This book is a story of people producing a new mortuary rite, the scattering of ashes, in a society where a growing number of people find themselves unable to peacefully anticipate their eternal rest. In his study of maturity in Japan, *Long Engagements*, the anthropologist David Plath observed the transformation of the social framework of the life course in the era of mass longevity: “In post-industrial nations a new pattern of constraints and opportunities is shaping the entire course of life for persons as they go along enacting their allotted span of years” (1980, 3). Mass longevity has transformed not only people’s late adulthood but also their expectations of an afterlife, or post-death trajectory. Japan scholars have long noted that, in the Japanese social universe, death was not viewed as ending the course of a person’s development. After achieving the status of honorable elders, ideally the deceased in Japan were gradually transformed from the polluting dead into benevolent ancestors. Rather than seeing a death as the termination of a person’s social existence, it has long been seen as a transitional point, beyond which the deceased enters a new state of existence through the ritual efforts of those left behind. Despite adopting the biological perspective on death as the termination of an individual human being as a living organism, this perspective did not necessarily eliminate the cultural construction of death as a pathway to the next state of existence. This cultural definition of death as an entrance into ancestorhood persisted in postwar Japan, shaping the material and social realities of the living and the continued interdependence between the living and the dead.

Yet in Japan’s postindustrial society, patterns of social relations within families and communities, on which the deceased’s security rests, have changed greatly. The central questions asked in this study, therefore, are: What new constraints and opportunities have emerged to shape post-death
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trajectories in Japan’s postindustrial society, and what innovations have been made to the end-of-life rites to accommodate them? How have such innovations created a new death and a new beyond? Who are the main actors making these changes? Why are they making these changes? What are the implications of these changes for the society and for the actors and their loved ones? Highlighting the perspectives of aging persons who have adopted the practice of scattering ashes to ritualize their own deaths, this study explores the creation of this new memorial strategy in Japan, one that has developed since 1991 as a citizens’ movement based at the Grave-Free Promotion Society (GFPS) (Sōsō No Jiý O Susumeru Kai).

Incorporating Age in a Study of Death Rites and Social Change

Anthropological studies on death have moved from those emphasizing the ways in which death reflects or reproduces existing cultural values and social structures to those stressing the increasing ambiguities surrounding the boundaries of life and death, and the making of a new kind of death in a changing world.1 A classic study of death rites by Robert Hertz (1960 [1907]) examines death as a transformative process and identifies the functions of death rites. Death rites provide ways of dealing with the material remains of the dead, for example, through cremation or (re)burial (48). Death rites provide a way of socially dealing with the loss of a community member by reallocating the social role and rights. These rites often act to symbolically transform and reincorporate the dead into society with a new identity, for example, as an ancestor (48, 61). When considering the impact of death rites as rites of passage on individuals in a society, such rites are often thought to collectively inscribe on people the new identities allotted to them by society as they proceed along their life courses and to reincorporate them into society with newly assigned roles and identities (e.g., Turner 1966; Van Gennep 1960 [1909]). If so, the end-of-life rites are performed to give the deceased the identities imagined by society. Death rites in this context can be considered as opportunities for socializing society’s members, instilling in them relevant age norms, and (re)allocating age-specific roles, thereby leading to the reproduction of these norms and age structures, as people move from gendered age-statuses over their life courses (i.e., the unborn, infant, child, adult, elder, the deceased). In other words, rites of passage can be seen as opportunities for people to engage in both the collective construction of age norms and the reproduction of age relations among people of various ages in a given society.
More recent anthropological studies of death, however, consider the ways in which actors re-create death in times of change rather than view death as reflecting unchanging values and structures. In particular, the burgeoning anthropological literature on life and death examines blurred boundaries between the “beginnings and ends” of a human life course (see Kaufman and Morgan 2005). The adoption of life-prolonging devices and brain death at the end of life (e.g., Cassell et al. 2003; Kaufman 2000; Lock 2002; Namihira 1988; Nudeshima 1991; Ohnuki-Tierney et al. 1994; Papagaroufali 1999), in addition to the use of new reproductive technologies and the biomedicalization of birth (e.g., Ram and Jolly 1998; Rapp 1998; Van Hollen 2003), have all led to the reconfiguration of life and death. The first decade of the twenty-first century has seen an explosion of studies focusing on the new end-of-life options and attitudes, such as a hospice death and “death with dignity,” in a world where life-prolonging practices are routinized (e.g., Cassell 2005; Good et al. 2004; Johnson et al. 2000; Kaufman 2005; Long 2005; Russ 2005; Seymour 2001).

While the dying in Japan are facing an increased number of end-of-life options and new definitions of life and death at the end of their lives, the deceased-to-be in Japan have also witnessed a dramatic increase in post-death ritual options to memorialize themselves. In particular, there are now many alternatives to the typical Buddhist funeral and veneration of ancestors at a family grave. The scattering of ashes is one such option. GFPS members have their ashes scattered, rather than having them interred and, ideally, venerated in perpetuity at a family grave. Anthropologists have noted that death rites are used to transform the relationship between the living and the dead (e.g., Battaglia 1990; Conklin 2001, xxi; Heilman 2001, 120). Since death rites as rites of passage involve collective representations of age norms and relations, the modification or the creation of a death rite involves changes not only in people’s perceptions of death and the dead but also in the age relations between the dead and the living.2 Considering this, one might ask, in what ways are GFPS members attempting to change their own deaths and their future relations with their survivors by adopting the scattering of ashes? In other words, in what ways are the relationships between the living and the dead being modified by the deceased-to-be when they choose a new mortuary practice? Rather than seeing new memorial rites as the static reflections of existing cultural norms and structures, this study explores ash scatterers’ memorial choice as a creative reshaping of their death and post-death trajectory and a restructuring of their relations with younger generations in Japan’s postindustrial society.
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Although a number of studies describing general trends regarding death ideologies and practices over time or the major characteristics of mortuary practices in a modern society have deepened our understanding of death and social change (e.g., Ariès 1974, 1981; Elias 1985; Gorer 1955; Kellehear 2007; Walter 1994), there is ample room for further investigation into the ways in which people of various ages experience such changes and why certain groups of people participate in the new practices. Focusing on society as a unit of analysis is a limiting factor in studies focusing on trends in death practices. As a result, these studies do not necessarily explain why some people but not others are choosing new mortuary practices (see Walter 1994, 49, for “ideal types” of death and their purpose in analysis), though some scholars attribute the uneven penetration of new death practices to differences in class and gender (e.g., Seale 1998; Walter 1994). Furthermore, the rise of new mortuary practices, even if practiced by only a minority, is sometimes taken as evidence of the future direction of change.

