

The Precarity of Those Without Anyone to Depend Upon: Readjusting the Injustice of Family-Dependent Care in Japan

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Abstract

Belonging in Japan has been tied to the patrilineal family since its codification by law in 1898. And even though the postwar Constitution of 1948 dismantled *ie* (the patrilineal household system), replacing its legal authority for that of the individual, the family has remained the de facto unit of aspirational normativity, social status, and daily care ever since. This essay considers the consequences of remaining ideologically attached to a social form that, for a number of reasons, has become less available (or desirable) to an increasing number of Japanese people today. As more and more people live and die alone, “familylessness” is accompanied by a sense of loss that has itself shifted over time: from a precarity of possibility following the post-bubble economic collapse, to a precarity of intimate connection today as Japan’s aging population faces having “no one to depend upon.” Yet, in response to the latter, something sociologically new (*shūkatsu*) is emerging to replace the family system in the field of deathcare. As the essay proposes, the implications of this shift for not only the dead but also the living are potentially profound.

Keywords: family, care, precarity, sociality, contractual sociality, Japan, deathcare

Who Cares for Us?

I start with two stories.

Of the precarity of those without anyone to depend upon.

The first case is of a woman, aged 69, employed as a pharmacist and living all alone. Without a partner or children, she is socially single (*ohitorisan*), part of a demographic that is on the rise in Japan with its high aging/low fertility population, declining marital and childbirth rates, and downsizing of households. Not an exception in living by herself, Ishii Yuko is normal in other regards as well; she is a citizen of the country, up to date on taxes and health insurance, and gainfully employed. Yet, when diagnosed with a brain tumor and told to seek surgery as soon as possible, the hospital refused to schedule it unless she was accompanied by a family member who could stay with her throughout (*mimoto ni tachiau*). But Ishii had no such person. Her only kin were distant relatives living far away and an aging mother, barely mobile and in a facility. Without what it called a familial witness (*rikkaijin*), the hospital would not schedule the surgery, despite the urgency of Ishii's condition.¹

The second story involves another woman who, at the age of 89, has been living alone for half of her life. Married to a police officer who died in his 40s, Sako Masae took care of both her mother and mother-in-law until their deaths decades ago. An avid shamisen player, she taught hundreds of students until retiring. No longer in touch with them, and without children or close friends or kin, she now spends most days entirely alone. But none of this particularly distresses her. What does is not knowing what will happen to her body at death. Without a successor or familial kin to make arrangements and ensure that her remains will be transported to the grave of her husband's family—a burial plot that she once routinely visited and gave proper care to in her role as married-in-kin—Sako worries that her body will be simply abandoned. If she dies at home, or even in the hospital, she has no kin to claim her, which would mean that the municipality

would assume responsibility for her postmortem care. And, as she knows, this means that she would ultimately wind up as a *muenbotoke* (disconnected soul) in the grave for the disconnected (*muenbaka*) in the local public cemetery.²

So, here are two cases of persons facing exclusion from major institutions—a hospital where Ishii Yuko is seeking medical treatment and a cemetery where Sako Masae is seeking burial in her husband’s family plot—on the basis of their sociological status as singles, lacking close kin to assume responsibility for their care. This is the issue I address in my paper: the state of what I call “family-less singles”—a term I borrow from what some scholars have called Japan’s new era of family-less dead (*ie naki jidai no shisha*), referring to the precarity that singles find themselves in when navigating a deathcare system that is still modeled on the legacy, and presumption, of the patrilineal family form.³ In order to be buried in most private and public cemeteries, for example, one needs to have a successor or kin-based guardian to assume responsibility for tending to the grave and paying annual maintenance fees.⁴ Yet, increasingly, the Japanese are no longer living or dying within the framework of familial sociality. Due to a number of factors, including urbanization, economic decline, high aging/low fertility demographics, and decline in marriage and childbirth, lifestyle patterns are trending towards singlization.⁵ 34% of all Japanese households are single today. Institutionally, Postwar Constitution of 1948 changed the legal status of the grave to be an individual’s final resting place rather than the site for honoring ancestors as specified in the Meiji Civil Code of 1898.

