Managing an increasingly negative view of old age as the time of decline, older persons in Japan have shaped pre-funerals as ceremonies of later life celebrating their agency, self-sufficiency, and personal pleasure in steering their remaining years. Whereas new policies have been employed to handle the growing social and economic stress of eldercare on the nation's shrinking younger population, pre-funerals ceremonially engage Japan's aging society, where longevity is considered not a gift but a burden. Using symbols and practices found in various life-cycle rites in Japan, during pre-funerals aging persons express their gratitude and say goodbye to those close to them. By designing, conducting, and consuming their own pre-funerals, older persons playfully construct an age-specific ideal of independence against a treasured, mainstream value of mutual dependence.

(Longevity, ceremony, life course, Japan, personhood)

Longevity's recent increasing presence in Japan has undermined its cultural value. Older persons today are reconsidering the meaning of a long life in their family and social lives, but also ceremonially. Japanese folklore studies show that people's desire for achieving long life pervaded customary celebrations, which were conducted for persons aged 61, 77, and 88 (Tomaru 1978). Celebrating older persons for achieving the culturally desired condition of advanced age, these ceremonies also sanctified the life force that ensured the well-being and long life of fellow community members. The desire for prolonging life was also present in other ceremonial occasions, as when sharing food symbolizing longevity during the New Year celebration, when all people grew one year older together. Although people today still participate in ritual activity for seeking and honoring longevity, it is on a reduced scale. Due to the "gift of mass longevity" (Plath 1980), long life is a destiny for most. Japan is known for having one of the longest life expectancies in the world: 85 years for women and 78 for men (Mainichi Interactive News 2002). Older persons today sometimes reject the value of long life, stating that they do not mind living long as long as they have their health. Long life otherwise implies a burden; it is tied to physical and mental decline. A 76-year-old woman put it bluntly: "I pray to deities that I would not live long. I don't want to live long and become a nuisance (meiwaku) to others."

By painting grim futures for the world's most rapidly aging society, policymakers amplify uncertainties surrounding old age. Considering the declining fertility rate, they say there will be too few of the younger generation to pay for pensions and medical care for the rising number of elderly. The social-security system, policymakers add, will go bankrupt without serious reforms. This sense of crisis led to the implementation of new policies such as the Long-Term Nursing Insurance (kaigo hoken) to cope with a growing elderly population. If in the practical realm of policy-
making old age has become a problem, and if this is expressed in the ceremonial realm, in what ways do ceremonials for older persons reveal the changing value of a long life? This article examines the emerging phenomenon of Japanese pre-funerals (seizensō). These are conducted before death and express new ideals of independence and self-sufficiency in later life. Against the growing perception of old age as the period of dependence, aging persons celebrate their agency by creating personally meaningful ceremonies.

The anthropological literature on life-cycle rites has customarily highlighted their power of transforming people’s identities along the culturally defined life course; from child to young adult, unmarried to married, and elder to ancestor (e.g., Van Gennep 1999 [1909]). Rather than treating life-cycle rites as reproducing pre-existing social categories, this essay explores the ways in which older persons use previously available ceremonial frameworks to create new identities as the deceased-to-be (Grimes 2000). Unlike previous studies of late-life ceremonies, the pre-funeral provides neither an opportunity to claim a high ritual status (T’ien 1949; Yagi 2001:175, 191) nor a retirement from production (Luborsky 1994; Jacobson 1996). Rather, planners of pre-funerals declare independence and egocentric orientations in a society that highly values mutual dependence.2

THE APPEARANCE OF PRE-FUNERALS

The development of contemporary pre-funerals during the early 1990s is best understood by considering the influence of commercialized mortuary practices in Japan. By the late 1980s, funerals had become packaged ceremonies for mass consumption. With urbanization and the weakening of community ties, the funeral industry came to dominate the production of mortuary ceremonies (Suzuki 2000). Funeral specialists are said to have pressured the bereaved to buy packaged funerals without allowing them to consider cost and need. In response to the funeral industry’s dominance, there was increasing disgust with the loss of personal control and meaning in mortuary ceremonies, and during the 1990s people began to reclaim some control in mortuary practices (Kawano n.d.). Depleting the commercialization of death, voices arose demanding clearer pricing policies, broader service choices, and customized package deals. People began to create their own ceremonies. The planners of pre-funerals examined in this study share these characteristics to different degrees, but are alike in determining to stage their endings in personally meaningful ways. Some explicitly stated that they were dissatisfied with their kin’s funerals. Actress Mizunoie Takiko, for example, decided to hold a pre-funeral because she was unhappy with her sister’s routinized funeral (jimuteki) (Asahi Weekly 1993).