To further refine the analysis of change in death practices and examine the nature of change experienced by individuals positioned differently in their social universe, this ethnographic study employs cohort analysis, or the examination of particular cohorts associated with the rise and spread of new death practices in contemporary Japan. Cohort is often used as an objective analytical concept defined by the analyst (Keith and Kertzer 1984, 31), but it can also be used as an *emic* (insider’s) concept referring to a culturally meaningful group of people born during a certain period and sharing a certain historical incident in their lifetime or a particular condition in a society. In this study, following Itō (1994) and Ochiai (2000a, 87–91), I lump together multiple cohorts born between 1925 and 1950 and label people belonging to this group as the transitional cohorts. Thus, I use cohort in an objective sense, in order to highlight the impact of demographic transition on people’s lifestyles. The transitional cohorts were born when Japan was transforming from a high-mortality-rate and high-birthrate to a low-mortality-rate and low-birthrate society. As a result, members of these cohorts tend to have many adult siblings.

A cohort’s collective exposure to changing social structures, access to resources, and experiences of certain historical events over time contextualize the elimination, modification, or preservation of existing norms and structures. Members of a cohort may “define new patterns of behavior, reshape social institutions, and alter attitudes and values” (Foner 1984, 208; also see Riley, Foner, and Riley 1999, 339–341). Such changes initiated by a cohort may lead to culture change or to the rise
of a new subculture as members of a cohort respond to the new patterns of constraints and opportunities in the changing world. As members of the transitional cohorts, the majority of my informants, despite the variations among them, faced a dramatic reduction of memorial-care resources to continue conventional ancestor veneration at a family grave. In this context, the rise of new mortuary practices can be seen as a new mortuary subculture created by the cohorts who experienced this reduction of resources. To understand the mortuary practice of ash scattering from the actor’s perspective, a cohort-specific understanding of the available options and their implications helps us refine our analysis (cf. Ahern 1973; Fortes 1961; Freedman 1979; Goody 1962; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; J. Watson 1988; R. Watson 1988). Understanding choice by using cohort analysis thus differs from analyzing a new choice by focusing solely on the larger social trend (e.g., old vs. new practice) or individual differences (e.g., conservative vs. progressive).

Nonetheless, a cohort should not be assumed to be homogeneous (e.g., Dannefer and Uhlenberg 1999, 311; Keith and Kertzer 1984, 33). Class, race, and gender all shape the experiences of a cohort and produce diversity within it. For example, not all Japanese people who belong to the zenkyōtō sedai (i.e., the generation when student uprisings were widespread) participated in the uprisings or adopted the same values and lifestyles as those who took an active part in the protests. Shared generational experiences eliminate neither individual differences nor gender-, class-, or ethnicity-based distinctions. That a person belongs to a transitional cohort does not mean that he or she chooses ash scattering. (See chapter 1 for a detailed description of memorial-care allocation and variations within the transitional cohorts.) The scattering of ashes is much more common in urban areas and among people who are not eldest sons (i.e., people who are expected to set up their own family graves—as opposed to eldest sons, who are expected to inherit existing graves). The choice to have one’s ashes scattered is mediated and patterned by the cultural framework of the generational contract (I will return to this framework later in this introduction).

Despite the existence of variations within a cohort, however, cohort analysis is useful not only in providing a picture of the changing patterns of constraints and opportunities that people experience over time from the perspectives of a cohort’s members, but also in allowing us to examine a choice at a particular point in the larger context of the whole life. What new subculture are the transitional cohorts creating with their participation in new memorial practices? Is this subculture consistent with or a departure
from the subcultures in which the cohorts previously engaged? Cohort analysis can be used to see if what is happening in the field of death rites is aligned with the long-term patterning of lifestyle options and choices. I will thus examine ritual as a lens through which a changing society is seen and acted upon by the transitional cohorts during their lifetimes (cf. Ohnuki-Tierney 1987; Schnell 1999).

Furthermore, because rites of passage such as death rites involve representations of the dead and their relationship to the living, this study will also explore aging urbanites’ re-casting their place in their imagined futures and their post-death relations with the younger generations. Conventionally speaking, as the younger generations are morally obliged to transform their family dead into benevolent ancestors through many years of material and social investment, the choice of a new mortuary practice that reduces the ceremonial caregiver’s burden transforms the balance of interdependence between generations. Seen in this light, this study of changes in mortuary practices is an exploration into the rise of a new subculture that is transforming generational relations. Considering that the main actors driving this change are aging urbanites in contemporary Japan, this study has implications for broadening our understanding of the development of what Morioka Kiyoshi calls a “new urban elder culture” (1994, 183–184). These urban elders, mostly retired salaried employees, are reported to be significantly different from the stereotypical elder, who values coresidence with children and participates in the community through an old-age club. They are seeking alternative lifestyles and new options in their late adulthood, for example, by exploring private retirement housing. Originally appearing in the 1970s, private retirement communities developed as a new option for those elders who did not have children or did not want to depend on them for live-in care in old age (Kinoshita and Kiefer 1992). The rapid growth of retirement and elder-care facilities in the last decade increased semi-independent seniors’ options, which were previously limited to living with children or in institutions. It is in the context of this new urban elder culture that the scattering of ashes gains significance as a new “lifestyle” choice (after death) among aging persons in today’s Japan. This study’s focus on actors’ perspectives, and on their age and place in society, thus makes a unique contribution to the study of changing death rites in Japan in the postwar period (cf. Fujii 1993; H. Inoue 2003; Iwata 2006; Kawano 2003; Kobayashi 1992; Kōmoto 2001; Makimura 1996; Mori 1993b, 2000; Morioka 1984; Nakamaki 1995, 1999; Nakasuji 2006; Rowe 2003, 2006; Shimane 2001; Smith 1974, 1999; Suzuki 1998, 2000; Taguchi 2003; Tsuji 2006; Uesugi 2001; van Bremen 1998; S. Yamada 2007) and beyond (e.g.,
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Understanding Older Adults’ Engagement in Their Death Rites

