Nothing seems so unmodern as death. Modernity presents itself as newness continually renewed, casting aside worn-out pasts and extending into far-flung futures. Death, however, remains a steadfast check on worldly ambitions, no matter how extended our life spans become, no matter how limitless the future may appear. In the end, death exacts its due, and all societies, modern or not, face the inevitable question: what to do with the dead?

THE FUNERAL

It is a hot summer morning at a Buddhist temple in suburban Tokyo, 1997. The air is filled with the scent of incense, together with the sound of cicadas and the sonorous chanting of two Buddhist priests. Tomiko, born nine decades earlier, has been dead for two days. She now lies in a coffin, her body surrounded by items traditionally marking a Buddhist pilgrim: a white robe, a walking stick, and a rosary. Keeping her cool on her voyage into the beyond are blocks of dry ice. An imposing altar (saidan), constructed for the occasion by an undertaker and consisting for the most part of artfully arranged flowers, both fronts and flanks the coffin, hiding it from view. Wooden plaques rise from the flowerbeds at carefully planned intervals, displaying the names of family members, neighbors, and friends who have helped defray the cost of the funeral. Placed at the center of the altar, directly above the coffin, is a photograph of the deceased. It looms over a wooden mortuary tablet (ihai) displaying the characters that make up Tomiko’s Buddhist name (kaimyō), conferred posthumously to signify her entrance into the clergy and, it is hoped, into a
state of buddhahood. Throughout the proceedings of the day, she is, in fact, referred to as a “buddha” (hotokesama), as are most of the dead in Japan.

Two priests, dressed in brilliantly colored robes, sit directly in front of the altar with their backs to the attendees. To one side of them sit Tomiko’s children and grandchildren, who, like almost everyone in attendance, understand very little of the Buddhist scriptures and prayers that the priests are chanting. Unlike the priests, they do not face the altar. Instead, they are seated at an angle so that they can return small bows to the guests, all dressed in black and many grasping rosaries, who walk, one by one, up the temple stairs. At the entrance to the temple hall, its enormous doors flung open, each attendee quietly approaches a cloth-covered stand holding a censer and a box of powdered incense. Once there, each person adds a pinch of incense to the smoking censer, bows toward the “buddha,” then bows toward the family members. Afterward, each one walks down the steps, wipes his or her hands on a towel offered by one of the undertaker’s staff, and either leaves the temple grounds or waits quietly at the base of the stairs.

Some of these guests, including the members of Tomiko’s flower-arranging club and neighborhood association, knew the dead personally. Most, however, are there not for the deceased but for the chief mourner (moshu or
seshu), Tomiko’s daughter, who is a respected university professor. Many of those offering incense are her colleagues, and it is her students who staff the tent-covered reception desk at the base of the stairs, collecting the gifts of cash (kōden, “incense offering” or “incense money”) that each attendee hands over before proceeding up the temple steps. The students, four men and two women in their late teens and early twenties, carefully record the names of the donors and the amounts given by each. This is an important responsibility, since it will determine the value of the “return gift for incense money” (kōden-gaeshi) to be given to each attendee, which often takes the form of different grades of green tea delivered either days or weeks after the funeral. Also, if a family member of one of today's guests dies in the future, knowing how much the guest gave at Tomiko’s funeral will help the members of Tomiko’s family decide how much money they should give as attendees.

After about fifty people have paid their respects, the priests conclude their chanting by repeating several times, “Hail Amida Buddha” (namu Amida Butsu), the central figure in the Pure Land (Jōdo) sect to which this temple belongs. According to scripture, Amida resides in a paradise located to the west, where he welcomes into salvation those who recognize and call upon his grace. The priests take their leave, and the undertaker, a middle-aged woman wielding a microphone, announces over a loudspeaker the name and professional title of the chief mourner, a middle-aged woman herself. The undertaker then proceeds to read telegrams sent by people who could not attend the ceremony, after which she directs her three-man staff to dismantle the altar and open the lid of the coffin. Next, she invites relatives and close friends to approach the coffin and place flowers inside. Once they have done this, the coffin is nailed shut and carried by the students and funeral staff to a “shrine-style” (miyagata) hearse waiting just inside the gate to the temple. Its chassis is constructed of wood and gold and topped with an elaborate roof like those found on shrines and temples throughout Japan.

Attendees bow as the coffin is placed in the hearse, and before it drives away, the chief mourner, now holding the mortuary tablet with both hands, tells them that her mother is surely glad to be joining her husband in the afterlife and honored that everyone has attended her funeral. The chief mourner’s brother, standing at her side with their mother’s portrait in hand, offers a brief word of thanks to the attendees. This is the cue for people to leave the temple grounds and for the family members, including distant relatives, to follow the hearse in several vans to the crematory.

