Greeting the Dead

Managing Solitary Existence in Japan

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Even Tokyo slows down during O-bon, the season of greeting and revisiting the dead. It is August 2013, and the day feels still as my friend Maia and I head to a cemetery at the edge of the city. She has asked me to accompany her, as the thought of going alone is unsettling. Once death and the dead were part of everyone’s everyday. People died at home, were buried in or close to rice fields outside, and became spirits enshrined in household altars that the living communed with on a daily basis. But now, and particularly in the cities, people rush about and concentrate their energies on other things. Less tethered to the land and to the ancestors buried there, Japanese have left death to the experts: funerary companies and the Buddhist priests at the temples where families, at least those that have them, keep their family plots. When someone dies, a family contracts with a funerary company to handle the body and services and contacts the priest at the Buddhist temple where they are parishioners to preside at the wake. The expense has become exorbitant, an average of $14,000 for the funeral alone.1 And for its handling of the dead—the only time or service for which many turn to religion at all during their lives—Buddhism becomes known as “the religion of death,” an unseemly association, tinged by the money that temples/priests earn in the process.

On this day the temple is quiet. We are the only visitors to the cemetery, and Maia finds the grave she is seeking with ease. As she anticipated, the plot is unkempt—the telltale sign of neglect by those family members who should be tending it (a wife and son, in this case). “Just as I suspected,” she says under her breath, as she greets the friend who is buried there: a former colleague with whom she ran a business for years. Clapping her hands and bowing her head, she quickly sets upon straight-
ening things up. She pulls weeds and pours water over the stones in front of the grave site. Speaking softly, she tells her friend about recent events at the business and how she’s been doing herself. The flowers she has brought are put in stone vases on the grave, and the incense and candles are lit in the box altar underneath. A few more weeds are pulled, and the stones in front of the grave are swept again. Finally, looking purposeful, Maia claps her hands, bows her head, and claps once more. I follow her lead, and then we walk off. The visit has been good, and Maia tells me she is happy she has come. But it’s not exactly her place to be tending to the grave, as the priest keeps telling her. Yet her friend’s wife and son don’t do their duty. And Maia bears her own guilt in not being more attentive to her friend when, after the Lehman Shock of 2008 almost wiped out their business, he fell into a deep depression. When he committed suicide, he was all alone. Maia was the one who discovered the body three days later.

The rate of suicide went up in 1998 during the “lost decade” of economic decline. It stayed at 32,000–33,000 deaths per year until 2012, when it started to slowly decline. Men are twice as likely as women to commit suicide, driven overwhelmingly by problems related to finances and work. Despite its prevalence, however, suicide is not something people easily discuss. It still carries a stigma—the reason, I assume, that Maia has shared the story of her friend’s suicide with very few people. But suicide is not the only form of socially troubling death these days. Another is the phenomenon much in the news lately of what is called lonely or solitary death (kodokushi, koritsushi)—persons who die alone and whose bodies are discovered days or weeks after the fact. As reported by Japan’s national broadcasting system in its January 2010 television special on Japan’s “relationless society” (muen shakai), there were 33,000 such deaths in 2009—a number eerily consistent with that of suicide. When such bodies go unclaimed by their families, an increasingly common circumstance, the remains get sent to Buddhist temples, where they are placed in communal plots for the socially disconnected (muenbotoke). A sign of abandonment and eternal solitude, this is an unenviable state—becoming a relationless Buddha (or soul).

Leaving the cemetery, we see the plot assigned the displaced dead. In this corner of the graveyard, labeled muenhaka, the grass is overgrown, and there are no offerings of any kind. Most cemeteries have these plots, and, as I was told earlier in the summer when headed to check one out in my neighborhood, they are easy to find. “Just look for where things are a mess.” Of course. Muen means lacking (mu) connection (en): having no one to tend to one’s grave. But despite her own efforts to tidy her friend’s grave and tend to his soul, his likely fate is to become a muenbotoke as well. As the priest tells her, it is up to the man’s son to do the memorial rites (kuyō) and pay the annual maintenance fees at the temple. Because the
son fails to do so, the father will soon become an abandoned soul. This means that his remains will eventually be moved from the family grave where he is marked by name and Buddhist name on a mortuary tablet to the grave for the disconnected, where his ashes will mingle with others and his identity will become both collective and unknown.

Just as she couldn’t keep her friend tethered to life, Maia can’t save him from abandonment in death, a fate that, as a single woman without children, could befall her as well. But whose responsibility is it to keep someone from dying or to memorialize them after death? This is an issue troubling many today at a time when Japanese are increasingly living and dying alone, and progressively dislodged from those ties—of family, work, locale—once expected to perform caregiving to both the living and the dead. One-third of all Japanese now live alone, one-fourth of the population is aged sixty-five and above (only 15 percent of whom live with a child), and the rates of both marriage and birth are declining. All the while, the rate of those dying annually has reached a historical high (making Japan a “mass death society”); the ranks of those irregularly employed have risen, which correlates with social isolation—men with regular jobs are twice as likely to marry as un(der)employed men; and the number of solitary nonemployed persons (SNEP) is rapidly on the rise. “Single-fication,” as the sociologist Yamada Masahiro calls it, is the new social fact of living and dying in twenty-first-century Japan. Reading this dystopically, Yamada sees in it a state of decaying sociality. Without recognition from others, or a set of relations to provide help and care in times of need, people are tasked with the self-responsibility (jiko sekinin) of managing their own existence. “Refugees” is what Yamada labels such isolates, bereft, he assumes, of family, society, and home.