Breaking with the conventional analytical treatment of death as the end of a person’s existence, in analyzing the activities of the aged this study aims to integrate death as a culturally constructed transitional point in an aging person’s “life” course and reshapes the course of development as a culturally constructed pathway rather than one based mainly on biological understanding (i.e., beginning at conception or birth and ending at death). An aging person’s conceptualization of late adulthood is a matter for empirical investigation rather than something that should be assumed by the researcher (Kaufman 1986); a similar point can be made about an older person’s conceptualization of death. If death is not seen as simply an individual’s extinction, and aging as the road to that terminal point, the meanings of an older person’s engaging in his or her own death rite can vary.

Cross-cultural studies of aging have shown that the view of aging as an inevitable decline toward individual extinction is culturally constructed; narratives of aging and its experiences differ from culture to culture. The autonomous individual as the locus of decision-making, moral judgment, and rationality is highly valued in the United States, and there is a tendency to equate the essence of the self with one’s cognitive ability; in such a context, the loss of “self” due to Alzheimer’s disease is “seen as catastrophic” (Deal and Whitehouse 2000, 323). The independence of an autonomous individual is assumed to be normal in such narratives of the disease. Behind the stigmatization caused by Alzheimer’s disease is “the British and North American belief that the ideal, healthy self is an independent self that does not, and should not, require institutionalization, medical care, or other external support” (320). Among elderly Yolmo Buddhists, however, the “dissolution of self” ideally occurs before the biological death, as one prepares for death (Desjarlais 2003, 181). In India, too, late adulthood is culturally constructed; it is seen as a life phase in which older persons leave the center of household life and give up their economic and political power but achieve an elevated status, being served by the younger generation (Lamb 2000). The elderly strive to “loosen” their ties to others and to the world, for example, by freely moving about, going on pilgrimages, giving away possessions, and arguing or cursing (124–129). All of these acts are employed
Introduction to “shrink those personal extensions that were known as maya” (128), in preparation for death, often understood as a transitional point on the way to rebirth. The life course “may or may not be commonly viewed, evaluated, and planned for as a unit” (Keith 1980, 354; also see Obeyesekere 2002); its cultural specificity shapes the contents of people’s life experiences. Furthermore, in contrast to the Western perception of Alzheimer’s disease as the loss of self, in India aging is understood as part of a wider social change—the decline of a joint family (Cohen 1998). Like Cohen’s study of aging in India, both Lock’s study of menopause (1993) and Traphagan’s account of senility (2000) in Japan illustrate the moral element involved in aging as a process. Lock points out that Japanese women with moral fiber are thought to have an “easy ride” with their menopause. Rather than individual extinction, in Japan overdependence on children is much more dreaded by the aged (Traphagan 2000, 153–154; Deal and Whitehouse 2000, 330).

An uncritical acceptance of death as a person’s end can lead to the consideration of afterlife, death, and aging in fragmented ways, even though, from the perspective of an aging social actor, late adulthood, death, and what lies beyond are all connected. Yet, the biological view of death as the end of a human being as a living organism predominates in research on aging and the life course. For example, Matilda Riley (1979, 4) states, “Aging is a life-long process of growing up and growing old. It starts with birth (or with conception) and ends with death.” Aging as a natural, biologically determined process has been assumed in many developmental studies of age, whether aging is considered a period when “development” ends and a decline begins or one where “development” continues in some ways. In cohort analysis such an assumption remains in the context of each cohort, even though cohort analysis is seen to challenge the assumption by emphasizing differences in age trajectories across cohorts (Dannefer and Uhlenberg 1999, 312). The tendency to compartmentalize various developmental stages into narrow periods of specialization and to exclude post-death stages have resulted in theoretical discontinuities among various disciplinary approaches to the course and experiences of human life and beyond. Because a life-course approach proposes the analysis of the whole person rather than a narrow focusing on a fragmented part of a person (Levy and the Pavie Team 2005, 4), attention to the culturally specific “life” course, which may include a post-death stage, further contributes to the “wholeness” of our analysis.

By examining a certain life phase in relation to other phases, which may or may not be conceptualized as linear, we can further enrich our analysis of people’s life course. Though focused on earlier phases of life, Gottlieb’s
ethnographic study of Beng infants (2004) explores the interrelatedness of multiple “life” stages, or the impact of a pre-birth stage on early life phases. As reincarnated ancestors, infants are treated and thought to develop as such. Like Gottlieb’s study, the present study is an attempt to consider the interrelatedness of the two “life” phases—in this case, late adulthood and the phase beyond death.