Today, the presence of *ohitorisan* (singles) is spreading, gaining legitimacy, and spurring a host of venues such as ramen counters expressly fashioned for solo users. Why, then, are singles so thwarted when needing care of multiple kinds such as medical or mortuary treatment at mainstream institutions? This signals a tension in what is a continued (ideological, social, and institutional) reliance upon the family to provide care, despite the fact that fewer and fewer

Japanese people have such kin to actually rely upon. The effect left, and even produced, by this gap is the condition of being *miyori ga nai hito* (a person without anyone to rely upon). As another expression commonly used these days in reference to singles, it indicates that, as with the cases of Ishii Yuko and Sako Masae, such individuals are effectively abandoned.

**Post-Bubble Precarity:
(Loss of) My-Job, My-Home, and Middle-classness**

I return later to the stories of these two women. But, first, some background about the terrain of precarity and family that has preceded, and conditioned, the situation faced by Japanese people now a quarter into the twenty-first century. Studying this was the subject of my previous book, *Precarious Japan*, that tracked the demise of Japan's era of superpower globalization when, following the bursting of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, the country underwent its so-called "lost decade" that has extended to the new normal of a downsized, post-growth Japan ever since. As I observed, on the basis of fieldwork done from 2005–2011 with a spectrum of Japanese—young and old, working and not, politically and socially diverse—a mood of anxiety and unease simmered nationwide. As companies went bankrupt, workers lost their jobs, and those searching for employment faced a glacial age of hiring, Japan's postwar generation felt betrayed, as its expectation that hard work would be rewarded with a steady job and materialist lifestyle went unfulfilled. This was the social contract that postwar Japan had counted on. In the recovery the country underwent following the war to remake itself from a military empire to an industrial superpower, efforts were poured into working hard at one's workplace and forming families and homes that would reproduce this channel of productivity. With a social factory of mothers managing housework and kids, children cramming schoolwork to perform well in exams, and male breadwinners devoting nearly everything to their

jobs, this conjoining of workplace and family served Japan's postwar path to national capitalism. Charged by a moral, even patriotic fervor of nationalism, the postwar banner—of hard work (for mothers, students, and wage-earners)—was also coupled to that of private ownership. To own one's own home, one's own car, one's own set of domestic electronics (such as electric rice cookers and color TVs) was both a goad and a sign of middle-class belonging. As an aspirational dream of both hope and futurity rooted in the family home, this was called "my-homeism" (*mai-hōmushugi*).⁶

As economic decline settled in during the 1990s and the 2000s and the country was hit by a number of other crises—such as the sarin gas attacks on Tokyo's subway system and the Hanshin earthquake in Kobe that both took place in 1995, as well as a record high in suicides in 1999—the country's vision of itself and the role imagined for its subjects started to shift. Responding to labor changes such as the upsurge in the hiring of irregular workers (30% of the workforce by the mid 1990s) versus regular workers (once the gold standard with its guarantee of bonuses and longevity on the job), Nikkeiren (Japan Federation of Employer's Association; a major Japanese business organization established in 1948 to manage labor relations) officially announced in 1995 that these shifts constituted a new cultural moment: a new era of Japanese-style management (*shinjidai no nihonteki keiei*). Applauding the flexibility of the country's labor force, the government adopted other signature tendencies of neoliberalism: deregulation of labor policies, heightened reliance on the privatization of social services, and an ideological endorsement of individual responsibility (*jiko sekinin*). Under this new regime of labor, what was deemed productive for capitalism was no longer the family or the long-term employment of company workers. And yet, as we shall see, this legacy, and the attachment to it, has ideologically lived on.⁷