Those choosing to have a pre-funeral challenge a common assumption that survivors take charge of mortuary arrangements. The pre-funeral does not replace a regular funeral, yet planners of pre-funerals indicate their desire to take charge of their mortuary ceremonies and say that they do not need a regular funeral. The idea of the pre-funeral resonates with an emerging trend in regular funerals emphasizing
self-planning, customization, and personalization. A growing number of older persons today make funeral plans by contracting with a funeral specialist or by communicating with the family. Yet with the pre-funeral the deceased-to-be takes the lead in executing the plan, playing the central role during the ceremony, and interacting directly with guests. In sum, the pre-funeral allows the individual to plan and enjoy the occasion as the designer, director, actor, and spectator.

Although performers of pre-funerals are critical of regular funerals, this alone does not move them to plan pre-funerals. They are led to consider doing so partly by some event reminding them that they are old and not immortal. Performers of pre-funerals say their experiences with death made them realize how temporary their existence is, and they found pre-funerals suitable vehicles for their feelings. One 80-year-old man from Osaka stated that a dream about death encouraged him to plan a pre-funeral (Asahi Shimbun 1996). Their encounters with death or near-death become more acute through illness, surgeries, and the deaths of friends and kin. A 73-year-old man, for example, reported that his cancer surgery five years previously prompted him to consider holding a pre-funeral. The youngest person in the sample reported that he was misdiagnosed with cancer when he was in his fifties and held his pre-funeral with the thought that he was to die soon (Asahi Shimbun 1999). Few people, however, were or thought they were terminally ill when they held pre-funerals.

Emphasizing the pre-funeral’s practical value, its supporters say they reduce stress on families. A full-fledged funeral strains survivors emotionally and financially. An informant in her late sixties said, “Funerals consume survivors, and my older sister became bedridden for several months after holding the funeral for her deceased husband.” With a regular funeral, the bereaved must make many decisions, and problems easily develop because the occasion involves a variety of people; religious specialists, funeral specialists, helpers, guests, and kin. Funeral specialists might try forcing an expensive package on clients, relatives might fight over arrangements for guests, or the bereaved might know too little about the deceased’s social relations to make informed decisions. A man in his forties declared, “In my hometown, you become a full-grown adult only after successfully managing a full-fledged funeral.” Financial issues, moreover, increase the stress placed on the bereaved. According to a municipal survey, the average cost of a funeral in Tokyo was 3,810,000 yen (approximately US$32,000). Even though the deceased might have saved money for the funeral, it can still cost the bereaved a small fortune.

The smaller family common today, averaging 2.2 children (White 2002:37), puts an additional burden on the survivors, particularly on couples without siblings to help out. A 76-year-old woman, a resident of a village in Nagano prefecture, said that without her pre-funeral, her eldest son and his wife, the only daughter in her natal family, would have had to conduct funerals for both sets of parents (Asahi Shimbun 2001). A 98-year-old woman of Hamamatsu city declared, “I am relieved [that] I had my pre-funeral; I wouldn’t want to cause trouble (meiwaku) for others when I die.”
(Asahi Shimbun 1998). Thus users justify their pre-funerals by expressing their consideration for survivors.

Families, however, may not appreciate the thoughtfulness extended by the deceased-to-be. Suga-san and Yamada-san found many co-performers to hold a pre-funeral together, but many later declined to attend due to opposition from family members, while others were reluctant to come, believing that neighbors and colleagues would find the ceremony absurd (Asahi Shimbun 1995a). Family members of Suga-san and Yamada-san eventually accepted their will. A 57-year-old man, however, stated that his relatives called him a fool and the pre-funeral inauspicious (engi ga warui), and some said there would be another funeral when he dies, implying that a pre-funeral would be a waste of money (Hokuriku Yomiuri 2002).

