

Introduction



ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH INITIATIVES FOR CREMATION, FUNERAL AND CEMETERY STUDIES

KASOUKEN

Chairman I T A R U T A K E D A

In certain densely populated areas of Japan, such as metropolitan Tokyo, the demand for crematory services is insufficient for the steadily increasing need. To the extent that, upon a person's death, reserving the cremation date and time becomes the priority issue. When compared with the past, the days between the death and cremation is getting longer. Limited space for expansion in urban areas prevents simple increase of existing cremation capacity.

In contrast, the number of deaths per annum is much smaller in sparsely populated areas. Such municipalities cannot have its crematorium situated too far away from the population it serves. There is no financial support from the government for maintaining crematoria. Thus municipalities struggle to finance building and maintaining a local crematorium. The function of the local crematorium requires it to remain open despite sporadic need. This extended downtime has a negative impact on crematorium workers' wages causing ongoing staff shortage.

Integration of public service facilities has a potential to improve finances. In the case of crematoria, serving a larger area may not be feasible, but the multi-purpose use of waiting area and ceremony hall could achieve the decrease of downtime and increase of income.

In Europe, it is not common for the funeral attendees to come to the crematorium. Having said that, in Belgium and in the Netherlands, you find crematoria that consist of a crematorium, a ceremony hall, a dining hall and/or cafeteria. All such efforts are aimed at providing better service, and creating a facility that accommodates a variety of needs which will

eventually lead to profit increase. Cafes at crematoria in St. Nicholas and Ronmel in Belgium are open to public. The crematorium in Tromso, Norway, is actively promoting the use of its funeral facility for weddings and concerts.

In Japan, many people have a strong antipathy to crematoria due to its close association with death. Therefore, the multi-purpose use of it will be met with resistance. Additionally, funerals require a solemn atmosphere. It will not be easy to accept non-funeral events taking place simultaneously. One solution to this problem might be to designate certain days of the week to cremation, and free other days to other uses. This will be one way to introduce consistent management and reduce downtime, leading to cost reduction.

The multi-purpose use of crematoria in Japan will require a thorough review of their conventional functions. The image of crematoria and existing funeral customs will need to be modified to accommodate different values people are putting on funerals today. We do see much less grand-scale corporate funerals. Small family funerals and direct cremation with no services are chosen more than ever before. Presence of religious leaders, notably Buddhist priests, is decreasing in funeral and memorial service scenes. Considering these changes, now is the time for Japan to move towards attaining a new style of crematoria management that suits our matured aging society.

English text by Yukiko Izumi

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