The first time I heard the word "precarity" in the context of Japan was from the activist, Amamiya Karin. Born in 1975 and entering the workforce during the era of the glacial hiring freeze, Amamiya

described herself as belonging to the “lost generation.” Employed in 1993 as a *furitā*—an irregular or flexible laborer—she found her job numbing not only because the pay was low and she could be fired anytime, but also because no one addressed her by name and the work could be done by anyone. As part of Japan’s disposable labor force, she felt superfluous and unvalued; it was this lack of recognition (*shōnin*) from lacking an affiliation (*shozoku*) with a durable group that a steady workplace would provide that made life precarious for her. Borrowing the word *precarité* from European social and labor movements that first used it in the 1970s to index shifts in late stage capitalism towards more flexible, contingent, and irregular work, Amamiya extended its meaning to incorporate the sense of worthlessness and disbelonging experienced by those raised to believe that having a lifelong job or lifelong marriage was paramount to one’s identity. As I discovered in my fieldwork, what Amamiya described as a pain in life (*ikizurasa*) was widespread—many people said that, even if not physically homeless, they felt the absence of any place where they felt truly at home (*ibasho ga nai*).⁸ It was a social, even existential sense of disconnection coupled with a sense of loss: loss of postwar dreams, loss of hope, loss of futurity.

This, too, was the experience of Akagi Tomohiro, another public spokesperson of the time. Despite doing everything he was supposed to (working hard at school, getting into and graduating from a good university, and wanting to be a company-man, married, with family and a my-home of his own), he found himself a loser at age 35. Living at home with his parents, he was unmarried, childless, and an irregular worker: this represented being socially (and existentially) stuck. Driven by what Lauren Berlant called aspirational normativity—wanting to be normatively normal—Akagi was fated to being nothing and nowhere instead.⁹ No future, as Lee Edelman has characterized those outside the path of being a part of, and reproducing, what engines a political-order founded on the template of heteronormative family (breadwinner/mother/kids). This, in my own term, signals

precaritization.¹⁰

In this account of a post-bubble mood and condition of malaise in Japan, I have focused on the middle-class, even though precarity, if defined as those experiencing precarious unemployment and livelihoods, extends far beyond it to include those who have rarely, if ever, had the luxury of steady jobs, income, and homes. By the definition of a precarious livelihood, most humans in the world today and across time have been precarious. It is a far more normal state than an exceptional one.¹¹ Yet, what I am focusing on here is a moment of time—the four decades following the war—when the security of durable employment, family, and home came to define norms as well as desires, both national and personal, for the Japanese. It signified a middle-classness, a status, of being and belonging, with which 80% of Japanese people identified. Even if that designation was only aspirational, many in this era thought they could count on such aspirations being realized, at least for their children, in the future. So, when the bubble burst and jobs disappeared, prosperity dampened, and homes (including the prospect of marriage and children) became economically out of reach, there was a sense of deep brokenness and loss. A *precarity of possibility*, we could call this.

Present-Day Precarity: (Loss of) Connectedness, Others, and Care

To turn now to the present, what has happened today to this “nostalgia for the future”? I borrow here Charles Piot’s understanding of an attachment to a particular vision of the future—one whose likelihood of actualization has, in the case of post-postwar Japanese, has significantly ebbed.¹²

In what has been the almost thirty-five years since the bursting of the bubble economy, much has transpired in the country, including the compounded disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown in Tōhoku on March 11, 2011, and—my focus here—the profundity

of demographic trends. Japan has the highest life expectancy in the world and with 30% of the population over 65 and the fertility rate plummeting to far below replacement levels, the overall population has been decreasing since 2009, and Japan is considered a “mass death society” with more deaths than births every year.¹³ Without sizable input from immigration, the country is literally shrinking in human capital. And though the government likes to imagine that the curative to this is the one that engined its period of high economic growth in the 1970s and 80s—young Japanese people getting married and having children—all the policies launched to incentivize childbirth hitherto have failed. Currently, Japan’s marriage rate is at a historic low with a considerable percentage of young people reporting that they never intend to marry (17.3% of women and 14.6% of men between the ages of 17 and 34), with the biggest reasons being financial instability and high cost of living in Japan.¹⁴ As only 2–3% of births occur outside the marital institution, the fading of marriage correlates with the decline in childbirth. As mentioned earlier, the sociological trend these days—in both habitation and lifestyle more generally—is of the single individual. “Singlization,” (*shingurushugi*) the sociologist Yamada Masahiro has called this.¹⁵