But not everyone reacts to the new trend in single-fication with such dismay, finding in it new practices and modes of being with/out others that imply less the refugeeization of humanity than new possibilities for constituting social existence. Feminists such as Ueno Chizuko and Inoue Haruyo, for example, advocate “flexible” relations and services versus kin ties in managing end-of-life and mortuary arrangements, what Inoue calls turning to “midwives for death”: the birthing of a new way of being at the time—and through the crucible—of death.

This is the subject of my essay: how the ecology of attachment to others is rapidly changing in Japan, affecting and being affected by matters pertaining to death—both those involving mortuary arrangements increasingly made by the individual herself and those involving the risks posed by dying in/by solitude as in suicide or lonely death. Relational place is key here, for how one is placed vis-à-vis others has been critical for marking and grieving the dead. But just as the place of belonging is changing with the rise of single-fication, so is the place of the dead in the
face of the shrinking role played by family and the family grave. Whether, for whom, and under what conditions these trends spell the emptying out of sociality (muen shakai) or, by contrast, new possibilities for arranging life and death with/out others are the questions I pursue. Looking at three different horizons aligned with different factors and characters in Japan’s changing ecology of attachment and death, I consider both risks and opportunities in the shifts of relationality—shifts I see as revolving around place. What I argue in the end is that the social, particularly as normatively defined in the postwar era, is indeed undergoing transformation in twenty-first-century Japan. But it is not ending as much as morphing into something else: a sociality less dictated by durable ties of kinship and work in which new arrangements for belonging and new ways of being—both in and beyond mortality—is beginning to emerge. This article aims to track this emergent sociality in a state of becoming around matters of death.

One's Place in Death

One evening in August 2013 I arrange to meet two friends, middle-aged Japanese women, at a bar. One has just come from visiting the graves of an aunt and uncle buried in a Buddhist temple nearby. We are in Shinjuku, a high-rise district in Tokyo, and the woman is matter-of-fact when explaining how her relatives are buried. Because both were single, their remains could not be interred in a family plot where children perform the ritual of memorial. So they arranged instead for a new practice, started in the late 1980s but now spreading rapidly across Japan, of eitaikuyō or eternal memorial where ashes are interred in a collective room and temple officiants rather than family perform kuyō (memorial).

When I visit this temple myself the following summer, I am told that there are two kinds of relationship one can have with the temple and two different forms of burial. One is to be a parishioner (entailing a long-term and more costly commitment) and to be buried in a plot held by the family. The other is to become a member of the Relationship Association (En no kai), which doesn’t require joining the temple or even being Buddhist, and paying a one-time membership fee of 800,000 yen ($8,000, about one-fifth the cost of a regular grave). For this one receives an interment ceremony, yearly memorial rites, a Buddhist name (kaimyo) engraved on a memorial plaque, one’s living name etched on a grave marker, and storage of one’s remains in an individual urn for thirty-two years, after which time they go to a communal ossuary. The brochure for Tōchōji lays out the logic of eternal memorial in postfamilial terms. “With En no kai, one has the opportunity to choose a new style of burial made so that all pray according to relations transcending those of blood. . . . Being disconnected
(mu-en) [from family] doesn’t signal the absence of relationality altogether but rather the possibility of being open to new kinds of connectedness.”

The day I visit Tōchōji it is pouring down rain, and the temple is unimposing despite commanding an entire city block. The only one signed up for that morning’s information session, I am seated, served tea, and then introduced to Ms. Yamada, who takes me through the structure of the temple following the bullet points in its tony brochure. An hour later we go on the tour. A four-hundred-year-old Sōtō Zen Buddhist temple, Tōchōji has been renovated multiple times. With its stylish blend of traditional and modern, the premises are calm and well tended. As we pass by the areas holding the family plots, Ms. Yamada notes that descendants are necessary for burial here. But the emphasis—in both spatial layout and guided tour—is on eitaikuyō, the new system of belonging and burial that the former head priest Takizawa Kazuo started in 1996 as a strategy to keep the temple solvent in struggling times.