At the municipal crematory, the undertaker’s staff takes care of the bureaucratic paperwork required by law while the family assembles in front of the
doors to a gleaming steel oven. One of the priests from the temple has accompanied them, and he resumes chanting as family members bow their heads, clutching rosaries. Free at last from the obligation of greeting guests, several of them, including the chief mourner, begin to weep, then openly sob, as the coffin is placed into the oven by a member of the crematory staff, who is attired in an official-looking hat and a starched white uniform. Once the doors are closed, the family members are ushered by the undertaker to a room where they eat, drink, and reminisce as Tomiko’s body is cremated. An hour and a half later, they reassemble in front of the oven, and the remains are presented to them on a stainless steel cart together with a ceramic urn. Now calm and collected, the mourners step forward two by two and, under the watchful eye and direction of the crematory’s uniformed staff member, lift the shrunken bones with large chopsticks and deposit them in the urn. The staff member
collects the remaining bones and ash and puts them in the urn, which is enclosed in a carefully wrapped box and handed to the family.

It is mid-afternoon when the family returns to the temple where the funeral took place. At the gate stand two members of the undertaker’s staff. They sprinkle the mourners with salt and offer them a ladle and a bucket of water so they may cleanse their hands as they enter the temple grounds. This is done to purify them of the death pollution (kegare) encountered at the crematory. Once inside, they take seats in the temple, this time facing a much more modest altar holding the box of remains. The priests chant once more, in a ceremony that had, for centuries, occurred seven days after the funeral to mark the first stage of the deceased’s passage into the afterlife. The seventh-day ceremony is still eponymous in some regions, actually occurring on the seventh day after the funeral, but in a world where time equals money and relatives are often far-flung, it is increasingly performed on the day of the funeral itself.

Several weeks later the urn will be placed in a family grave behind the temple, joining the remains of Tomiko’s husband and his parents. The grave is topped with a rectangular tombstone displaying the family name, standing in
a line of similar tombstones all covering their own concrete cubicles that hold the urns of other temple parishioners. To these graves family members come at appointed times: once in the spring and fall and once during the summer “ghost festival” (obon), when, it is said, the spirits of the deceased return to their families. Relatives also visit the graves at times determined by the individual deaths of those interred within them. It is customary to make visits to comfort the recently departed at forty-nine and then one hundred days after they have died. In fact, in much of Japan, it is at forty-nine days, the end of the Buddhist period of limbo between this life and the next, that the remains are placed in the grave, having been kept on an altar at home since the funeral. Rituals aimed at both comforting and honoring the dead occur at increasing intervals thereafter."

When asked whether she would regularly visit her mother in the years to come, Tomiko’s daughter replied with a teary-eyed smile, “Of course. Sometimes she’ll need a break from my father—and especially my grandmother.”

**PRESENTING THE PAST**

The funeral rites just described are representative of those held in hundreds of towns and cities throughout Japan on any given day. Coordinated by professional undertakers, most are officiated by Buddhist priests and most incorporate the offerings of money and incense that cast social relations between family members and attendees into sharp relief. Moreover, virtually all funerals end in cremation, with family members expected to take on the ritual work of placing the remains in an urn and interring them in a family grave. Each death is handled according to individual circumstances—including the social position of the deceased, local customs, and religious beliefs—but it is possible to speak of a standardized, Japanese “way of death,” a way that achieved its present form in the twentieth century.

This is not to say that key elements have not been long in the making. The practice with the longest pedigree is the use of water and/or salt to counter the dangers posed by death pollution. According to a Chinese document written in the third century, the inhabitants of Wa (the term then used to describe the Japanese islands) immersed themselves in water after each funeral as an act of purification. When Buddhism entered Japan several centuries later, it introduced a host of new rituals to cope with the danger of death. According to Buddhist priests, this danger confronted not only survivors but also the dead, who could (and probably would) pass into a hellish afterlife if not given proper care. Today’s funerals feature Buddhist rituals that were embraced by the
imperial court as early as the seventh century, and popularized among commoners in the centuries that followed, in order to guard against such a fate. These include, as we saw in the case of Tomiko, dressing the dead as a Buddhist pilgrim, devising a posthumous name, and offering incense.

Funerals have also long performed the function of displaying and negotiating social relations. From earliest times, in Japan as elsewhere, funerals have been conspicuous occasions to display wealth and status, to build or challenge communal solidarity, and to perpetuate lineages, biological and otherwise. Tomiko’s death activated a social network whose main nexus was the chief mourner, her daughter. Her students staffed the reception desk to the funeral, and her colleagues at the university where she teaches comprised the bulk of the guests.