The fading of marriage and family life certainly has implications for Japan’s population. This is what Prime Minister Kishida Fumio meant when, referring to the unprecedentedly low birthrate of 2022, he announced that the country was on the brink of sociological crisis as it would soon be unable to sustain national productivity and growth. The failure, that is, of reproducing Japanese workers birthed within the crucible of the Japanese family. But unrecognized in his remarks was how the weakening of the familial institution—long expected to be the de facto welfare and care provider for those vulnerable and in need (the sick, the young, the aging, the dead)—has also left a severe scarcity in care. How this has impacted Japan’s aging population when facing the end of life (those who once could have expected children and kin to tend to them into old age and death) is the subject

of my recent book, *Being Dead Otherwise*.¹⁶ I consider this to be a *precarity of intimate connectedness* that congeals around junctures when dependence on others for help (times of sickness, death) can strand those who are socially alone. This is the state of the two women whose stories I started my essay with: they are part of a quite large and growing demographic of Japanese who, for a variety of reasons, lack the intimate ties of kinship that are still expected, sometimes required, for care provision in Japan today. As such, one is at risk, quite literally, of abandonment. This is the situation facing those who live and die family-less, who may well wind up as disconnected souls (*muenbotoke*) in burial plots for the relationless dead (*muenbaka*)—a decidedly unsavory but all-too-real prospect in a country with rising rates of both lonely dead (those living alone who, after dying, often go undiscovered for quite a while before being cremated and deposited in a public plot by the municipality) and abandoned ancestral graves (where, no longer having living kin to pay annual fees, the remains are removed and reinterred into plots for the disconnected).

But other segments of the population, similarly disadvantaged by the absence of normative kin, are at risk of care precarity as well. I give two examples, both the subject of recently published books. The first, examined by anthropologist Kathryn Goldfarb in her book *Fragile Kinships: Child Welfare and Well-Being in Japan*, concerns child welfare institutions in Japan and how children, whose parents cannot care for them, are raised.¹⁷ The system prioritizes the biological bonds of natal parents, which means that until they officially renounce their rights over their child, the child cannot be put up for adoption. The consequence is that many in the system get stuck in welfare institutions where care providers rotate in and out every two or three years. So, instead of helping these children find a good alternative or replacement family, the welfare system keeps them emotionally and socially precarious. As Goldfarb argues, social disconnection is not mitigated as much as perpetuated by the social structures and policies targeted at family-less children. The system itself produces people

who have no one, she states.¹⁸

The second example comes from anthropologist Jason Danely and his book, *Unsettled Futures: Carceral Circuits and Old Age in Japan*, which explores the high rate of incarcerated elderly in Japan—the highest among industrialized countries.¹⁹ Over 13% of those incarcerated are over the age of 65, often for minor crimes, and many are repeat offenders—one in five will return to prison within two years of release. Like Goldfarb, Danely finds that the welfare system intended to help offenders reintegrate into mainstream society post-jail fails to do so because it—and society in general—implicitly expects kin to be doing the work of helping these men (and it is mainly men) find jobs, homes, and a social network. But few in this situation have family to rely upon and the welfare system does far too little to compensate for what Danely terms “wounded kinships.”²⁰ So, instead, most flounder and return to jail simply because being isolated in the world outside is worse. The futures and subjectivities of older former offenders are unsettled, as Danely puts it, abandoned as they have been by the state, demonstrating its indifference to conditions of old age, poverty, and disability.

As addressed particularly by Danely, there *are* third-sector organizations that try to step in to fill the gap here. One such operation that offers advocacy and assistance to those formerly and currently incarcerated is run by someone who spent a long time in prison himself. Accepting no money from the state, his organization is sustained by donations alone. Attempting to be an *ibasho*—a place where everyone can feel at home and find new forms of *en* (connection)—the operation is called Mother House and quite self-consciously aims to re-envision kinship. Danely calls this a “fugitive world of care” that, despite the challenges and failures it often experiences, is unique in operating outside both the family and the state.²¹