Buddhist temples are downsizing and closing all over Japan as religion retreats ever further in the lives of a population that highly self-reports as unreligious and, in the face of Japan’s economic decline since the early 1990s, is becoming less willing or able to pay large donations to temples for funerals and burials. But rather than sell or lease some of its land, a tactic taken by other urban temples, Takizawa decided to tweak the principles of temple membership and its strategies for servicing death. Adopting the system of eternal memorial and hiring a management firm to help run the Relationship Association, Tōchōji gained eight thousand new members by 2004 and had sold all its ten thousand spots for eternal burial by 2008. Tōchōji has been given new life as a result of its new management of the dead. But it is not economics that Ms. Yamada stresses in explaining the rationale of eitaikuyō. Rather, her account is sociological; it once was the extended family, then the nuclear family, and now the individual who buries the deceased. Somewhat unsettled, I ask, what comes next? But Ms. Yamada sees nothing but advantages in the direction things are going. Under the new system, there is more “freedom” in who can pay respects to the dead (not just family but also friends) and more egalitarianism in burial itself (every member here receives a Buddhist name for the deceased, and in a form undifferentiated by price).

According to Mark Rowe, the practice of eternal memorial promotes “limitless connections.” Rather than being limited to kin for burial and memorialization, or stranded as an “abandoned soul” when family is lacking, joining a burial association promises a different kind of relationality around death. This is indeed the language used in the Tōchōji brochure to advertise eitaikuyō: a form of connection that “opens up” even before one actually dies. Upon becoming a member of the Relationship Association, one can join a volunteer project, attend a retreat on Buddhism.
ending in a conferral ceremony for new members, and participate in a memorial held the first day of every month for the deceased. And, once dead, one is interred alongside fellow members in a space where everyone laterally (rather than vertically as with family vis-à-vis ancestors) belongs. The actual remains—ashes and bone fragments—are buried in urns two floors below the main premises where visitors are asked to burn incense first for the benefit of those who have no one to visit them. And on the main floor there are two spaces where the deceased are memorialized by name. In the Hall of a Thousand Hands, everyone has a memorial tablet (ihai) inscribed with their kaimyo (in red for those still alive). Living names go on black granite grave markers in one of three places. One is an idyllic water garden (mizu no niwa), where a monthly memorial is held when visitors light votive candles at dusk to pay their respect to the deceased—theirs and everyone else’s.

With its practice of eternal memorial, Tōchōji offers Japanese a new place to go when dead. But, disagreeing with Rowe, I find the connections here not really “limitless” but dependent on an entrance fee and formed (only) with other members and temple staff. Rather than pure freedom, the appeal of eitaikuyō would seem to be one of security: securing a place to go and commercial mourners instead of family, one of many services burgeoning in the new market in end of life (shūkatsu) targeting the increasing demographics of the aging and single-fied in Japan today. Certainly, as I have learned from doing fieldwork on the subject since the summer of 2013, where to place the dead and the place death itself assumes in the currency of connectedness are troubling issues these days, and not easy to sort out, given shifting social and familial dynamics. Many people are single and don’t “fit” the family grave even if there is one. For others, there is no family grave—this happened to a friend when her father died unexpectedly in his early sixties. He was the second son, in a system of primogeniture where traditionally only the first son is buried in the family grave. The family had not yet purchased a plot but then acquired one in great haste and at considerable expense.

For another woman, the fact that she has married and thus changed her maiden name, required by law, prevents her from entering her father’s family plot (and her husband’s family doesn’t have one). Childless, she also has no one to perform memorial services, which by Buddhist custom should be done twice a year and on regular anniversaries of death for a period up to thirty-three years. But her worries extend to her parents as well: an aging mother who lives far away but close to her dead father’s grave. Relocating her mother to care for her would mean abandoning the father in his grave left behind. All of this has become so troubling—to this woman, a political radical who claims no religious tendencies at all—that she has difficulty sleeping at night. When we visit a temple that practices eter-
nal memorial close to where she lives in Niigata Prefecture (the Nichiren temple Kakuda Myōkō-ji), the priest tells her that “this is nothing to worry about” and that flexible arrangements—of connection, of memorial—can be made here. He should know—with only daughters and no grandsons, he faces the same problem of no place to go upon death and no one to take over the temple.

It was anticipating this situation that inspired Ogawa Eiji, the head priest of Myōkō-ji, to start the first system of eternal memorial in the country, in a collective memorial mound called Annonbyō. This was 1989, the same year he wrote what was a controversial article, “How to Avoid Dying without a Grave,” in the Asahi weekly journal. Noting how the burial system had long been tied to the family and family graves at Buddhist temples, he advocated changing this in accordance with shifts in family and religious sentiment across the country. His position was that it should be acceptable to be buried outside family attachments, as an individual or communally.\(^9\) While initially the article and Annonbyō generated much criticism, now it is the opposite, Ogawa tells us. People are constantly coming to Myōkō-ji for seminars and to seek out advice: both individuals struggling with the issue of where to go when they die (and not just those who are single or childless) and Buddhist practitioners keen to know how to diversify their religious practice. And in both cases, if inversely, there is also the issue of money: of individuals wanting to save on mortuary costs and of Buddhist practitioners wanting to build business. As Ogawa told me,

the work Buddhist temples used to do is diminishing; the cremation business has decreased, and temples and graves are not as important as they once were. There used to be a system of primogeniture; in return for taking care of the elderly, the eldest son would receive property and his place in the grave. There was respect for the land that was tied to ancestors and also the temple. When people died, they thought they were reconnecting to ancestors, and this was comforting. But this ideology of death is fading today. We have entered an era when people no longer believe the temple is necessary. And while, during the bubble economy [1970s and 1980s], people spent a lot on funerals and graves, today that period is over, and people are now looking for ways to save money. More are doing just family funerals or direct funerals at the grave. And a communal burial space [eternal memorial] is one way to save money.\(^{10}\)

As Ogawa concludes at the end of the two hours we spend with him, “I see the breakdown of the family system in Japan today as giving religion a new chance.”