Actress Mizuno Takiko’s 1993 pre-funeral received much media attention and popularized the term seizensō. A number of informants mentioned her name when asked about pre-funerals. Mizunoe-san’s pre-funeral took place at a hotel in Tokyo on February 19, the day before her seventy-eighth birthday (Asahi Shimbun 1993). Approximately 500 people, the majority of whom were celebrities, attended the event. Wearing a shiny evening dress, Mizunoe-san sat by the ceremonial altar decorated with flowers. A representative offered flowers at the altar. Speeches filled with humor and jokes made for a jovial ambiance. The banquet was called “the ceremony of resurrection.” After a jazz band and professional singers entertained the guests, Mizunoe-san thanked those present four times, and there followed a brief moment of silence.

This event illustrates some common features of the pre-funeral. First, the central actor says “goodbye” and “thank you” to those present. Second, the pre-funeral is often performed for a person of a culturally marked age for celebration: these are 70, 77, 80, 88, and 90. Third, the event typically includes speeches, socializing, music, and singing, but no religious authority.

PRE-FUNERALS IN JAPANESE CEREMONIAL LIFE

How do pre-funerals compare with customary rites of passage in Japanese society; i.e., celebrations for the long-lived, ancestral rites, funerals, and weddings? Old-age milestone ceremonies (tosshiiwai) and pre-funerals share similar characteristics. Like pre-funerals, celebrations for the long-lived included speeches honoring the celebrant and banquets with friends and relations (Tomaru 1978; Watanabe 1979:329). In addition, there were the distribution of red rice and rice cakes (associated with auspicious occasions) and visits to Shinto shrines (Watanabe 1979). In some cases, special gifts such as bamboo for fire-fanning and palm prints of the celebrant were given to relatives and neighbors. These gifts were said to have powers to protect against fires and evil influences (Watanabe 1979:334). Old-age milestone ceremonies, therefore, sanctified old age and celebrated the long-lived for their special ritual power to ensure the well-being of their kin and community. Furthermore, younger generations attempted to achieve long life (ayakaru) by taking part in
these celebrations, for the life-force power of the long-lived was considered transmittable to others.

Yet today, since society sees long life more as a statistically likely reality than a condition charged with a special blessing, people are less likely to seek the life force from the long-lived during old-age milestone celebrations. Nonetheless, these celebrations persist, albeit on a reduced scale, and the long-lived receive gifts from family members. Town and city officials also send gifts to them on the national holiday for the aged (keirō no hi). In Yokohama city, persons over 77 receive cash gifts. A celebration for the aged, whether it is a ceremony sanctifying the long-lived or a more secular version, differs from a pre-funeral in at least two ways. First, it idealizes long life as a desirable condition. Second, younger people, rather than the aged, take charge of the celebration in an old-age milestone ceremony.

Despite these differences, people use cultural frameworks for the long-lived celebrations. Quite a few people in this study scheduled pre-funerals when they reached ages appropriate for celebrating long life. Others conducted pre-funerals on birthdays or memorial anniversaries of their kin. A 90-year-old man, for example, conducted his pre-funeral on his wife’s memorial (Kurashiki Cable Television 2002). By holding a pre-funeral at the memorial of a close family member, its performers link themselves to their family dead. This is also a time- and resource-conserving practice similar to having multiple memorial observances on the same occasion.

Pre-funerals resemble regular funerals in many ways. Typically, family members and friends attend pre-funerals, which take place at hotels and community halls. The size of a pre-funeral varies; those examined in this study ranged from 60 to 500 guests. The ceremonial altar, often decorated with flowers, accommodates the deceased-to-be’s portrait. Guests offer flowers at the altar, give speeches to honor the deceased-to-be, and share food and drinks.

Pre-funerals highlight the theme of social parting, prevailing in regular funerals, while downplaying the religious tone. A contemporary funeral typically consists of a death ritual (sōgi) and a farewell ceremony (kokubetsushiki), which provides an occasion for the living to part with the deceased. Usually a religious specialist (most commonly a Buddhist priest) performs a ritual making the deceased a disciple of Buddha and sending the soul to a Buddhist paradise. Although most funerals are conducted with Buddhist religious elements, people are more likely to define funerals in social terms. According to the 1995 municipal survey conducted in Tokyo, 60 per cent of the respondents said the funeral is “a customary occasion for parting with the deceased,” while some 30 per cent stated it is “a religious occasion to pray for the peaceful rest of the deceased” (Tokyo-to 1995).