Redesigning the Family Grave: Response to the Precarity of Family-Less Dead

As can be seen, a notion of the normative family still persists in Japan: an intimate relationality that, while less aspirational than the upwardly mobile model of my-homeism, remains tied to conferring social capital, everyday security, and care. At least, this is the promise, the hope, or—as in more and more cases—its absence. As Danely puts it, the “ghost of kinship” haunts Japan’s socio-economic landscape in this third decade of the twenty-first century.²² It is the absence of biological kin to assist in deathcare that has led, as I discovered when doing fieldwork on the subject in the 2010s, to an increase in the number of Japanese people facing the prospect of nowhere to go after death (*yuki ba ga nai*), rather than a pre-designated family grave. Generating a sense of homelessness, of being socially detached from others post-death, the uncertainty of postmortem designations generates a high degree of anxiety and unease.²³

But as with Danely’s example of Mother House, there has also been a response—and, in this case, much more so—to stand in for the kin far less available to provide care. Generically called *shūkatsu*, or “ending activity,” a flurry of initiatives, services, and products have emerged since the start of the new millennium offering alternatives to the family-based mortuary system. In the latter system, people were generally expected to be buried in the patrilineal family plot, and married women in that of their husbands. As described by religious scholar Ian Reader, the grave of the patrilineage served as “a receptacle for the spirits of the ancestors, a site for ritual offerings to the dead, and a symbol of family continuity and belonging.”²⁴ This is where family members visited—during the summer Obon season, New Year’s, and significant anniversaries and ceremonies—and where, once buried themselves, it was thought that the dead would, after 33 years, transition into an ancestor (or Buddha, or god) as well.

But in current times, fewer Japanese people have the requisite living kin to perform these acts of visitation, especially since family

plots (if they still exist) are often far away in the countryside and are both time-consuming and expensive to maintain. As family graves simply get abandoned in what has become a nationwide trend, in which almost 40% of graves in some cemeteries are now empty,²⁵ these shards of what were once ancestral burial grounds are symptomatic of what some scholars have called a profound loss of sacredness—collective respect given to the dead—in Japan today.²⁶ Yet the practice of ritually memorializing the deceased has hardly died out. Rather, I would argue, one can see quite a fervor, even animation, around trying to sustain some form of being and belonging for (and with) the dead—albeit by innovating and redesigning how precisely this takes place. One of the newest trends is natural burial or tree burial (*jumokusō*) where, instead of the privatized plots of families, the dead are buried alongside non-kin under trees and go unmarked by a headstone inscribed with a name. Many public and private cemeteries now offer a *jumokusō* option where the plots are not only cheaper, but the usual rule of requiring decedents to have a successor to pay annual maintenance fees and tend to the grave is suspended.

For those purchasing burial plots today, *jumokusō* is now the number one choice, driven less by the convenience of location—which, until recently, was the main consideration in selecting a gravesite—than by the freedom from needing a successor.²⁷ A connectedness of a different kind prevails here, as I was told by Inoue Haruyo, the founder of Ending Center, an alternative burial society with grounds within a beautiful Buddhist cemetery studded with cherry trees. The first natural burial ground in Tokyo, opened in 2005, offers *sakurasō* (cherry blossom departures) where the trees, flowers, and nature are promoted as a form of relationality with and for the dead. “No one is ever alone here,” the promotional pamphlet states, and as Inoue notes, being left to nature was the practice for treating the dead in Japan, at least for commoners, until the start of the Tokugawa Era in the early 1600s. In addition, upon signing up for a plot, one joins the Ending Center Association, which holds meetings and workshops for members

as well as an annual memorial service for all those to be, or already, buried there. Fostering what Inoue calls “trans-kin bonds” (*ketsuen*), members themselves call each other grave friends (*haka tomo*) when gathering in the house held for get-togethers located close to the burial grounds where all will be joining each other in death.²⁸

A feminist and sociologist of family and mortuary practice, Inoue was motivated to create a burial ground where entry was more inclusive than one delimited to kin. When her own mother died early in 1981 at the age of 62, the family had no grave for her; her father could not access his own family’s grave as a second son (given the rule of primogeniture) and her mother could not enter that of her natal family’s because her name, as a married woman, was now different. Finding that the patrilineal, patriarchal dictates of kinship still operating in most cemeteries at the time produced “disconnection” (*muenka*) for many Japanese people—including divorced women, men other than first-born sons, non-native residents, LGBTQ, and women in general—Inoue became an advocate for a different kind of burial system. This defines Ending Center: a cemetery not dependent on the successor principle (*datsu keishō*), but where anyone can be buried, even alongside their pets. Such an option has become increasingly available at private and public cemeteries and columbaria in the last twenty years in Japan,²⁹ sometimes appearing as a second choice at Buddhist-run burial plots where the first choice (diminishing in popularity and revenues these days) is for parishioners—those with long-standing ties to the temple and whose familial ties and plots have sometimes been passed down for generations.³⁰