To understand the meanings of death rites for older persons in Japan, the analysis of culturally specific ideas concerning the dead must go beyond individual beliefs—the presence of such beliefs and their impact on the well-being of older individuals. In daily life, the dead continue to exist socially and ritually. The family dead are commonly enshrined at a family altar and the dead receive regular offerings (e.g., Kawano 2005; Smith 1974). They are told the latest family news and thanked for ensuring survivors’ well-being. It is not unusual for survivors to offer a cigarette or the deceased’s favorite food on special ritual occasions. This social treatment of the dead in daily and ritual life may or may not reflect the survivors’ personal belief in supernatural beings or religion. The post-death stage in postindustrial Japan is often enacted regardless of the deceased’s or the survivors’ personal belief in religion or the afterlife, though post-death rites may turn into occasions for the religiously uncommitted to experience religiously significant thoughts and feelings (see Kawano 2005; Reader 1991). The practice of venerating the family dead encompasses a wide range of attitudes and feelings, from paying respect to the deceased and memorializing them to engaging in religious acts to ensure the deceased’s peaceful rest. Caring for the family dead in Japan, therefore, involves much more than an individual’s expression of his or her belief in religion or the afterlife. The dead in Japan require many years of care, typically for thirty-three or fifty years, through a series of post-death stages, and the establishment and/or maintenance of a permanent memorial site. The realities of ancestor veneration, which are not dependent upon the presence of personal religious belief in Japan, make a person’s post-death stages a social and economic concern for both the deceased-to-be and survivors. Because the transformation of the deceased into ancestors cannot occur without the efforts of the living (usually the married adult children of the deceased), a person’s biological and social death ends neither his or her existence nor the interdependence of the living and the dead. The impact of the deceased’s transformation through a series of post-death stages on their survivors in Japan has been acknowledged when examining the survivors’ process of “forgetting” the deceased and coming to terms with their kin’s deaths (e.g., Klass 1996; Plath 1964; cf. Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou,
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2005; Kübler-Ross 2003 [1969]). Yet, the fact that the dead continue to exist socially and ritually in Japan and require their descendants’ long-term material and social investment cannot be ignored when examining the experiences of the aged who are thinking about their personal deaths and what lies beyond. By choosing their memorial rites, the aged are influencing their present and future social relations, particularly those with their children. There is thus an advantage to examining the cultural specificity of a “life” course and the interrelatedness of its various phases when examining older persons’ engagement in their death rites.

Ceremonial Change and Generational Reciprocity in Japan’s Postindustrial Society

I contend that ash scattering with the GFPS is an attempt on the part of older persons to cope with postindustrial society, which is characterized by high-tech communication, a dominant service sector, increased mobility, and smaller families. With structural changes in society, patterns of dying and dealing with death change as well. Japan and other postindustrial societies share similarities across a number of changes in patterns of death and dying (Long 2005). For example, the causes of death in today’s Japan clearly reflect the postindustrial pattern of longer life expectancy, lower infant-mortality rates, and higher incidences of chronic degenerative rather than infectious diseases. Scholars have also pointed out that postindustrial societies have seen the development of new death ideologies: in particular, the ideology of choice encourages a person to construct his or her self-identity through choosing a way of dying (e.g., Long 2005). The Japan Society for Dying with Dignity (Nihon Songenshi Kyōkai), originally established in 1976, had some 120,000 members as of 2009 and encourages people to die a humane, “natural” death (songenshi) when terminally ill, though “death with dignity” in contemporary Japan often refers to “the withholding of aggressive therapies,” and should be distinguished from euthanasia (anrakushi) (Long 2005, 63). Structural transformations, however, do not occur in a cultural vacuum but rather are mediated by culturally and historically specific frameworks for constructing meaning and action. Furthermore, the ideology of choice, its implications, and its consequences in Japan are also culturally constructed. Thus, it is critical to consider changing death ideologies and practices by exploring the cultural and social contexts.

To examine actors’ understanding of their memorial choice, it is useful to examine their culturally constructed generational contract, which
is embedded in the social, political, and economic changes of the larger society (see chapter 1). The social contract stipulating generational interdependence and reciprocity is the basis not only for the family-based elder-care system (Hashimoto 1996) but also for the ritual care of the family dead in postwar Japan, which requires that living family members nourish the dead daily at a domestic altar and perform seasonal rites at a family grave to gradually transform them into benevolent ancestors. In exchange for this ritual labor, the living receive protection from their ancestors, and the elderly count on this system for their own future transformation into ancestors. Just as the elderly claim their dependence on younger generations by making elder care an obligation (Hashimoto 1996), the family dead demand ritual care by making it a moral obligation of descendants. Those who receive no veneration are fated to become pitiable homeless spirits, bereft of the taken-for-granted human and posthumous conditions of connections and reciprocity in Japanese society (Kawano 2003). That a person will be able to rest peacefully after death depends heavily upon this system of reciprocal ritual care. Yet, postindustrial society has been creating contradictions in the contract. Intergenerational reciprocity is not easily maintained, and an investment made by one generation may be seen as one that cannot be fully reciprocated later. Ash scattering is one response to such inconsistencies in the contract.

Societal change in the postindustrial era has had a serious impact upon the sense of security of both older persons and the dead. Central to a person’s posthumous security in postwar Japan has been the veneration of the family dead at a domestic altar and the establishment of a family grave. The latter has been the norm in many regions in postwar Japan. A family grave is an important place for “contact between the living and their ancestors, a receptacle for the spirits of the ancestors, a site for ritual offerings to the dead and a symbol of family continuity and belonging” (Reader 1991, 96). In a family grave, generations of the family dead’s remains are interred, and only one child in each generation, often the eldest son, is expected to inherit the right to use the grave. The succession of a family grave in Japan often presupposes the continuity of a family line, which easily evokes the rule of succession in the prewar stem-family system. The common practice is that each stem family establishes its own family grave. The maintenance of a family grave by generations of descendants is critical to the security of the family dead.

The story of Yamamori-san, a seventy-two-year-old woman with two children, illustrates how a person’s posthumous security is becoming increasingly uncertain. Her daughter is divorced, while her son is married;
however, neither has children. Yamamori-san’s husband is a third son and thus not in the position to inherit his parents’ grave in his hometown. He and his wife are expected to establish a new family grave for themselves and their descendants. Once established, the grave can be passed on to Yamamori-san’s son, yet there is no grandchild to care for the grave in the future. The declining birthrate, postponed marriages, and childlessness have diminished the pool of future family-grave caretakers. Many people in their late sixties and early seventies today, like Yamamori-san, have many siblings but few children since, by the late 1950s, the total fertility rate had decreased to an average of two children per woman (A. Katō 2006, 15). Their children have a higher chance of remaining permanently single or of having only one child, if any. Many members of the transitional cohorts, including my informants, are facing the culturally constructed necessity to invest in their memorial place even though they recognize the difficulty of maintaining it in the future and thus ensuring their peaceful afterlife.

