

## Death and Desire in Contemporary Japan

Representing, Practicing, Performing

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# The Funeral in Contemporary Japanese Society

## The Company-sponsored Funeral of the Founder. Arrangement and Creation of the Most Important Funeral Service in the Company's History

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**Abstract** The company-sponsored funeral represents a fundamental event in company's life. In particular, the funeral of its founder presents some peculiar features in comparison with other types of company-sponsored funeral. In this paper, I will investigate the arrangement and the creation of the founder's funeral through the analysis of three significant examples, namely the ceremonies for Matsushita Konosuke (Panasonic), Ibuka Masaru and Morita Akio (Sony).

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**Keywords** Anthropology. Company's Founder. Company-Sponsored Funeral. Panasonic. Sony.

### 1 The Company-Sponsored Funeral and the Company's Founder

The company-sponsored funeral<sup>1</sup> is a ceremony organised and supported, both under the economical and human point of view, by a company to commemorate the top-level administrators who particularly contributed to its success. This ceremony chronologically follows the 'private funeral' (*missō* 密葬) and the 'temporary burial' (*kasō* 仮葬) organised by the family and it is considered the 'formal funeral' (*honsō* 本葬). In Japan, the number of these formal funerals have considerably grown, whereas in the adjacent countries, such as Korea, the number is lower.

<sup>1</sup> A previously translated version of this paper was published in March 2003 as "Company Funeral of the Corporate Founder. Panasonic and sony", *Tenri Journal of Religion*, 31, 151-66. For the original paper see Nakamaki 2002.

The main characteristics of company-sponsored ceremonies can be summarised as follow.<sup>2</sup> First, it is not exclusively centred on the prayers for the deceased, yet a great importance is given to the funeral oration where the deceased is publicly honoured. In other words, the company undertakes the arrangement of the ceremony in every aspect. Second, it is clear that the company's reputation is intimately connected to the company-sponsored funeral. Since the company invests a considerable amount of money and time in these ceremonies, any fault could undermine both the company's prestige and the departed's name. Therefore, the company pays attention to every single detail within the organisation and, in order to provide against unexpected events, a certain flexibility is fundamental. Third, the company-sponsored ceremony is a usage that continues to exist within the reciprocal relations of the company's members. Socially, this is a ceremonial event for the company, open also to people who do not belong to it. Although it is a funerary ceremony, it represents an occasion for the company to express the will to maintain its internal and external relationships. Four, in this occasion the company displays its eternity and rebirth. Indeed, the ceremony often symbolises the succession of authority. Lastly, one of the most evident features is the displaying of inequality, since these ceremonies are noticeably arranged exclusively for founders or administrators. Even though all the new employees participate in the welcoming ceremony, they will never receive the honour of a company-sponsored funeral unless they reach the company's top positions.

In particular, this paper deals with the ceremony held on a grand scale for the company's founder. It is not an exaggeration to say that this is the most important event in the history of the company, presenting different aspects in comparison with the company-sponsored ceremony of other members. This is because the passing of the founder is invested with a particular significance within the company. During the ceremony, on the one hand, the succession of authority and the changing of the guard take place along with the development of the company's future attitude and image. On the other hand, people's opinion about the company and the reality it lives constantly change. Albeit a company is defined as an organisation with its own regulations, in many cases the ideas and personality of its founder constitutes the keystone around which the company develops. It is, thus, clear why this ceremony is highly considered to be important.

The founder's ceremony emerges for its importance among the other ceremonies performed for the company's top members. If we compare the company's internal organisation to a family's, the founder constitutes the first ancestor. As well as ancestor's DNA is transmitted to his heirs, the attitude of the founder, in some way, transfers to his successor. Moreover, the

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2 For further details, see Nakamaki 1999b.

characteristics of a company are handed down as intangible regulations. Thus, the passing of the founder, who personifies the image of the company, represents an opportunity to make some changes because it hides the reorganisation of DNA and the possibility to transform the company's essence. Depending on the arrangement of the ceremony, the course of the company's future may considerably change.

The company or the undertaker are not the sole directors of the company-sponsored ceremonies. Indeed, the people attending the ceremony may also arrange the event. In this case, some important decisions need to be made properly, e.g. the choice of a proper funeral chairman; the people in charge of reading the message of condolence; how to accommodate every participant's individual need. In a broader sense, the company's future relationships depend on the success of the ceremony. In many cases, albeit the funeral formally takes place according to plan, there might be unexpected events as well. It proves to be an occasion for the company to show its ability to cope with unforeseen situations. The participants to the company-sponsored ceremony, thus, create this event in every single part.