But according to Inoue Haruyo, the relationship goes the opposite way; it is the breakdown of the Buddhist burial system that is giving the
family, and particularly women vis-à-vis family, a new chance. A feminist and nonfiction writer when she read his article in 1989, Inoue started collaborating with Ogawa. As she argued in her 1980 book advocating that women retain their maiden names upon marriage, Inoue has long felt that Japan’s customary (and legal) system of succession (keishō seido) is discriminatory against women. When her mother died at age sixty-two, she was graveless; unable to enter the family plot of her father (because her married name was different), she could not enter the family plot of her husband either (because he was a second son and hadn’t yet purchased his own family plot). The experience was horrible, Inoue wrote, making her keenly aware of how women, as daughters, become “relationless” (muen ni naru) under Japan’s succession system, particularly at the time of death.\(^{11}\)

Having returned to school to study sociology, Inoue is now a professor and prominent figure in the emerging field around life and death in Japan. A leading advocate for the human rights of the dead, she is also a practitioner who started Ending Center, a citizen’s group for treating death and postmortuary practices with respect. This was in 1989, and Ending Center has now evolved into a registered nonprofit organization (NPO) with burial grounds of its own.

Located on the outskirts of Tokyo within a beautiful Buddhist cemetery strewn with cherry trees,\(^ {12}\) Ending Center identifies itself by both practice and place: this is a graveyard for conducting funerals with cherry blossoms (sakurasō). With five different burial areas, all differently priced and designed (one where ashes go directly in the ground and all with the names of the deceased written discreetly on walls), Ending Center offers postmortem services in a natural setting without the need to depend on family. These are the two most common reasons for those who choose to be buried here, Inoue tells me the day I visit. And the two logics blur. The dead commune with nature in a burial ground where this and other forms of companionship take the place of or eliminate the need for family. As with those temples offering eternal memorial service, Ending Center provides both a place to go and a form of relationality after death. Here, though, because there is no direct affiliation with Buddhism, memorial (kuyō) is not part of the package. Instead, upon becoming a member (and paying for burial there), one is offered a different sort of connectedness. The dead are never alone here, the brochure points out, because one has a support network of flexible relations, including those provided by falling cherry blossoms and pets (coburial is acceptable).

Being “midwives” (josanfu) for death is how Inoue conceptualizes the work done by Ending Center, which helps individuals manage the end of life in their own way (jibunrashi) and form companionship for the future when dead.\(^ {13}\) This could be a “grave friend” (hakatomo), a word coined by Inoue for making friends with someone who will be buried
nearby. When I attend a forum at Ending Center in the summer of 2016, members readily tell me they are “grave friends” with one another. A man tells me he has already attended one of the monthly get-togethers and looks forward to more. And a bubbly woman greets me by pointing to her nametag, where the number of her grave site is written next to her name: her place when dead has become part of her identity, and sociality, when still alive. Yet Ending Center promises not only the possibility of new forms of relationality around death but also the dissolution of older forms of relationality that bound one during life. According to Inoue, at least 10 percent of women seeking new burial practices are doing so to avoid being buried in their husband’s family plot, still tied to mother-in-law and spouse. Inoue calls this “postdeath divorce.”

The Place of Others in Life

The feminist Ueno Chizuko has written many books on being alone. Two have been best sellers, Ototorisama no rōgo (Aging Alone [2007]) and Otoko ohitorisama dō (The Path of a Gentleman Alone [2009]), which are guidebooks of sorts for managing single life as one ages. Turning now to “dying single at home” (zaitaku hitori shi, the term she prefers to “lonely death”)—the condition but also choice of an increasing number of aging Japanese, including herself—Ueno seeks viable ways to do this both within and beyond the medical profession. In the context of a new care insurance policy instituted in 2000 that facilitates, in her opinion, staying at home until death, Ueno describes resources for home health care in her 2015 books Kea no karisumatachi (Care Charismatics) and Ohitorisama no saigo (End of Life for the Single Person). Having been motivated to write these books to counter the discrimination she has faced as a single woman, Ueno is invested in making solitary existence more robust. One avenue is coming up with alternative networks beyond the family for managing life/death (having many good friends is a lot better than a bad marriage, she has quipped). A highly respected scholar who taught anthropology at Tokyo University and remains a prolific author, Ueno is now retired and has started her own NPO, Women’s Action Network. Living and dying alone can certainly bring misery, Ueno acknowledges. But in all the recent media attention given to such phenomena as lonely death, there is the recurring question of where is the family that she contests. The overriding assumption is that family is key to social security and connection, the premise, for example, in a series the Asahi newspaper ran on Japan’s trend toward disconnectedness (titled “The Country of Lonely Belonging”). In her own contribution to the series, Ueno critically assesses the postwar Japanese family. Tied as it is to productivity and corporate capitalism, the family is
expected to foster ties (kizuna) conducive to high output and competitive performance (for men at work, women at home, and children at school). In an argument that I have made myself, this is a form of belonging that itself can produce loneliness and stress. In reproducing and incubating the pressures of society, family comes with its own set of risks. Considering the pitfalls of family formation, “What’s so bad about being alone?” Ueno queries.

