized practices when it needs to be performed. The funeral conductor is both a funeral dictionary and a psychological counselor. They often listen to the bereaved talking about the deceased and provide sympathy to those in which the death was tragic. There are no set requirements regulating how much time a conductor should spend with their customers; but conductors tend to be generous people who possess volunteer spirits. I often saw them chatting with the bereaved and comforting them until late at night.

The bathing ceremony (yukan) that professionals provide involves the bathing of the deceased in front of the deceased's family. Traditionally the bathing ritual was to purify death pollution and neutralize evil spirits. Water was seen as a medium in which all malevolent elements could be dissolved, and its symbolic power gave the bathing ritual its value. With the attenuation of community funeral rituals, bathing rituals started to disappear. Ceremony Special Car Service Company (hereafter CSC) began marketing bathing services by contracting with funeral companies in 1987. Moon Rise contracted with CSC and began marketing bathing services in November 1994. By the end of 1997 the company had