In addition, when run by a Buddhist temple, often in collaboration with a funeral business like Hasegawa, most of these new-style burial facilities offer memorial services (*kuyō*) to be performed by one of the Buddhist priests on staff. This is a ritual that the family would conduct over the course of 33 years when making visits to graves and at key anniversaries and holidays, sometimes in coordination with priests of the temple to which they belonged. Believed to prevent the dead from

becoming spiritually disconnected (*muenbotoke*), *kuyō* is conducted at similar milestones as part of this new type of interment plan for all those interred there: called eternal memorial (*eitaikuyō*), the service is advertised as particularly attractive for those without successors or kin to visit them. So, the funeral facilities take over the role of living kin. Moreover, they do so not only for the newly dead, but also for the entire contents of family plots where—in a new trend gaining popularity—ancestral graves in the countryside are being closed (*hakajimae*) and their contents moved (*kaisō*) into urban columbaria where professional staff guarantee an “eternity” of care. This is what a Japanese friend of mine is seriously considering given that she and her sister are both single and childless, marking the end of their family line, which means that their ancestral grave in the public cemetery in Tokyo will be abandoned after they both die. To prevent this, she plans to reserve a space in an urban columbarium into which she will move the contents of her family grave before her own death. Thinking of not only herself but also her ancestors, there is an attachment here to continuity—to trying to uphold a sense of being and belonging across time through the ritual performance of care, at once traditional and techno-futuristic.

From Familial to Contractual Connection

As with my friend, the sociological condition of lacking close kin to depend upon is riddled with precarity—in her case, taking the form of what Judith Butler calls the ungrievability of becoming negated in death.³¹ But by switching the social contract of deathcare away from kin to others—with a columbarium that does not require a successor and that will tend to the deceased and their ancestors by performing *kuyō*—one avoids becoming stranded, albeit by changing the notion of connectedness. This option is appealing to my friend, but it also requires anticipatory action that involves signing up and paying for a pre-mortuary plan that allows one to be buried somewhere other than

a family grave. This could be called a form of contractual connection—where one contracts for a non-kin other to perform the care-role that family once assumed.

This is, in fact, precisely what both women in the stories introduced at the start of this essay wound up doing. Ishii Yuko, single and requiring surgery, was told she needed a relative to accompany her. But when she told the hospital she had no such person, they simply urged her to find someone and declined to schedule surgery. It was a caseworker for her 92-year-old mother who suggested a solution. She told her about a new service that had recently started in Ishii's municipality—pre-mortuary plans which, by paying for funeral and other postmortem costs ahead of time, provided a guardian who could assist during emergencies before one's death. Ishii signed up for such an agreement and thereby acquired a *mimoto hoshōnin* (guarantor). This worker, a middle-aged man, then accompanied Ishii through every stage of the surgery: getting her to the hospital, staying during the procedure, and seeing her home after release. In other words, the hospital allowed him to act as a legal proxy for kin. Referring to him as a substitute for family (*kazoku no kawarini*), Ishii found his presence incredibly comforting.

For Sako Masae, the 89-year-old single woman who feared she would wind up in a burial plot for disconnected souls, it was also a caseworker who told her about a new funeral plan in Yokosuka City where she lived. For those who qualified, this one provided elderly singles with financial support. By signing a pre-mortuary contract with a local funeral company, funded by the 260,000 yen she received, Sako was guaranteed transportation—of her body to the crematorium, and the ashes from there to the ancestral plot where her kin, now all dead, are already interred. Without such an arrangement, Sako would indeed be destined to become a case of lonely death when discovered at home alone and would have been buried in a plot for the disconnected if her remains had been unclaimed by any kin. Now, though, she can look forward to joining her kin in death. As Sako told

the NHK reporters running a story on such cases, “For those like me who have no one to depend upon (*miyori ga nai hito*), we can be very relieved (*anshinshita*) with a contract like this and also reassured that our deaths won’t be a bother to others.”³²