Pre-death funerals amplify the element of parting. Aware that health in old age is a gift, performers send farewell greetings to those around them. At the same time, they express gratitude to participants, which is a job of the bereaved at a regular funeral. Thus the pre-funeral goes beyond the regular funeral by allowing the deceased-to-be to communicate with the guests in person. A 69-year-old widow in Tokyo stated: “My grandchild said it’s strange to have a funeral for a living person.
I said I'd like to see and thank people to whom I am indebted while I am still healthy" (Asahi Shimbun 1999d).

Despite the element of parting that links the regular and pre-funeral, they differ in several ways. The pre-funeral less commonly involves a religious specialist chanting Buddhist sutras. Instead, an amateur or professional musical performance accompanies pre-funerals. In one case, a guest sang a song he wrote for the deceased-to-be. In addition, planners of the pre-funeral sometimes dress in festive costume instead of traditional funeral dress. The pre-funeral, therefore, dramatizes social parting more than a religious rite. A lack of strict commitment to Buddhist funeral conventions is not surprising, considering that the performers often find conventional funerals unsatisfactory. Although the bereaved usually receive incense money and pay for a significant portion of funeral expenses, guests at some pre-funerals paid a small flat fee such as 3,000 or 5,000 yen, a practice common for Japanese banquets.

In staging a social parting, pre-funerals employ a range of activities making the deceased-to-be the center of attention. Guests give speeches praising the celebrant, for example, rather than expressing sympathy to survivors. Video and slide presentations might offer additional commentary on the person’s life. In some cases the deceased-to-be performs, playing music or singing karaoke. These practices make pre-funerals resemble wedding banquets. Everyone is said to be the center of attention at least once in life—at his or her wedding. The pre-funeral, however, provides a second chance in later life, which its performers enjoy. A funeral co-ordinator pointed out, “There is a regret that the deceased, the central figure of the funeral, can’t say anything to those who gathered.” The pre-funeral is considered a solution to this problem.

People find pre-funerals cheerful and festive (akarui) occasions as opposed to the somber (kurai) image of funerals. Nonetheless, practices and symbols common in the regular funeral coexist. This explains why some guests are at a loss for what to say at pre-funerals, “whether to express condolences or congratulations” (Asahi Shimbun 1999d). Selectively combining practices linked to life and death, joy and sorrow, and celebration and mourning, the pre-funeral produces ambiguities and uneasiness.

PRE-FUNERALS AS A NEW LIFE-CYCLE RITE

Pre-funerals do not replace regular funerals. It is not uncommon for the bereaved to have a small gathering for the deceased even if a pre-funeral has already been performed. The gathering at death, however, is unlikely to be called a funeral or farewell ceremony, but more of a memorial. Such gatherings tend to be informal, private affairs mainly for the immediate family, and might involve funeral speeches or reading telegrams. Because pre-funerals are occasions for the deceased-to-be to express gratitude and part with friends and relations, the public importance of the farewell ceremony at death diminishes. As a result, the pre-funeral is unlikely to lead
to a full-fledged funeral. The pre-funeral serves to screen out people who do not know the deceased well, and allow only those closest persons to gather at death.

What is the pre-funeral, then, if it is not a death rite? Pre-funerals are new life-cycle rites for older persons, in which themes of death and rebirth recur. These themes have been reported to dominate rites of passage marking a person’s identity transition (e.g., Van Gennep 1999:87, 99, 100, 119). In pre-funerals, people create a sense of separation and ending by employing practices common in regular funerals: offering flowers, displaying the deceased-to-be’s portrait, and giving speeches resembling funeral addresses (chôjî). A moderate number of pre-funerals resemble regular funerals by having sutra-chanting by a Buddhist priest, using white funeral costume, and collecting incense money. In one case, a 75-year-old wine connoisseur gave away his collection of wine glasses to approximately 200 guests at his pre-funeral held at a hotel in Tokyo as a form of katamiwake (giving away personal belongings of the deceased) (Asahi Shimbun 1999a).

Images of death in pre-funerals, however, are followed by acts embodying a sense of renewal. In one pre-funeral, a group of participants wrote their wills, with a focus on their unfulfilled dreams and unsolved problems in their remaining years (Ikiikiwakuwaku Jibunkai 1999). Similarly, several people announced their new life plans. In one case the deceased-to-be planned to reappear onstage for the ceremony of “resurrection” to the music of “Hello Baby” (konničhiwa akachan) (Asahi Shimbun 1996). The author (Kagyo 2001:7) of a manual about the pre-funeral named it a “phoenix ceremony” to emphasize rebirth. A 73-year-old company president said he felt refreshed after the ceremony, a feeling in harmony with the occasion for renewal (Asahi Shimbun 1999b).