Increased mobility makes caring for a family grave more difficult because, in addition to the annual fees to maintain a grave, depending on the regional and family customs “proper” care might require offerings at a grave and donations to the priest performing ancestral veneration rites on a monthly or seasonal basis (e.g., the New Year, the equinoxes, and the Festival of the Dead in summer). The maintenance of a grave also involves regular cleaning and weeding. Fewer descendants means an increased chance that both husband and wife will be expected to care for their natal-family grave because the eldest and only son married to the eldest and only daughter might inherit two family graves, increasing their ceremonial burden and creating a problem in a generational contract.

In addition to such strains between generations in a family, postindustrial society has caused ever-greater stress on the reciprocal relations among family, community, and religious institutions. In early postwar Japan, communities venerated the dead collectively, ritually sending their spirits to the otherworld (Suzuki 2000). Community members helped each other organize and perform death rites. It was not uncommon for community members to maintain religious federations (nenbutsu kō) whose purpose was to perform community rites and ensure the peaceful rest of the community dead in the otherworld. However, in postwar Japan, with increased mobility and the commercialization of death, communal rites were replaced by commercialized funeral ceremonies (see Suzuki 2000), weakening the reciprocal-care system for the community’s dead.

Similar changes have occurred in the family parishioner system, according to which individual families maintain long-term ties with religious insti-
tutions, most commonly Buddhist temples, to care for their ancestors by making financial contributions to the temple at funerals and ancestral rites. Because urbanization has seen some families relocate, while other families have no descendants, Buddhist temples have been pressured to seek more parishioners and perhaps even to seek one-time clients. People who have moved to urban areas and established their families do not always find new Buddhist temples with which they can affiliate. It is not uncommon for them to remain unconnected to religious institutions until a death occurs in their immediate family (Nelson 2008, 308). Funeral professionals take advantage of these opportunities by including Buddhist priests in their business network and introducing them to clients who lack local religious affiliations. In a tight-knit, residentially stable community, Buddhist priests at one temple perform rites for a family that has maintained its parishioner status for generations. In this system of mutuality, it is assumed that the temple will exist forever as a religious institution and that it takes charge of ancestors in a stem family that should also continue forever. The temple depends upon their parishioners financially when the need arises—for example, for renovating the temple or holding a special ritual. Absent a long-term reciprocal tie with parishioners, a priest will charge more for his regular ceremonial services, such as funerals and memorial rites. Weaker reciprocal ties between families and Buddhist institutions have led to the increasing commercialization of ritual services (Suzuki 2000, 172–174). This commercialization of ritual services invites criticism from users, who accuse the death industry and Buddhist priests of getting rich by overcharging for their services. In fact, informants often told me that they chose to have their ashes scattered partly because they did not want to make Buddhist priests richer by buying the right to use a grave at a temple. In this context, a Buddhist priest is not seen as someone who will ritually ensure the transformation of the family dead into benevolent ancestors but as someone who takes advantage of the family dead for financial gain.

In short, Japan’s postindustrial society has strained the generational contract, and reciprocal interdependence is now harder to maintain. Ash scattering is a way of modifying mortuary practices and reconstituting reciprocal relations between the living and the dead in symbolic, social, and material terms. Those who adopt new mortuary strategies reconfigure memorial rights and obligations and reformulate generational contracts by addressing the upset balance of “symbolic equity” (Hashimoto 1996) between generations from the perspectives of aging persons. This study will thus focus on older persons who rewrite generational contracts in one way or another. In other words, this book is not about whether younger people
are no longer filial and abandon family graves to lighten their obligation to care for the family dead.

**The Rise of New Ceremonial Strategies and Death Ideologies**

How do users of new alternatives to family graves modify the social contract of reciprocity between generations, and reciprocity among families, communities, and Buddhist institutions? Some alternatives modify the resource base that ensures a person’s posthumous security. In the case of graves with “permanent” ritual care (eitai kuyōbo), for example, often it is Buddhist institutions rather than families that ensure the provision of that care to the dead. In some systems, a user pays a one-time membership fee, and the head priest of the Buddhist institution performs the necessary memorial rites for the dead, usually until the thirty-third or fiftieth memorial anniversary. Though still rare, Shinto versions of these graves with permanent ritual care have also been established (Rowe 2006, 67–69). With the scattering of ashes, the dead return to nature. Though the scattering leaves room for descendants to continue their memorial activities to ensure the peaceful rest of the family dead (Kawano 2004), nature also plays its role in transforming the dead into a larger, benevolent force. Another major way of rewriting the memorial contract between generations is to make no or limited investment in fixed ceremonial assets that demand descendants’ care. With the scattering of ashes, no one acquires a fixed memorial site. Graves that come with permanent ritual care give people an option of buying an individual membership to a grave shared with non-kin (e.g., H. Inoue 2003; Kawano 2003; Rowe 2003). Furthermore, in some graves with permanent ritual care, family members obtain the right to use a separate space to inter the remains of an individual or couple for a limited period of time, whereas a family grave presupposes its existence as long as the family line continues.

New ideologies of death have emerged as well. The concepts of “dying in his or her own way” and choice have become more important in today’s Japan among the terminally ill (e.g., Long 2005). Similarly, the idea of deceased-centeredness is now evident in death ceremonies and the disposal of bodies. Today both funeral professionals and ordinary people talk about having mortuary ceremonies that recall the dead person’s individual characteristics, making these ceremonies occasions of central importance for the deceased (e.g., Suzuki 1998; S. Yamada 2007).