The central role played by Tomiko’s daughter perpetuated tradition in one form even as it undermined it in another. Had this funeral occurred before the U.S. occupation of Japan (1945–1952), the role, indeed the duty, of chief mourner would almost certainly have fallen to her brother, who would have been mandated by law to inherit his family’s assets and don the mantle of “lineage head” (ienushi). Even at the end of the twentieth century, many Japanese continued to honor a ritual system favoring the eldest male, now under the aegis of custom instead of law. By assuming the position of chief mourner in place of her brother, Tomiko’s daughter broke with that system. Yet, on a deeper, structural level, Tomiko’s funeral continued the tradition of making the most socially powerful member of a mourning family—in this case, a daughter who was a well-respected professor at a prestigious university—the chief mourner. It was precisely because the longstanding social function of funerals was still intact in Japan at the end of the twentieth century that Tomiko’s daughter, not her son, assumed the most honored role at the funeral.

Just as the old persists within the new, the new frequently passes for the old, a phenomenon created through a process that historians now commonly refer to as the “invention of tradition.” Impressed by the antiquity of many of its ritual elements, Japanese accept as tradition a way of death relatively recent in origin. Central to this way is the practice of cremation, today the taken-for-granted endpoint of virtually every Japanese. Cremation has been practiced in some form throughout Japan’s recorded history, but this manner of dealing with the dead, now nearly universal, became dominant only in the twentieth century. In fact, for a short time in the 1870s, the government then ruling Japan outlawed the “barbaric” practice of cremation, a little-known piece of history that tends to surprise Japanese who learn of it. Although many communities embraced cremation only decades ago, burning the dead is now
accepted as a national tradition that reaches far back into the past. The same can be said of the shrine-style hearse, a prominent feature at many funerals, including Tomiko’s. Invented in the 1930s to replace funeral processions—made impractical by streetcar, then automobile, traffic—it was consciously clad in the material trappings of Buddhist and Shinto tradition. This legacy also inspired the design of increasingly elaborate altars that, together with the hearse, perpetuated the splendor formerly embodied by processions.

Thus, while elements of Japan’s modern way of death arose in a premodern past, others date to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, shaped by the same political, economic, and social forces that transformed Japan into an industrialized nation and a world power. Even those customs that passed relatively intact through the centuries, such as the offering of incense and the reading of Buddhist scriptures, were resituated and reconfigured by rapidly changing circumstances. Priests increasingly came to perform their time-honored function in settings controlled less by themselves than by commercial providers, who forced the clergy to make adjustments along the way.

Constituting the funeral rites of Japan, then, is an evolving negotiation of the new and the old, of traditions perpetuated and invented. Reaching as far back as the seventh century and as far forward as the 1990s, the following chapters trace this dynamic process over the sweep of Japanese history. While touching on both the recent and the distant past, they focus especially on the imperial period (1868–1945), when Japan underwent its rapid transformation into a global power. Initiated by the Meiji Restoration and terminated by Japan’s defeat in World War II, these turbulent decades witnessed change on an unprecedented scale, and this was as true for the handling of death as for the conduct of daily life. As a confederated hierarchy of samurai domains metamorphosed into a constitutional state and an agricultural economy turned into an industrialized one, various groups pursuing differing and often conflicting aims—including Buddhist priests, Shinto nativists, journalists, intellectuals, bureaucrats, businessmen, and, of course, mourning families—struggled to find places for the dead, and the past, in a world continually on the move.

The conflicts and compromises that made up this struggle not only generated a national way of death, one that reached its maturity among the urban middle class by the 1930s and became increasingly popular in the decades that followed, they also contributed to a wider negotiation of the shifting boundaries between private and public, native and foreign, civilized and barbaric, religious and secular, local and national, superstitious and rational, traditional and fashionable. Examining how these categories were generated, separated,
and joined through the changing practices surrounding death helps us to make
sense of the “human shuffling of social feet” that constituted modern Japan.
The result is a tale of Japanese death rites that is, at the same time, a story of
Japanese modernity.

MODERN DEATH IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

From the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, bureaucratic and com-
mercial forces isolated the consequences of death from the business of every-
day life. In industrializing nations around the globe, including Japan, dead
city-dwellers were exiled to suburban cemeteries and outward displays of
mourning were abolished so as not to disrupt the work of creating a future
without delay. The modern restructuring of age-old death practices provoked
a nostalgic response that was also global in scope: from the late nineteenth
century, folklorists in various countries scrambled to record customs on the
brink of extinction, producing “discourses of the vanishing” that offered con-
tinuity in prose if not in practice.