In her life as well as her work, Ueno has consistently critiqued the marital norm in postwar Japan that accords social capital to the married and discounts childless singles (particularly women) as losers. Embracing feminist politics, she urges Japanese to find alternative socialities for sustaining existence and decries the inevitability of loneliness or estrangement for those without children or spouse. Her message—the liveliness of the Japanese single—is being given ever more attention by the press and the general public alongside the demographic expansion of the unmarried, childless, single households, and elderly in Japan. The role played, but increasingly evacuated, by family is certainly a cross-gender issue these days. But it is also gendered. Women are said to be better at communicating and making friends, which helps sustain them in living alone. And for men, whether or not one has a steady job seems as critical, if not more, than the presence of familial/social others in being at risk for isolation. This is the narrative I have been told repeatedly for why 80 percent of those who die isolated deaths are men, mainly unemployed. When a man lives to work (ikigai) and socializes almost exclusively with fellow workers, he loses his sense of belonging when retired or out of a job—as I was told by someone who cleans up the rooms of people who die all alone and are discovered sometimes weeks later. This is also the finding of labor historian Genda Yūji on the phenomenon of SNEP: solitary nonemployed persons (koritsu mushoku), defined as unmarried, unemployed persons not connected to people outside family.

According to government statistics, the number of SNEP younger than sixty was 2,559,000 in 2011, 63 percent of whom it identified as solitary. (This was based on those who answered that they had not done anything such as have a conversation with a person outside the family in the past two days.) Between 1996 and 2011 the total number of SNEP doubled, a symptom of what Genda considers to be the insecuritization of labor and life in Japan today, particularly for middle-aged men. As shown in his earlier work on NEET (not in education, employment, or training), young people were hit hard by the collapse of the bubble economy in 1991 when a “lost generation” of youth couldn’t find permanent jobs. But the category, officially defined as age eighteen to thirty-four, has now spread in what Genda terms a “NEET-ification” of older workers as construction companies closed down, manufacturing grew strong
overseas, and the yen inflated in the late 1990s. Many middle-aged and older workers lost their jobs and couldn’t find or didn’t look for other employment. According to Genda, this is the demographic increasingly at risk for and prone to solitarization. And while more have family than not (of 1,623,000 SNEP in 2011, 80 percent lived with family), this does not necessarily shield them from isolation; two-thirds still report as solitary. SNEP are vulnerable to depression, suicide, and lonely death. They are also no longer exceptional. Genda ends his book on SNEP with guidelines for not falling prey to becoming SNEP: look for work of any kind, take up an activity or join a group, be motivated, and don’t give up.¹⁹

The founder of hope studies (kibōgaku) at Tokyo University, Genda places much hope in place—finding a place (ideally at a job), attaching to something one can work at, being a part of a group larger than oneself. I find his study of SNEP sharp edged and important. But I also think what he is capturing—men who get isolated without an anchor to work—reflects a postwar vision of Japan as a growth economy fed by, and feeding, the productivity of core workers (mainly men) that is not only tremendously fraught but also increasingly unsustainable in what some call the postgrowth Japan of today. That a job itself, sometimes with the addition of marriage and children, does not necessarily produce social/psychic security is the insight of psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki in his article “Depression and Japan’s Corporate Culture,” cowritten with Jō Shigeyuki.²⁰ As he has noticed from his practice, a new form of depression has emerged over the past ten years. While difficult to figure out, it seems that those who are most prone to it have already become “social adults” (shakaijin) marked by permanent jobs, marriage, or both. Men in their thirties are particularly likely candidates who become depressed (leading sometimes to suicide) after losing a job or are simply struggling to remain competitive at the stage before they are due, in their forties, to advance to divisional or sectional head in the company.²¹ For those trying to enter, or already inside, Japan’s corporate culture the pressure to perform is intense, and this collides with the fact that the level of satisfaction with work and one’s company is the lowest in Japan of all industrialized countries.