The importance of deceased-centeredness, however, is stressed not only among survivors but also among the living who conceive and plan...
their death rites. In the reciprocal system of ritual care, people were not required to think about what to do with their remains when they died. Disposal and care of the dead were the society’s and the survivors’ responsibility. One characteristic of postindustrial mortuary practices is a shift of perspective from the viewpoint of survivors to that of the deceased-to-be. With prolonged life expectancies and the decline of infectious diseases, death is now strongly associated with old age rather than with an event that might capriciously snatch a person’s life in his or her early years or middle age. A person, therefore, can make plans for his or her death because it is anticipated to occur after late adulthood. This reconfiguration of the life course is critical to understanding my informants, who routinely discuss their choice of an end-of-life ceremony and make a concrete plan. Celebrating “deceased-centeredness” is an attempt to seize control over the last phase of life (“life” after death), which is increasingly incorporated into “life”-course planning in postindustrial society.

Do Japanese patterns of developing new mortuary trends resemble those reported in other postindustrial societies? The major trends highlighted in previous studies of modern Western societies revolve around the loss of a community to collectively organize a death rite, the privatization of death, the social isolation of the bereaved, the state’s increased involvement in defining death, the adoption of a medical discourse, and the decline of religious forces defining and ritualizing death (e.g., Ariès 1974; Elias 1985; Gorer 1955, 1965; Hockey 1990; Howarth 1996; Kellehear 2007; Walter 1994). The rise of revivalism (see Walter 1994) has been noted in Anglophone societies as a response to the above developments that make death a taboo and leave the bereaved increasingly isolated. Revivalism encourages people to die in their own way, honoring the individualities of the dying and highlighting the importance of their personal choice. While the uneven diffusion of such revivalist scripts in a society has been acknowledged (Seale 1998; Walter 1994), the extent to which culture plays a role in the spread of such scripts in the disposal of the dead has not attracted as much attention until recently, though some scholars have considered issues of terminal care and organ transplantation (e.g., Lock 2002; Long 2005; Ohnuki-Tierney et al. 1994; also see Becker 1993).

According to Walter (1994, 185), revivalism is the logical conclusion of Western individualism, which enshrines the autonomous individual and the ideology of individual choice. Is this scheme applicable to Japan, a postindustrial society from which the tradition of celebrating the autonomous individual is absent? Rather than being conceptualized as an isolated, autonomous individual, the Japanese person is conceptualized as a human being in the
company of others. Although larger economic and political forces present in Anglophone societies also exist in Japan, the effects of personhood on revivalist scripts, both on their forms and on their consequences, cannot be underestimated. I intend to examine the Grave-Free Promotion Society’s mortuary practice and ideology as a culturally specific version of revivalism in a society where the relational concepts of a person predominate.\textsuperscript{13}

Before moving away from the above questions, it is useful to consider some key conceptions relevant to them and their relations with each other. These ideas, such as individual, family, and society, and autonomy, choice, and independence, are aligned differently with each other, depending on the cultural setting, and this makes a cross-cultural discussion of such terms difficult. To deal with this difficulty, let me first distinguish between the anthropological concept of agency and folk or scholarly theories about the individual and the group, as these theories are used when people act and interpret their own or others’ actions in a given cultural setting. Although “agency” is variously defined in anthropological theorizing (e.g., Ortner 1984), I define it here as an individual’s or group’s engagement in action, which is thought to accumulate over time and either reproduce or change the existing structures, rules, and norms. I see agency as a theoretical concept rooted in dualistic thinking about social continuity and change, though the importance given to the concept in the process of social reproduction and change varies according to the researcher’s theoretical orientation.

Theories about the individual and the group constitute a different level of analysis. In all societies both individual and group are recognized and have some importance in various contexts. Each society also has its own theories about the nature of the relationship between them. In some societies, an individual is seen as fragile and the group as easily threatening the individual’s healthy functioning (see Benjamin 1997), whether the group is conceptualized as society in general or as a specific group of people. An individual’s independence from the group must be carefully cultivated to produce a good, well-functioning human being. An individual human being must achieve independence and establish the core of himself or herself to stand up to the pressure of the group. Such an egocentric perspective on personhood contrasts with another view, in which an individual human being must be trained to recognize his or her interconnectedness to others. Japan is one society in which the latter theory of sociocentric personhood prevails (e.g., Bachnik 1994; Edwards 1989; Kondo 1990; Lebra 2004; Plath 1980; Rosenberger 1992; Smith 1983).

Agency on a theoretical level, therefore, exists regardless of a society’s theory about the individual and the group, and, as in all societies, there
are norms, rules, and structures in which people, as individuals or groups, participate in their daily lives. Yet the theories about the individual and the group produce differences in the meanings of an individual’s or a group’s action and its expected consequences in a local context of social interaction because theories of personhood are used when people act and interpret their own and others’ actions.

A common misunderstanding regarding a sociocentric theory of the individual and the group is that this theory presumes a lack of self or a weak self without individuality or autonomy. In the egocentric theory of the individual, encouraging interdependence and recognizing the ways in which others define an individual may seem to threaten the very core of what makes the individual himself or herself. Yet, in Japan, individual and society are considered mutually constitutive (Kawano 2005). Just as others define the person, so does the person define others. It is the mutual constitution of an individual and others that makes an individual a person in this cultural setting.

The above point brings me to reconsider the importance of “dependence,” which has been discussed by a number of Japan scholars (e.g., Borovoy 2005; DeVos 1973; Doi 1973; Kumagai 1981). In some contexts, “interdependence” rather than “dependence” is more useful in characterizing the sociocentric personhood pervasive in Japan (see Smith 1985). Interdependence presupposes reciprocity between an individual and others, and what is important in a Japanese theory of personhood is to achieve a good balance in the relationship between oneself and others. Conflicting demands from the two sides must be managed, and an individual must constantly reflect on and work to achieve the right balance.\(^1\) The theory of sociocentric personhood encourages a social actor to acknowledge contributions from others and to keep this two-way reciprocity and mutual constitution intact. Whatever action an individual pursues, he or she should consider others’ engagement in the current balance he or she is achieving. Both self-centeredness and overdependence constitute a violation of the equitable balance an individual must achieve. Self-centeredness, often seen as the tendency to consider only one’s own needs while neglecting those of others, is criticized because it denies the mutuality involved in interdependence. Meanwhile, overdependence also denies the reciprocity involved in interdependence.