Historians were slower to turn their attention to death, but they made up
for lost time beginning in the 1960s. Two main factors explain the timing of
this trend. One is the boom in social history, whose practitioners rejected polit-
cal narratives of the elite in order to analyze changes to the everyday lives of
ordinary people. Studying death was an attractive way to study those lives for
the simple fact that death strikes everyone. A mid-century upsurge in studies
about contemporary death also motivated historical research on the subject.
Especially influential for historians was the work of British sociologist Geof-
frey Gorer, who in 1955 coined the provocative phrase “the pornography of
death” to describe the marginalization not only of funerary rites but also the
very subject of mortality among the English middle and upper classes, arguing
that it had replaced sex as a social taboo. No sooner had Gorer proclaimed
this taboo, however, than a succession of works concerning death began to fill
bookshelves in England and elsewhere. In fact, international criticism of the
funeral business reached a high water mark with the 1963 publication of Jess-
ica Mitford’s scathing and bestselling exposé of the U.S. death industry, The
American Way of Death. In Japan too, intellectuals loudly advocated stream-
lined funerals shorn of “useless” excess. Five years after Mitford’s book was
released, for example, a group of Japanese doctors published a book bluntly
called Sōshiki muyōron (On the uselessness of funerals).

Countering the utilitarian reformers, pioneers of the history of death, like
the folklorists, bemoaned the corrosive effects of modernity, writing works
that adhered to a story line of decline and loss. A prominent example is Haga Noboru’s *Sōgi no rekishi* (1970), which roundly condemns the rationalization and secularization of modern times for perverting what were supposedly heartfelt funeral rites of the past into empty spectacle. Haga exhorted his contemporaries to appreciate “the goodness of Japan that has been lost amid rapid [economic] growth,” writing that what motivated him to study the historical origins of mortuary customs was to help his fellow Japanese discern “what should be preserved, what should be passed on...” The nostalgic tone in Haga’s scholarship also pervades the work of French historian Philippe Ariès, who ambitiously charted changing attitudes toward death in Western Europe over the course of a thousand years. In the final chapter to *L’Homme devant la mort*, this scholar of the *longue durée* highlighted the recent decline of mourning practices, such as the donning of “crepe and voluminous black veils,” that had been prevalent during his youth. Agreeing with and building upon Gorer’s thesis, Ariès introduced the expression “*la mort inversée,*” or “death reversed,” to describe what he perceived to be a modern tendency to banish death from mind as well as sight. Histories declaring death to be a fundamental “taboo” of modern life continued to appear over the next couple of decades. A notable Japanese example is Inoue Shōichi’s *Reikyūsha no tanjō,* which invokes Gorer’s concept of “the pornography of death” (via Ariès) to explain the replacement of funeral processions with motorized hearses in early- to mid-twentieth-century Japan.

Since the 1990s a growing number of works have challenged the “denial of death” thesis, which had proved to be of limited utility to those seeking to understand not only the displacement but also the replacement of death in the modern world. Writing about the history of cremation in America, for example, Stephen Prothero stresses that “death and its processes still demand ritual and stimulate meaning-making,” despite the fact that “many steps in the American way of death have been taken out of the hands of family members and clerics...” Recent ethnographers of Japanese funerals also emphasize the positive creation of new approaches to death, providing a counterbalance to tales of decay and loss. They do not deny that certain facets of death have been displaced from day-to-day living. Yet their work demonstrates that this phenomenon must be understood within a larger context, one in which people both create and perpetuate death practices as actively as they discard them. If this were not the case, funeral providers would have closed shop long ago.

Paying attention to the creative and not merely the destructive interaction between locally embedded practices and the standardizing forces of modernity
helps us to avoid the common trap of reducing “modernization” to “West-ernization.” This is not to say that the latter did not play a role in the former. For example, during the reign of the Meiji emperor (1868–1912), the Japanese upper class adopted the European and American practice of publishing obituaries with black borders; and in planning the state funeral of Iwakura Tomomi (1825–1883), government officials consulted English military procedure to determine the appropriate number of gun salvos. The spread of cremation, however, took on a very different meaning in Japan than it did in England. Cremation became the dominant method of disposing bodies in both countries over the course of the twentieth century. Yet in England today it is common to scatter the ashes, while in Japan cremation is a step to ensuring permanent resting places for the deceased in family graves.

It is also important to keep in mind that Japan does not stand in binary opposition to a unified “West” represented by England or by any other “Western” country. Rates of cremation versus full-body burial differ dramatically from one European country to another. And when it comes to the handling of remains, it is America—frequently portrayed as the modern nation par excellence—that is the exception rather than the rule among its (post-) industrialized peers. Ariès was flummoxed that America, “the most fertile center of modernity,” had devised “ridiculous” rites centered on the embalming of the corpse, a practice popularized during the Civil War to transport dead soldiers to their families. At the start of the twenty-first century, the American funeral industry continues to generate profits based on the nineteenth-century technology of embalming, radically distinguishing itself from its counterparts in both the “East” and the “West.”