Life-cycle rites transform ritual participants’ social identities, but the pre-funeral does not transform someone into a socially dead person. Then what kind of transitions, if any, do pre-funerals highlight? The pre-funeral uses images of death and rebirth to shape a sense of division in life, one that shifts away from obligatory social ties (shigarami). The Buddhist priest who designed and performed the collective pre-funeral, for example, made participants write their wills, maintaining that this is a way for them to say good-bye to their life bound to the workplace and society. People see new life when they lose everything. So, I make people lie down in caskets and listen to chanting during pre-funerals. This puts them in the context of total loss and makes them truly afraid of dying. They realize how they’ve wasted their precious life and vow to start anew. (Ikiikiwakuwaku Jibunkai 1999)

Another Buddhist priest echoed: “It is not easy to move beyond social expectations that bind a person. Won’t you make a transition in life and start a new one [by conducting a pre-funeral]?” (Kôgenji Temple 2000).

As a sign of their departure from social obligations, several participants of pre-funerals said they stopped sending New Year greeting cards. The New Year observance is considered an occasion to renew social ties. By not sending New Year cards, a person leaves the community that he or she has been maintaining. After his
pre-funeral, an 81-year-old former Shinto priest announced: "I'd live the rest of my precious life as I please. From now on I will avoid obligated interactions" (Asahi Shimbun 1995b).

Despite the abundant anthropological literature on life-cycle ceremonies, studies of ceremonies for older persons are rare (Myerhoff 1984:313). In some cultures, researchers report no ceremonies of later life, but it is not always clear if scholars lack interest in this phase of life or if no significant rites of later life exist. Ceremonies of later life in some societies focus on shifting religious or economic identities. By performing the Great Pai ceremony, for example, a Tai of the Yunnan-Bruma frontier gains a status higher than that of political authority or economic success. The ceremony grants an elderly Tai the ritual title of Paga and "a guarantee of a seat in heaven in the future life" (T'ien 1949:47). The title of Paga resembles the tōya, prestigious ritual authority granted to elders in charge of community rites in the shrine guards (miyaza) of Japan (e.g., Yagi 2001). Yet the pre-funeral does not grant a new ritual identity to the performer, and unlike retirement parties in Israel that sever ties with the workplace (Jacobson 1996), the pre-funeral fails to give a new economic identity to its performer. Instead the ceremony transforms an older person into the deceased-to-be and announces the person's withdrawal from obligated interactions. Thus the pre-funeral is a new life-cycle rite of later life celebrating the remaining life, and declaring a new beginning in anticipation of death.

CONVEYING AGE-SPECIFIC IDEALS OF PERSONHOOD

The pre-funeral's ideas of independence and departure from social duties go well beyond those of Japanese personhood that pervade anthropological writings (e.g., Kondo 1990). Rather than fostering separateness and independence, the ideology of personhood in Japan promotes mutual dependence. This ideal permeates every facet of life in Japan: socialization, schooling, work, and family. A great deal of energy is spent on making a child sensitive to the social nature of personhood. The idea that a person lives by others' support is also evident in the cultural construction of ritual (Kawano, In press). Older persons in northern Japan daily engage in sports, games, and social activities in an attempt to prevent falling into the condition of senility (boke), a form of social death making a person helplessly dependent on others for care. Once trapped, senile persons have no control over their dissociate states (Traphagan 2000). In pre-funerals, older Japanese persons idealize a kind of dissociation whose degree and scale they control with the aim of truly enjoying the remainder of their life.

Pre-funerals offer an age-specific, alternative ideal of personhood in later life. They bring to light the image of a person who is self-assured and has lived in the company of others, but is now allowed to more freely follow personal pleasure. For a younger person, focusing on oneself creates a negative impression of self-centeredness. Unlike a young person who might not yet have learned proper social skills, the deceased-to-be in a pre-funeral is granted the presumption of having amply
practiced interdependence. In fact, far from denying the importance of mutuality and support from others, pre-funerals are used to express gratitude for the support from family, friends, and relations.