So even those who have the jobs that SNEP so sorely lack are at risk of depression, rates of which are rising among company workers, as they are in the population in general. And while Japan’s high rate of suicide started to fall in 2012, the one contingent for whom this is not true and for whom suicide is continuing to rise are men in their thirties. Losing a job (even when this comes from quitting it oneself) is often what precipitates suicide, but so is never getting one in the first place for those a generation younger entering the job market in May. Suicides spike in the months of May and now June, and “disease of the heart” (kokoro no byō), as depression is euphemistically called in Japan, has taken hold around the long-
term company job both for those excluded from it and for those stressed within just such a job.\footnote{22}

In the attention he pays to the relationship between depression and Japan’s corporate culture, Saitō puts his finger on something else: a dark hole in the very idea of place itself as what confers identity and ties of belonging to others. It is not only that people are nervous about (not) getting regular jobs or (not) getting married and having children. These very pathways to adulthood are themselves contested or found to be precarious in their own right. A strange new form of depression, Saitō calls the latest disease of the heart among Japanese. And at risk is anyone—with or without job, living with family or all alone.\footnote{23} This would seem consistent with the kind of existential anxiety that seems to be springing up among Japanese youth, according to Usui Mafumi, a social psychologist at Niigata Seiryo University whom I interviewed about the online site for suicide prevention he started in 1997. In asking high school students he works with as counselor what they feel anxious (\textit{fuan}) about, the third most common answer, after their abilities and future, is their very existence: Why am I alive? Why do I exist? Why was I born? Unsure of who they are and their place in the world, they find that existence itself makes little sense.

When I talk with Usui the summer of 2014, he reports being worried about Japanese teenagers today, whom he finds timid and withdrawn. In his assessment, they are growing up in a world where there are too few roadmaps for who or what to become, a situation fraught with social and existential risks for the young.

In Japan, everyone wants to be ordinary——just to fit in with everyone else. If girls fail [at school], they can stay at home and help out. But boys have nothing else after failing at school or work; they become socially withdrawn (\textit{hikikomori}). Japan has become a country where people lack self-confidence. It used to be that, even if someone was poor, they could have confidence and hope—as long as they didn’t kill someone or do something grievously wrong. But we don’t have that mind-set any more. Local relations (\textit{chiikisei}) used to be strong. But now we have few bonds like this. People do want relations (\textit{tsunagari}) with one another, but no one knows how to communicate anymore.\footnote{24}

According to Usui, young Japanese have become “speechless” (\textit{mugon}: \textit{mu} for lacking, \textit{gon} for speech, 無言). While everyone has a cell phone and is constantly twittering on social media, no one really talks, and especially not about those things that may be troubling them—an observation others have made about youth culture/sociality in Japan today, where the dynamics of belonging can be brutal and cutthroat.\footnote{25} The presence of others may be risky, even deadly, as in the cases of bullying that have led, in the extreme, to suicide. For some students, the easiest path is social exit or retreat, what Usui sees in a recent trend at his high school of fashion masks
Face masks are commonly worn in Japan when someone has a cough or cold to protect the spread of germs. But here they are worn when healthy, ensconcing the wearer in a *cordon solitaire*. It’s not that these kids don’t want relations with others, Usui says. Afraid of getting hurt, they wear the mask to feel better. Astute about the anxiety the very proximity to others can engender, Usui attributes the behavior of fashion masks to fear. But one could also read into these acts far more agency than he does. Engaging in a form of playful in(ter)vention, these “speechless” youth are learning how to survive in an ecology of changing relationality: behind a mask but in public nonetheless.

**A Practice for Living**

As a young man, Nemoto Jōtetsu was unruly and wild. He stayed out late listening to music, routinely got into fights, and studied philosophy at university but never graduated. Along the way, he worked at various jobs but took nothing too seriously. One day, more as a joke, his mother showed him a recruitment ad for Buddhist priests. But the son was intrigued, and, getting the job, he started working as an entry-level monk doing pet funerals. The job didn’t require he be trained, but soon, wanting to learn more, Nemoto entered a Rinzai Zen monastery where the training is so grueling that most initiates don’t make it through. Given that “a well-trained monk lives as though he were already dead,” few remain in Japan today; Nemoto’s monastery only has seven. The focus of the Rinzai Zen sect is individual enlightenment, what Nemoto practiced for four years inside the monastery. He then decided to leave to reacquaint himself with life outside. Taking a job at a fast food restaurant in Tokyo, he enjoyed the lightness of the work and the banter with customers and staff. Things were good. But his training hadn’t been for this, he was told by his sect, who needed trained monks to become abbots of temples that were closing across the country.

A small Rinzai Zen temple in the rice fields of Seki city in Gifu Prefecture, Daizenji had lost its abbot and was on the verge of collapse when Nemoto agreed to step in. Built during the Heian period over a thousand years ago, Daizenji required major renovations to keep it alive. This was Nemoto’s first order of business: raising the funds needed for the physical repairs. Once this was managed, reconstruction began, and today the temple is beautiful as a result. The day I visit in June 2014, Nemoto points out the pieces of roof sitting on the ground from the reconstruction. “They’re three hundred years old,” he says with a smile. As head priest of Daizenji, Nemoto has eighty-eight parishioners whom he tends to in all the usual ways: presiding over funerals, memorial services, and the everyday running of the temple. But Nemoto also engages in something
else that extends, by tweaking, the Buddhist work of managing the dead: tending to the still living who are contemplating self-death (*jisshi*, the word he prefers to suicide, *jisatsu*).