Modern societies, then, do not deny death so much as remake it, and how they do this is determined by a complex mix of global forces and parochial aims. Simply put, wherever it takes place, modern death has a history. This book tells how it happened in Japan.

POLITICS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A person dies not in the singular, but in the plural. When Tomiko passed away at the age of ninety, she was at once a mother, a neighbor, a parishioner, and a friend. She was also many things to the different people who met her only in death or at the verge of it. To her doctors and nurses—who, according to convention, acknowledged their brief connection to Tomiko by making incense offerings in front of her dead body before it left the hospital—she was, first and
foremost, a patient. To the students of the chief mourner she mattered insofar as she was the mother of a professor who expected their logistical support. To the undertaker she was the centerpiece of a funeral that contributed, along with other such ceremonies, to the livelihood of herself and her staff. Finally, to unseen bureaucrats who never came in direct contact with Tomiko, alive or dead, she was a statistic to be counted and a corpse to be regulated.

The practices surrounding Tomiko’s death reflected her multiple identities and the interests attached to them, both differentiating and uniting those who had known her in life while satisfying the impersonal demands of a capitalist economy and centralized state. The funeral rites put attendees into ritual motion according to conventions—such as the offering of sums of money determined by one’s relationship to the mourning family, or the exclusion of nonfamily members from the crematory—that made clear each person’s place in a hierarchy governed, for the most part, by social proximity to the deceased or the chief mourner. At the same time, the rituals provided an income to the undertaker and her staff, and conformed to bureaucratic rules designed to keep track of the population and guard public health against the improper disposal of corpses. What resulted was not only the public acknowledgement of an individual death but also a display of social, commercial, and legal relations between the living and the dead and among the living themselves, whether they attended the funeral or not.

The following chapters show how these relations and the powers they entail changed with and through death rites over time, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This dynamic process, in which the ritual and the social mutually constructed each other, was driven by a variety of interests—ranging from the saving of souls to the building of a nation-state—that could be complementary but were often in conflict. Writing at the close of the Meiji period, Hozumi Nobushige, the most influential architect of the imperial civil code (1898) and one of the most prominent advocates of primogeniture and ancestor reverence, made the following observation about the “blending of the Past and Present” in ceremonies designed to honor and comfort the dead:

To the Western eyes, the sight must appear strange of a Japanese family inviting their relatives, through the medium of telephone, to take part in a ceremony of this nature. Equally incongruous may seem the spectacle of members of a family, some of them attired in European and others in native costume, assembled in a room lighted by electricity, making offerings and obeisances before the memorial tablet of their ancestor. The
This passage depicts modernity, the “Present” with a capital “P,” in the form of material goods (the telephone, electric light, and European clothing) that appear to have been smoothly, albeit curiously, integrated into existing practice without substantively altering it. In reality, the combining of past and present was far more troubled, involving open clashes between parochial interest groups advancing distinct agendas. Buddhist clerics attempting to perpetuate their beliefs and practices and Shinto competitors trying to popularize “purely” native forms of worship fought bitterly over ritual turf. Bureaucrats trying to standardize Japan by using Euro-American methods collided head-on with the defenders of local tradition. Families competing to outdo each other in mortuary splendor, together with the burgeoning funeral industry that serviced them, faced attacks from advocates of thrift both in the government and outside it.

The history of Japanese death rites is composed of the interactions between these different groups, each of which made particular claims on the dead and gained or lost influence at particular junctures in time. Complicating the picture is the fact that these groups changed in composition and character as they pursued their different agendas, making the study of what changed in Japanese death rites inseparable from a study of the transformations undergone by those who made change happen. This twofold analysis provides the structural framework for the following chapters, each of which shows how death, the most intimate of events with the most public of consequences, was implicated in a reordering of relationships within and between the familial, communal, official, and civil spheres.

Providing a measure of stability throughout this historical process were the aims and expectations of mourning families and Buddhist priests, but they and the social networks in which they lived and died changed significantly over the centuries. During the Tokugawa period (1600–1868), a combination of government policy and social striving increasingly grouped extended families into corporate patrilines (*ie*), lineages determined mainly by biological descent from a common ancestor although often sustained through the practice of adoption. From the mid-seventeenth century, the ruling shogunate required these lineages to register their affiliations with Buddhist temples, legally binding them to priests who were themselves regulated by a system of privileges and punishments specific to their clerical status. This does not
mean that priests and parishioners were placed into a simple relationship of dominators and dominated, for it was partly through their voluntary and lavish spending on Buddhist funerary ritual that patrilines vied for position in their communities—to the chagrin of Tokugawa officials who encouraged frugality and passed sumptuary laws—generally with limited success.