Despite the existence of the widely recognized cultural acceptance of dependence in late adulthood, older individuals are often reported to fear becoming bedridden or *boke* (senile), commonly seen as conditions that overburden their family with care that cannot be reciprocated (e.g.,
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Traphagan 2000, 133–134, 153–154). Older persons’ visits to and prayers at pokkuri temples, where they pray for quick deaths without prolonged suffering, testify to their desire not to overburden caregivers (Wöss 1993, 194–195). Rather than expressions of despair, older persons’ visits to pokkuri temples should be seen as expressions of self-control and attempts to avoid overdependence. Even among frail older persons who are institutionalized, certain levels of self-reliance are valued and expressed by their active contribution to and participation in the life of the institution (Wu 2004, 86–87). Wu notes that “[Institutionalized persons’] fear of senility and hope of dying quickly without suffering chronic illnesses indicate that they want to be in control of themselves and not to be dependent on others” (2004, 87; also see Smith 1985, 45). Furthermore, residents of one retirement community embraced the ideal of not causing nuisance to others (Kinoshita and Kiefer 1992), thereby further illustrating that older adults value self-sufficiency. Therefore, older persons strive to counterbalance their dependence to some extent and to actively participate in achieving better levels of dependence. Such attitudes among older adults make us realize that the cultural acceptance of dependence in late adulthood should not be equated with the rejection of an individual’s self-reliance, self-sufficiency, or self-control. These values of self-reliance and self-sufficiency do not necessarily constitute the antithesis of culturally valued interdependence. More important, valuing self-reliance does not imply adopting a self-centered approach to life or abandoning the sociocentric theory of the individual and the group.

The ideology of individualism is further distinguished from individuality in this study (see Hendry 1992; Moeran 1984; cf. Rosenberger 2001). In the Western conception of individualism, an ideology sacralizing the autonomous individual and individualistic orientations toward life, autonomy, and choice are strongly linked to the individual’s rights and healthy functioning. In a society largely lacking such an ideology, people still recognize their individualities. Despite the fact that the idea of interdependence is important in Japan, an individual is seen as possessing various idiosyncratic characteristics, and his or her own sense of individuality is distinguishable from that of others (Smith 1983, 92). Therefore, there is a difference between emphasizing a person’s individuality and taking an individualistic approach to life by adopting a Western or other ideology of individualism. Being “selfish” (jibun katte) is yet another matter.

Postindustrial society has often been characterized by an increased emphasis on the reflexive fashioning of oneself through personal choices in the “contexts of action and the diversity of ‘authorities’” (Giddens 1991, 5).
For example, in Japan and other postindustrial societies, one can see the desire to express personal identity through the consumption of particular goods and services and the choice of a certain lifestyle. However, it is possible to express one’s personal identity without sacralizing the individual as the only locus of autonomy and choice. As Tsuji contends (2002, 191), the growing emphasis upon the individual in Japan does not necessarily indicate the waning significance of the collectivity. Yet, the expression of individualities is interpreted according to the society’s theory of the individual and the group. Ash scattering as a way of “dying in his or her own way” is an attempt to express the individuality of the deceased-to-be, which is in line with trends in other postindustrial societies. However, as readers will see, the act of “dying in his or her own way” is critiqued and interpreted differently in the Japanese context, where a sociocentric theory of the individual and the group applies.

In sum, the scattering of ashes with the GFPS highlights the growing importance of individuality, rather than individualism, and the deceased-to-be’s increased control in relation to, but not independent of, younger generations. The new mortuary choice is made by a person who is still primarily defined in terms of his or her social relations rather than by an “autonomous” individual.

Fieldwork

My initial plan was to study the impact of childlessness on ancestor-veneration rites and to explore the solutions created to cope with the declining fertility rate. Interment was the norm in postwar Japan, and ash scattering was still rare when I made plans for my fieldwork in 2001. Many organizations, both religious and secular, had started collective-interment systems for those without family, and ash scattering seemed to be monopolized by the Grave-Free Promotion Society. Because a visit to the family grave evokes the notion of the family values of good old Japan, it was not unusual for ash scatterers to face criticism. As I conducted my preliminary research on the GFPS, I discovered from their home page that it is a citizens’ movement run by volunteers only—including the president. This discovery intrigued me even more, since it gave me a very different picture of death and end-of-life ceremonies. Born in Tokyo, I was familiar with Japanese mortuary customs, and, in my experience, interment occurred more or less automatically, following the family “tradition.” Why do the GFPS members choose a mortuary practice so vastly different from interment? Why don’t people just leave everything to their families? What do they think about having no
monument or gravestone indicating the location of their remains? What do families do to memorialize the deceased? What does it mean to serve as a volunteer in an organization promoting ash scattering? And, above all, why do they have to promote ash scattering as a social movement? I conducted fieldwork to answer these questions.

My entry into the GFPS was painless. I met President Yasuda and told him that I was interested in observing and participating in the society’s activities while working as a volunteer and scholar. He was generous, allowing me to freely observe people and the society’s activities. Once President Yasuda and the executive board members had given me permission to study their organization, my association with the GFPS became official. Right after I received permission to study the society, I was introduced in their newsletter. This introduction was useful to me when I had to introduce myself to members of the GFPS whom I had never met. Whenever people visited the GFPS office, President Yasuda introduced me to them.

While my close association with the person in power opened doors in some situations, it probably limited my interaction in others. This is not an uncommon dilemma for anthropologists doing fieldwork, and there is no easy way out of it. A fieldworker never remains a neutral observer, whether he or she likes it or not. The researcher must be aware of the power relations in which he or she is placed during fieldwork.