Conclusion

If precarity in the post-bubble period correlated with uncertainty of jobs, marriages, and “my-homes,”—the loss of aspirational possibility—precarity today in Japan correlates more with tentative social bonds and the isolation of disconnection—the loss of intimate connectedness. Those “without any one to depend upon” are in a sociological condition that is unquestionably on the rise, one in which the interdependence that human survival relies upon is precariously scarce. Although, as Butler says of precarity, it is differentially distributed in that some are more vulnerable than others (the elderly, low-income, un(der)employed, single parents); anyone is potentially at risk, as data on lonely deaths have distressingly shown.³³ Even those with partners, children, and wealth can wind up all alone in the end. The prospect of dying by oneself and remaining unclaimed by anyone else is a widespread fear, as I discovered in my research. Offering safeguards to this is what has fueled the *shūkatsu* boom: businesses, services, alternative burial grounds that provide their own form of *ibasho*—an ending place where one is guaranteed belonging and care, albeit contractual care, no matter if one is (otherwise) by oneself.

Admittedly, much of this new-age deathcare is a business and runs as a marketplace where those who sign up do so as consumers signing a contract. It is hardly outside capitalism as making burial, funerals, and even cremations more affordable is one of the driving forces of *shūkatsu*. But it is in the domain of the sociological that one sees the signs of something truly pioneering. Breaking from the mandate of reliance upon kin and recasting *ohitorisan* as not only acceptable but potentially social—as being able to engage with different kinds of

relationality such as “grave friends”—the new designs of deathcare are challenging the normative anchors that have defined being, belonging, and having others to rely upon in Japan. By offering alternatives to abandonment for those otherwise socially alone, the channels of and for grievability today are becoming pried loose from the governance of the nation-state, the normativity of the patriarchal family, and the “no future” of social reproduction dependent on children and ancestors. All of this, I suggest, has significant implications for the course of Japan moving forward. This is particularly the case if the progressive reimagination of sociality that glimmers in the field of death could spread elsewhere.

Moving those made precarious by the reliance upon a familial system that they “cannot depend upon”—such as former offenders, parentless youth, but really, just about anyone—into more reliable networks for belonging and care would seem to be the mandate facing Japan and the Japanese today. Forged in the crucible of precarity, the possibility of something otherwise is being born here.

Notes

¹ “Effort Alone Won’t Solve Anything; Who Should I Entrust My Life To? [Doryoku dakede wa dōnimo dekinai; dare ni takusu? Jinsei no jūdai kyokumen],” Who Should You Entrust Your Life to? [Dare ni takusu? Jinsei no jūdai kyokumen]. *NHK One*, July 10, 2024.

² “Even if you Have no Relatives, You Can Prepare for the Grave You Want While You’re Still Alive with the ‘Yokosuka Method’ [Yokosuka hōshiki] to ha muen demo nozomu haka e seizen kara sonaeru,” *Chiba Web*, March 27, 2024.

³ Suzuki Iwayumi and Mori Kenji, eds., *Contemporary Japan’s Grave and Funeral System: The Whereabouts of the Dead in an Era Without Family* [Gendainihon no sōsho toha hakasei: Ienakijidai no shisha] (Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2018), 1.

⁴ Inoue Haruyo, *The Way of Dying in the Age of Singles* [Ohitorisama jidai no shinikata] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 2025).

⁵ Anne Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023).

⁶ Anne Allison, *Precarious Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 22.

⁷ Allison, *Precarious Japan*, 22.

⁸ Allison, *Precarious Japan*, 22.

⁹ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Allison, *Precarious Japan*.

¹¹ Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, “Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, nos. 7–8 (2008): 51–72.

¹² Charles Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future: West Africa after the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1.

¹³ Inoue.

¹⁴ Inoue.

¹⁵ Yamada Masahiro, *Refugees from the Family* [Kazoku nanmin] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbun Shuppan, 2014).

¹⁶ Allison, *Being Dead Otherwise*.

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