Patrilineal identity remained strong in the post-Tokugawa world, and was, in fact, reinforced by the Meiji civil code designed by Hozumi and other conservatives. Yet its demographic foundations perceptibly shifted as increasing numbers of Japanese established nuclear families in urban areas far from their villages of origin. For generations Buddhist temples had maintained a hold on the lineages affiliated with them. Yet after the early years of the Meiji period, when the imperial government instituted a number of measures that firmly separated Buddhism from the state—such as abolishing the requirement that Japanese register with Buddhist sects, seizing vast tracts of land donated to temples by the shogunate and daimyo (daimyō, domain lords), and demoting clerics to the status of commoners—their influence derived more from custom than from law. Given a choice not available under the shogunate, many of the freshly minted urbanites of imperial Japan did elect to maintain ties with ancestral temples in the countryside, sending cremated remains to be interred in the graveyards attached to them even if this attempt to maintain tradition on one level required a large number of Japanese to part with it on another, since most came from areas where full-body burial, not cremation, was the norm. Other Japanese who had moved from the countryside to the city chose, in contrast, to bury their dead (cremated or not) near their new homes, a trend that generated parishioners for urban and suburban temples while draining them from rural ones. Finally, whether or not they chose to send the dead back to ancestral communities, Japanese transplanted to urban areas, and particularly those who joined the growing middle class, produced funerals that both reflected and created new social networks—formed in schools, workplaces, and other locations in the modern landscape—that quickly grew as dense as those that had been in the making for generations, eventually eclipsing and displacing them.

As families, communities, and the Buddhist clergy changed, new groups emerged on the ritual scene, making their own contributions to the management of death. Some did so directly and others indirectly, some to greater and others to lesser effect. The one with the most radical and active ritual agenda was composed of anti-Buddhist, pro-Shinto nativists (kokugakusha) who desired to “return” Japan to a mythical state in which the emperor, his subjects, and native deities (kami) harmoniously interacted via “purely” Japanese forms
of worship. Nativism arose in the eighteenth century and came into its own in the nineteenth, when its practitioners mined the earliest imperial histories (dating to the eighth century) in order to construct an indigenous alternative to the widely accepted systems of belief and ritual that had long combined worship of deities particular to Japan with devotion to buddhas venerated across Asia. The combinatory systems, which typically treated kami as the local manifestations of universal buddhas and were for the most part controlled by Buddhist temples, were unacceptable to the nativists, who worked hard at convincing fellow Japanese to embrace forms of Shinto ritual free of Buddhist taint. Although differing from one subset of nativists to another, these ritual formats were anchored by the imperial house, the ultimate this-worldly authority descended from, and in communication with, the otherworldly sun kami Amaterasu. Central to the nativist cause was the development of Shinto funerals: no easy task, since kami were thought to abhor the pollution generated by death. Moreover, because ancient Japanese texts provided only fragmentary evidence of pre-Buddhist death rituals, those seeking to invent a native funerary tradition drew upon, ironically, the Chinese teachings and protocol advocated by Confucian scholars, who themselves had long attacked the “unfilial” and “barbaric” practices of Buddhism, especially cremation.

Until the end of the Tokugawa period, campaigns against Buddhism, and against Buddhist death rites in particular, made little headway against a status quo enforced by the shogunate. So when the shogun’s government fell to the leaders of the Meiji Restoration, the promoters of Buddhist-free funerals eagerly seized the opportunity to match a political revolution with a ritual one. Nativists numbered among the decision-makers of a new state that declared itself hostile to Buddhism and quickly enunciated the principle of the “unity of rites and rule” (saisei itchi), a policy that put the imperial house at the ritual center of governance and established the ideological foundation for a system of Shinto ritual sponsored and controlled by the state. In the years following the Restoration, prominent nativists and their allies worked to rid state ceremony and, ultimately, the entire nation, of Buddhism, making the replacement of Buddhist death rites with Shinto ones a cornerstone of their efforts.