Having suffered the death of an uncle and two high school friends from suicide when younger, Nemoto had long been intrigued by the pain of humans that puts them in a vise between life and death. As he discovered that people easily opened up to him when working at the fast food restaurant, Nemoto started holding workshops on death and for *hikikomori* (socially withdrawn) at Daizenji. At the same time, he began a suicide website. Responding to everyone—which often migrated to phone calls and face-to-face encounters—Nemoto was endlessly engaged, 24–7. He also became exhausted from the emotional engagements of this constant work in near-death. Eventually getting sick, he was discovered to have blocked arteries and underwent four angioplasties over a two-year period. Posting about his illness, Nemoto was surprised at the cold reactions. No one seemed to care, absorbed as they were in their own issues. Disheartened, he considered giving up counseling. After giving it more thought, though, he decided to stick with his practice but to make some changes. One was demanding that, to communicate with him, everyone first meet him face-to-face. This is why, in my case, too, I go to Daizenji.

Sitting in his temple, overlooking the rice fields, everything is quiet and still. Nemoto lingers over my questions, and answers are anything but quick. When I ask what he thinks accounts for the high rate of suicide, for example, he says, well, there’s a long history of this in Japan. And today solitude (*kodokukan*) is widespread; many cannot connect or communicate with others or find a reason for living (*ikigai*). But in answer to whether certain contingents are more at risk, such as the un(der)-employed, Nemoto won’t be pinned down. Yes, many young people who are irregularly employed are struggling, and because Japanese men tend to turn inward rather than express (or seek help for) their problems, this leads to stress and isolation. His emphasis, though, is on the fact that anyone can become lonely and depressed, even those with a family and a job. This is why Buddha, after all, left home and went into the world. Suffering is a fact of life, our existential condition, rather than a problem that is easily fixed. But without tending, the pain of living can fester out of control. Helping sufferers figure this out would seem to be Nemoto’s mission.

Nemoto often speaks through example, of cases he has dealt with, like a woman in her thirties who had been suffering for years from an emotional disorder for which she had been taking regimen upon regimen of medication. Obsessed with her condition, she read everything on the subject and accumulated a library of information. Have you ever tried just letting it go? Nemoto asked her when she attended one of his workshops. After learning basic zazen, where one meditates by entering a space of
nothingness (*mu*, 無), the woman tried it and found that something immediately shifted. Starting to get relief, she has continued the practice and now given up medication altogether.

Practice is important to Nemoto—practicing ways of being in the world that can keep us from self-death. Constantly experimenting with different methods and strategies for such a life practice, Nemoto tells me about one of his newest: a workshop called “playback theater.” The third such one at Daizenji was held the weekend just before my visit, attended by thirty people, eighteen to forty-eight years of age, who signed up through a posting on social media. Over two days spent in a range of activities, including going to a nearby hot spring, special attention was paid to expression (*hyōgen*). This involved communication of various kinds: sharing stories of struggle and pain and “playing back” different ways of being in and around body and space—one’s own and everyone else’s. One such game they played involved a chain of motion: one person starts with a movement (such as a cartwheel) and then touches the next person, who does his or her own thing (like a headstand), who then touches the next person, triggering a round robin of touching/moving/morphing that spreads around the circle.

Being here, in the midst of others and as part of an event, feels good, Nemoto says. But once everyone leaves it is easy to slip back into depression and loneliness. Then staying in touch with people met during the workshop is important, as is maintaining something of the practice of life learned during the theater to prevent death held by the Buddhist priest at his Rinzai Zen temple among rice fields in Japan.

**Conclusion**

Much of what I have read and encountered in the field on the subjects I take up here—the rise of singular living, the shift away from a sociality based on long-term bonds, solitary death, and eternal memorialization—gets articulated, at some point, through the Japanese character 無 (*mu*, absence). There are the relationless souls (*muenbotoke*), Japan’s derelational society (*muen shakai*), the solitary unemployed (*koritsu mushoku*), and the speechless youth (*mugon*) sheltered behind masks. And in the face of what is often taken to be a voiding of sociality now much talked about in Japan, there are models posed for countering the risks of solitarization, many of which involve forging new connections: volunteering or getting a less pressured job (as Genda suggests for SNEP and Saito for the corporately depressed) and joining a temple with eternal memorial (to avoid ending up as a relationless soul upon death). Place is critical in this flux around connectivity, as I have tried to show in this article. Where one fits (or not) and what or who determines the fitting (or no longer does so)
affect the dead as well as the living. And, in both cases, there is a lot of stress and struggle around place/lessness—an anxiety that also plagues the nation at a time when Japan faces a host of domestic problems, from an aging/declining population to postnuclear security, and its “miracle economy” of the postwar era seems forever a thing of the past.