Rebellious attitudes of the deceased-to-be in Japan stand in sharp contrast with white American retirees (Luborsky 1994). In the first weeks after ending their jobs, the retirees, all in good health and without financial problems, launched into domestic projects such as landscaping and housecleaning, without hiring outside help. These retirees further emphasized their independence, self-sufficiency, and productivity by pointing to their vegetables planted in the backyard, the house improvements, and other home accomplishments. Thus challenging the stereotypical image of the retired in America as unproductive persons waiting for death (Clark and Anderson 1967), the new retirees assumed a pioneer spirit as they reconfigured their new identities (Luborsky 1994:420). Like users of pre-funerals they employed symbols and activities indicating renewal: gardening and home construction projects. While both the older Japanese and Americans initiated remaking their identities, the Americans returned to core values through their domestic activities, while the deceased-to-be examined in this study moved beyond and even undermined the fundamental norms of mutuality in Japanese society.

CONCLUSIONS

Pre-funerals constitute a ceremonial response to Japan’s aging society, where longevity is no longer a gift but a social burden. The age of 61 (kanreki) formerly marked the beginning of old age, but no longer does. If long life is a destiny rather than a blessing, and potentially “cursed with long illness” (Traphagan pers. comm.), mass longevity influences not only policy-making but also ceremonies. Unlike official eldercare policies, pre-funerals are shaped by old persons with their own visions of what to do with their longevity. And their visions challenge those of policymakers who dismiss the agency of the aging, treating them as dependents on family and society. The users of pre-funerals long for self-sufficiency and independence, and the pre-funeral trumpets its users’ refusal to become docile care receivers. Older persons take charge, command attention, and enjoy being central figures. Sometimes going against the wishes of their children and those around them, they publicly announce egocentric orientations against cherished ideas of mutual dependence. It is worth noting that the aging examined here grappled with conventions and created new practices. Neither guardians of traditions nor liminal persons struggling outside the social structure (Myerhoff 1978), users of pre-funerals cast themselves as agents of change.

Theoretically, this study suggests that age presents a major point of analysis in reconsidering the cultural construction of personhood. Anthropologists have written much about how children become socialized into culturally defined persons, but comparatively little attention has been paid to older persons, a group that cannot be considered a minority in a straightforward way. Very little is known about the
process by which older persons acquire the ability to act against norms or move beyond them, let alone express such changes in ceremonial terms. This path of research promises more complete pictures of personhood in society, and a more nuanced analysis of aging. By examining ritual agency among older persons, this study contributes toward this goal. Despite older persons being marginalized, and the power and honor attributed to old age being contested, seniority in Japan still commands respect and grants access to resources and prestige to some degree. Thus this study provides an important contrast with studies of ritual agency among people who are marginalized due to their gender, ethnicity, or class (Lewis 1971; Ong 1988; Atkinson 1989; Schnell 1999).

In conclusion, pre-funerals are self-initiated ceremonies of farewell and renewal in later life. In these ceremonies, older persons take charge of their own lives, redirecting them away from social duties. Pre-funerals celebrate powerful images of older persons as decision-makers and consumers, as the quality of long life, rather than longevity itself, has become a central issue for the aging.

NOTES

1. I am grateful for the postdoctoral fellowship provided by the Social Science Research Council and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (2002-2004), which supported fieldwork and archival research for this project. Glenda Roberts and staff at the Asia-Pacific Studies of Waseda University provided an ideal research environment in Tokyo, and Leslie Williams and John Traphagan provided valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. Finally, I thank people who kindly participated in this study.

2. The data examined here come from twelve months of fieldwork and archival research in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area conducted between 2002 and 2003. The data derive from published accounts of pre-funerals in newspapers and magazines, open-ended interviews with persons over 60, journalists, funeral specialists, and Buddhist priests.

3. The price of the funeral includes fees and expenses for professional funeral services, religious specialists, food and drink, accommodations for guests, gifts, and tips. Yet some 59 per cent reported that the incense money (cash given by visitors at a regular funeral) covered only a small portion of the funeral expenses (Tokyo-to 1995).

4. The images of renewal prevailing in pre-funerals resonate with those found in the studies of celebrations for older persons. In particular, the age of 61 is considered the year of renewal because the Chinese calendar revolves around 60 zodiacal combinations.

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