Consequently, nativists made history, but not as they had hoped. First, their anti-Buddhist campaign met strong resistance from the population at large, which was less interested in reviving a putative, pre-Buddhist antiquity that in ensuring the well-being of dead family members. To most Japanese, Buddhism was not a “foreign” teaching, but an integral part of their lives and deaths. Second, the Meiji state, particularly in its early years, was not a unitary entity; it was, rather, a collection of diverse officials pursuing goals frequently at odds
with one another. While nativists sought to cast the new Japan in a supposedly ancient mold, other officials focused first and foremost on revising the so-called “unequal treaties” that had been signed by the shogunate with the United States and Europe in the wake of Commodore Matthew Perry’s uninvited visit to Japan in 1853. To counter gunboat diplomacy meant building a “wealthy country, strong army” (fukoku kyōhei), to quote a popular slogan of the day. Bureaucrats in the Finance and Home ministries (Ōkurashō and Naimushō) accommodated the pro-Shinto, nativist agenda to the extent that it contributed to this task, which it did mainly by augmenting the charisma and authority of the emperor. When it did not, however, they forced it to take a back seat to the material aims of an industrializing nation-state. In dealing with the consequences of death, their overriding goal was not to promote Shinto belief and ritual. Instead, it was to keep the immediate reality of corpses from interfering with ambitious plans for the future.

This pragmatic approach towards death, more prophylactic than proactive, was starkly evident in the events leading up to and surrounding the Meiji state’s prohibition on cremation. Instituted in 1873, only to be repealed in 1875, the ban was justified by supporters as a way to protect public health from the baneful effects of crematory smoke while putting an end to what nativists and Confucian scholars had long reviled as an immoral Buddhist practice. The ban proved to be unpopular, however, just like the Shinto funerals that were being promoted by nativists and sympathetic officials. Buddhist priests, intellectuals, and journalists used petitions and newspapers to pressure the government to overturn the ban; they argued that rotting corpses were far more deleterious to people’s health than crematory smoke and that reducing bodies to bones and ash and placing them in family graves furthered the filial goal of keeping family members together after death. They were joined by pragmatic officials in the Meiji regime like Kanda Takahira (1830–1898), one of the originators of Japan’s modern land tax system and at the time of the ban the governor of a major prefecture. He and other modernizers recognized that full-body burial required more space than the interment of cremated remains, consuming land that could be put to economically productive use. They were also converted to the position that cremation protected public health more than damaged it, swayed, in part, by scientific studies coming out of Europe on the dangers posed by rotting bodies. The ban was therefore rescinded, its ironic legacy being a broad-based consensus among the official and civil elite that cremation was good for families and good for the nation.

In responding to the cremation ban, both those for and those against the policy incorporated the modern concern for hygiene into the pursuit of their
parochial aims. As a result, the new consensus in favor of cremation not only provided a starting point for growth in the cremation rate, eventually transforming what had once been a minority practice into a majority one, but also established that the protection of public health would be central to all future discussions of death and the disposal of human remains. It also contributed more broadly to the post-Restoration dialogue developing between officials (the *kan*) and self-appointed representatives of the “people” (the *min*). The latter consisted of prominent clerics, intellectuals, journalists, and other members of the literate public who increasingly voiced their opinions not only by submitting petitions directly to the government, a practice inherited from the Tokugawa period, but also through newspapers founded after the Restoration. The fight over cremation was, in fact, one of the earliest debates chronicled by Japan’s burgeoning national press, “creating a public” in the process.

Notably, this debate and others did not weaken state control so much as strengthen it. Continuing a Tokugawa tradition of active but loyal opposition, the early Meiji elite tried as much as possible to change the hearts and minds of officials, not to oust them from power or undermine their authority. Although the cremation ban was a policy failure, the public appeals of its detractors reinforced acceptance of the fledgling imperial state as a legitimate arbiter for competing interests. Intent on working through official channels, cremation boosters ultimately succeeded in authorizing their agenda through the conversion of a hostile bureaucracy, thereby also fostering acceptance of the Meiji government as a forum for social change. The more fights that occurred in this forum, including the one over cremation, the more indispensable the forum became, setting the parameters for building the nation as a whole.

After the fiasco of the cremation ban, the Home Ministry led the effort to disentangle the practical operations of nation-building as much as possible from the ritual agenda of the nativists. Choosing to secularize daily governance, officials from the late 1870s onward regulated cremation and burial almost solely in line with pragmatic aims such as efficient land use and the protection of public health, and they did so with approval from a civil sphere that, for the most part, considered such aims to be positive manifestations of “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*), a catchphrase for the Euro-American technologies, institutions, and practices that were rapidly remaking Japan.