But absence—of fitting in, of belonging—is not the only story of twenty-first-century Japan. Out of the very strain around the social grammar of existence are emerging alternatives in the organization of life with/out others. There are the initiatives of those like Ueno Chizuko and Genda Yūji working to destigmatize the socially single and to offer support for living and dying without family or job. But there is also the effort, more radical in its implications for sociality, to rethink the very attachment to attachment altogether, to imagine a lifestyle, or death style, that does not privilege belonging to long-term organizations or groups, with the attendant risks, for those without such ties, of feeling abandoned at death. This is how I view the initiatives of Nemoto Jōtetsu, who urges those he counsels to not rush too quickly to replace one set of (lost) connections with another but, rather, to linger over the placelessness of (a more solitary) existence and try to inhabit it (without turning to a fake mask or self-death). As in his playback theater, emphasis is placed more on being than belonging, on reorienting one’s subjectivity rather than finding a new place for oneself in yet another group (which is the case when signing up for eternal memorial, a membership that excludes those too poor to pay), and on cultivating a different way of being through practice, which may include zazen: meditation by mindfully detaching from the world into the emptiness of mu無. This is something Nemoto now teaches at yoga and Zen sessions offered in public parks—another step toward moving Buddhism into the realm of the living and beyond merely managing the dead, and one in which mu (disconnection) signals not social death, as does the mu in relationless souls/society/youth, but a practice of life less dependent on a notion of a fixed place, with its implications for dis/belonging.

When I did fieldwork in Japan between 2008 and 2011 on what I call precarity—the sense of insecurity around jobs, marriage, future, and the everyday that has percolated in the country since the start of Japan’s postbubble decline in 1991—an expression I continually encountered was ibasho ga nai: not having a place where one feels comfortable or at home. It was as if the aspirational ideal of the high-growth era of owning one’s home (my-homeism) had dissolved into its antithesis: the fear/feel of having no home at all (no-homeism), the breakdown of groundedness itself—the image captured by muen shakai (disconnected society). But today, as I finish writing this in 2016, the tenor of the times seems to have subtly moved on. Not that real precariousness and insecurity aren’t still experienced by many Japanese in many different ways—this is indeed the
case. But I hear less mention of ibasho ga nai and more interest in making new arrangements for both living and dying, as in doing so alone. This means devising new concepts of place and home, as with eternal memorial. But it also has prompted experimentation around the borders of place itself: to where, how, and with whom people are attached and see themselves as socially placed. Prompted, I argue, by single-fication and the attention now given to management of the dead increasingly as a single subject, place and one’s attachments over time are becoming more open and less fixed to a durable, linear sense of commitment (as in ties to ancestors at the family grave).

Yoga and Zen in the park where different people participate at each event; the recent rise in share houses, where coresidents can be anyone and stay for varying lengths of time; graves that are not only the end point for the dead but also gathering spots for the living (as advertised by an NPO with a collective burial spot for single women); a company that sells pendants as “portable memorials” for the ashes of loved ones (including pets) that have been otherwise scattered at sea. As single-fication becomes the state of ever more Japanese, as surely it will, how single people engineer getting through life, including the end, and on whom or what they can count to both give and receive help will be key in the shape sociality assumes in future Japan. The point I have tried to make in this essay is that this sociality to come is already emergent today and can be seen in innovations given to dealing with—and learning from—the dead.

Notes

1. The price varies considerably depending on a number of factors, such as whether or not, and what level, the deceased is given a kaimyo (Buddhist name) by a priest, which according to a survey by the National Funeral Association of Japan averaged 498,000 yen ($4,140) in 1999. Danely, Aging and Loss.
2. Yamada, Kazoku nanmin.
3. Ueno, Kea no karisumatachi; Inoue, Sakurasō.
4. Tōchōji, En no kai boen, 2.
5. Rowe, Bonds of the Dead.
7. Rowe, Bonds of the Dead.
8. Ibid., 112.
10. Ogawa Eiji, interview by the author at Myōkōji in Niigata, 12 June 2014. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
11. Inoue, Sakurasō, 12.
12. While Machida Izumi Jōen is a Buddhist cemetery, Ending Center itself is not affiliated.
13. Inoue, Sakurasō.
16. Genda, Koritsu mushoku SNEP.
17. Because so many unemployed are married women who, not working, are supported on a husband’s salary, the category “unmarried, unemployed” is intended to capture those without either jobs or spouses.
18. The decline (and delay) of both marriage and childbirth also correlates with Japan’s economic downturn. Men with regular jobs are twice as likely to marry and have children as those un(der)employed, and women say they will not marry anyone without a steady job (and are remaining single and childless in greater numbers than ever before in large part, not excluding, because of economic insecurity). Genda, Koritsu mushoku SNEP; Yamada, Kazoku nanmin.
19. Genda, Koritsu mushoku SNEP.
20. Saitō and Shigeyuki, “Nihon no kigyōbunka to ‘kokoro no byō.’”
21. This is a point also made by Tanaka Toshiyuki, sociologist and founder of new “male studies,” in Otokoga tsuraiyo.
22. Saitō and Shigeyuki, “Nihon no kigyōbunka to ‘kokoro no byō.’”
23. Ibid.
24. Usui Mafumi, interview by the author in Niigata City, 12 June 2014.
27. Ibid.

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