Initially, my status as a professor at a university in the United States distanced me from my informants. The situation was different from my previous fieldwork, during which I was a graduate student. Students do not qualify as full-fledged adults in Japan, instead falling into the category of dependents. In contrast, a teacher is a person of authority, even though many scandals have somewhat damaged the image of teachers in recent years. My youth also gave me a lower status in relation to senior informants. However, professionally I held a high status in Japanese society, and people tended to use polite language when speaking to me. Because the Japanese language “places” a speaker in the social universe, one cannot utter a word without knowing who that speaker is in relation to his or her age and rank. Initially, some informants called me sensei, an honorific term reserved for schoolteachers, doctors, lawyers, and politicians. I insisted on being called Kawano-san, taking the generic, genderless ending used for most other staff members and volunteers. People quickly adopted Kawano-san. After all, for many informants, I was as young as their youngest children. Only a few long-term staff and volunteers used nicknames ending with -chan, a suffix signaling emotional proximity and informality. In Japanese companies, employees sometimes call a person by his or her title, such as manager or
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president, rather than by the family name with the generic suffix -san. At the GFPS, however, the president was the only person referred to by title.

President Yasuda was a journalist working for Japan’s major national newspaper, Asahi shimbun, and the occasional media coverage the organization had received since its formation in 1991 contributed to ash scattering’s growing social recognition. The majority of the members I interviewed told me that they first learned about the GFPS through an article in a national newspaper. Members of the GFPS, therefore, were used to seeing journalists at the society’s events and ceremonies. Members’ familiarity with the media partly contextualized my presence. In addition, the GFPS is a citizens’ movement that emphasizes the importance of spreading the society’s ideals, and this fact also shaped the ways in which people reacted to me. Members were usually willing to talk to me about ash-scattering ceremonies for their kin or about their ceremonial plans. On a number of occasions, I took notes with other journalists at a society’s event or ceremony, and several times I was mistaken for a journalist by GFPS members.

During my fieldwork, I volunteered at the GFPS’s Tokyo office, participating in the society’s special events (the annual business meeting, symposia, movie screenings, consultation sessions) and ash-scattering ceremonies held in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Along with other volunteers, I labeled and shipped the society’s newsletters, published four times a year. At the end of the year, I participated in the year-end cleaning at the Tokyo office. I was invited to the society’s midyear and year-end banquets for executive board members and volunteers. In addition, I visited the homes of some informants whom I came to know well and went out with some informants to see cherry blossoms and walk in Tokyo’s municipal parks. Occasionally, I accompanied staff members and volunteers for drinks after work. I participated in the society’s annual trip as well. In 2003 some members visited Sugadaira in central Japan, the site of the society’s forest for ash scattering. Originally, the society had planned to visit the Silk Road in 2003, but they postponed the trip because of the SARS epidemic and visited Sugadaira instead.

I conducted semistructured interviews with twenty members, and open-ended, casual interviews with seventy members. My semistructured interviews lasted between one and three hours. I asked interviewees to choose a place to meet, and some invited me to their homes, while others preferred to see me at a coffee shop. I did not use my tape recorder during participant observation, since it is intrusive. However, I took notes, reminding my informants that I was at the society to learn about their views and activities. I talked to a set of individuals (volunteers, staff members, and
ceremonial directors) on a number of occasions at the main office in Tokyo, during special events, and during and after ash-scattering ceremonies. Although the bulk of my data was obtained using qualitative methods, I also mailed questionnaires to persons whose kin’s ashes had been scattered by the GFPS. The 120 people were chosen, using systematic random sampling, from GFPS records of all the past ash-scattering ceremonies. I received 71 responses from the deceased’s kin regarding 76 deceased persons. In order to get the perspectives of both genders, and of persons ranging in age, having varied positions in the GFPS, and living in various places, I talked to office staff and also to ceremonial directors, executive board members, and general members, both those living in Tokyo and those in other regions of Japan. I participated in ash-scattering ceremonies and regional events hosted by the Sapporo, Sendai, Osaka, Nagoya, and Fukuoka offices, five of the society’s twelve branch offices.

An outline of this book will help further orient readers. By emphasizing the perspectives of the transitional cohorts, persons born between 1925 and 1950, chapter 1 briefly describes the patterns of social change in postwar Japan in which ceremonial change is embedded. Most participants in this study belong to these cohorts, which played major roles in the spread of new urban middle-class lifestyles and ideologies. In the realm of mortuary practices, the members of the transitional cohorts are the principal movers of new memorial strategies. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the “new patterns of constraints and opportunities” available to the transitional cohorts to contextualize my informants’ memorial strategy of ash scattering. Chapter 2 locates the GFPS movement in the Japanese history of mortuary practices and reviews the diverse mortuary practices available in today’s Japan in order to further contextualize the practice of ash scattering.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide ethnographic descriptions of the GFPS and its ash-scattering ceremonies. These chapters examine how GFPS volunteers and members produce these ceremonies, as these details of their practice are largely missing from the existing literature on the development of new mortuary practices. Using mainly the publications produced by the GFPS, the majority of the existing analyses are concerned with the GFPS’s ideology in an abstract sense, rather than its operation and adoption in a local context of ceremonial production. Chapter 3 examines the GFPS as a social organization, describing its day-to-day routines, history, people, and work.
Chapter 4 examines the usual sequence of ash-scattering ceremonies, their variations, and their meanings to their practitioners. This chapter illustrates how GFPS volunteers and members partially reconcile ash scattering with conventional mortuary practices and variously make sense of ash scattering, a seemingly radical departure from the normative practice of interment.

Chapter 5 shifts from the GFPS and its activities to consider the relationship between ash scattering and family relations. This chapter critically examines the historical-transition thesis, which is sometimes employed to argue that new mortuary practices emerged because the nuclear-family system has replaced the stem-family system and fostered mortuary practices more consistent with the new family system. The adoption of ash scattering by GFPS members suggests some reconstitution of stem-family formation rules in Japan’s postindustrial society.

The final chapter considers ash scattering in contemporary Japan as a culturally specific revivalist practice. This chapter illustrates that, although ash scatterers promote self-reliance and more control over their own mortuary practices, they do not always proclaim the rights of an isolated individual or adopt an egocentric theory of personhood.