This did not mean that government policy no longer clashed with popular opinion and practice. Bureaucrats and “enlightened” supporters encountered strong resistance to their modernizing, homogenizing policies when they undermined local practices that had been honored for generations. It was par-
particularly difficult for the new order to accommodate the self-determination of communities whose burial customs were tied to deeply entrenched sectarian identities, most of them Buddhist in one form or another. The Meiji state recognized the autonomy of religious belief, explicitly conferring this liberty in its constitution (promulgated in 1889), but officials understood this concept, imported only recently from Christian nations, not to grant “freedom of religion” so much as to relegate people’s faith to a private realm separate from, and, more importantly, subordinate to, a public interest determined by bureaucratic reason. To illustrate: municipal officials in Tokyo and the state officials who backed them saw it as within their rights to seize control of graveyards in the capital, declaring that they belonged to the city, not to the temples and their parishioners who had traditionally controlled them. Their purpose was not to interfere in the ritual life of Tokyoties, though that is, in the end, what happened. Instead, it was to ease the path of urban development. To defend their autonomy against encroachment by the state, the temple communities in Tokyo and communities across the nation invoked their religious liberty, although usually with the understanding that this liberty was a communal one conferred by tradition, not a personal one bestowed by nature. Because our ancestors did it this way, we need to do it too: that was the gist of their argument.

This line of reasoning gained increasing respect and force from the late 1880s and especially into the 1890s, when there developed a conservative backlash among officials and the wider public against the sweeping pace of change in the preceding decades. The example was set on high. In 1890 advisors to the emperor drafted the widely disseminated Imperial Rescript on Education, which enjoined his subjects to “render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers,” a sentiment also enshrined eight years later in the patrilineal civil code. The positive reappraisal of tradition was also reflected in the government’s approach to death rituals. Some bureaucrats, such as those in Tokyo, did not hesitate to meddle directly in the burial customs of the “people,” but others defended communal traditions, and not so much for their content as for their status as traditions.

The desire to preserve notwithstanding, after Japan’s entrance into the twentieth century, new developments advocated by no one in particular forced changes that were as influential as they were unplanned. A major case in point is the traffic jam, the unwelcome result of rapid urbanization combined with the industrialization of transport. Nobody asked for it, but this unwanted child of the modern world did more to cause mourning families in urban areas to abandon mobile funeral processions in favor of geographically fixed funeral
ceremonies than any other factor, permanently changing the character of mortuary rites in metropolitan and, eventually, rural Japan.

There to facilitate and direct the change was a funeral industry that had been growing hand-in-hand with a largely urban, status-seeking middle class for several decades. Initially hired to outfit elaborate processions, undertakers adapted to the changing times by taking on ritual tasks once performed by relatives and neighbors. Transferring the splendor of defunct processions onto altars erected in homes and temples, undertakers not only built the ritual stage, but increasingly determined what was performed on it, putting them in an awkward yet lucrative partnership with Buddhist clerics.

None of this is to say that undertakers were merely heartless profiteers or that families were insincere in their mourning, as finger-wagging moralists claimed. The personal feelings that may or may not have been experienced in the context of particular death rites are, nevertheless, beyond the scope of this study. While acknowledging the power of emotion, it is important to clarify that a history of funerary practices and the public debates surrounding them entails questions, sources, and interpretations dramatically different from a history designed to analyze personal reactions to death, which are as numerous as the individuals who experience them. Although they intersect, “the history of dying, of death, of grief, of mourning, of bereavement, of funerals and of cemeteries are all distinct subjects, the relationship between which is at best complex and at worst obscure,” observes David Cannadine, who adds, “any attempt to trace the evolution over time of an emotion like grief, or even to generalize about such an emotion at a given time in a given society, is an extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible task.”

Private feelings do play a role in the pages ahead, but only insofar as they were transformed into public acts with public consequences.

“What to do with the dead?” In Imperial Japan, as elsewhere in the modernizing world, answering this perennial question meant continuing to rely on ancestral solutions. Even in times of turbulent change, as during the decades after the Meiji Restoration, few practices were as entrenched as those surrounding death. Funerals, burials, and other mortuary rites had developed over the previous centuries with the aim of building continuity in the face of loss. As Japanese coped with the economic, political, and social changes that radically remade their lives, they clung to the local customs and Buddhist rituals—such as sutra readings and incense offerings—that had, for generations, given meaning to death.

Yet death, it turned out, was not impervious to nationalism, capitalism, and
all the other “isms” that constituted and still constitute the shape-shifter we call modernity. As Japan changed, so did the handling of the inevitable. Cremation grew from a minority practice into a majority one; urban traffic drove funerals off public streets and into private spaces; commercial funeral providers took over tasks once performed by community and kin. As these and other changes created new contexts for old rituals, Japanese faced the problem of how to fit them all together. “What to do with the dead?” was thus a question tied to a broader predicament, one that haunts all societies committed to rapid change: “What to do with the past?” This puzzle is at the heart of the modern experience, and how Japanese tried to solve it through their dealings with the dead is, in the end, the subject of this book.