When analysing the company-sponsored ceremony we must consider two aspects: the arrangement and the creation of the ceremony. For instance, in the case of a film, there is a clear intention regarding the direction along with a screenplay. Yet, the actual film may reveal some differences with the planned one, due to the ability of the actors, the adjunction of scenes or other elements; in other words, it depends on things that were not initially taken into account. Analogously, in the funeral ceremony, it is fundamental to provide a 'film' that can be easily modified according to the circumstances, even though an original plan exists.

In this paper, I will present the cases of company's founder funeral from Panasonic and Sony. Panasonic and Sony are the leadership companies in the electronic field; their founders' business philosophy is unique and the respective companies present some peculiar features that differentiate them from other competitors. In any case, this paper is not focused on the different features of these two companies, yet the material collected from reliable testimonies clarifies the features of the funeral ceremonies of their founders.<sup>3</sup> Panasonic was founded by Matsushita Konosuke, whereas Sony's founders are Ibuka Masaru and Morita Akio.

After a brief illustration of Matsushita Denki's and Sony's funeral ceremonies, I will analyse these cases using the key-concepts of 'arrangement' (*enshutsu* 演出) and 'creation' (*sōshutsu* 創出).

3 Recently the following publications have appeared: Tateishi, Yasunori (2001). *Sony to Matsushita: Nijūisseiki seiki wo ikinokoru no wa dochirada!*. Tōkyō: Kōdansha; Ōtomi, Hiroyasu (2001). *Matsushita ga Sony wo koeru hi*. Ōsaka: Sunmark shuppan.

## 2 The Company-Sponsored Funeral. Some Practical Examples

### 2.1 The Funeral Ceremony of Panasonic's Founder

Panasonic was founded in 1918; it became a leader in the home electronics industry to the extent that its founder, Matsushita Kōnosuke, was defined as “the god of business”. Matsushita passed away on April 27th 1989, at the age of ninety-four. A first viewing was held between April 27th and 28th, in the western pavilion of the family's estate, whereas the formal viewing took place at the so-called Northern Hall (Tsumura branch temple in Nishi-Honganji complex) in Osaka on April 29th. On April 30th, the President Tanii Akio allowed the funeral chairman to perform the private funeral in the Northern Hall. The officiating priest was the head of the Nishi-Honganji's head office (Jōdōshinshū branch), and a tea ceremony was offered by the grand tea master Sen Sōshitsu of the Urasenke school. The people who attended the formal viewing were 3,500, while the participants at the private ceremony were 12,000. After a month of preparation, in May 25th 1989, a collective ceremony attended by the Matsushita Company and its affiliates was arranged at the gymnasium of the company in Hirakata (Deguchi et al. 1999). The ceremony was transmitted through satellite in the 24-hour shops of seventeen cities throughout the country. The condolatory telegrams amounted to 11,500, and the condolence callers exceeded the 20,000 people, therefore it was defined as “the greatest company-sponsored ceremony in the history” (1999, 151).

### 2.2 Company-Sponsored Funeral of Sony's Founders

Ibuka Masaru and Morita Akio are known as Sony's founders.<sup>4</sup> In 1946, Ibuka and Morita founded a tape-recorder company at Hirakuya in Nihonbashi. This was the origin of the well-known Sony Company; in fact, they both cooperated in the built of a tape-recorder and substantially contributed to Sony's birth. Ibuka died in 1997 and two years later, in 1999, the co-founder Morita passed away.

Ibuka, the company's founder who kept the role of supreme advisor after his retirement, gave his last breath in his house, in December 19th 1997, at the age of 89. Since Ibuka was Protestant, the private ceremony was held at the Christian Church in Shinagawa. The ceremony and commemoration sponsored by the Sony Group were organised at the International Hall “Pamir” of the Prince Hotel New Takanawa, in the afternoon

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<sup>4</sup> Formally, the first president was Maeda Tamon, who was Ibuka's father-in-law and had previously worked for the Education Minister. However, Sony's founders are equally identified with both Ibuka and Morita.

of January 21st 1998. The tenor of the music was high and the mourners were approximately 5,700.

Sony's co-founder and honorary chairman, Morita, died at the age of 78, on October 5th 1999. The company-sponsored ceremony (organised with the participation of Morita Co., Ltd), took place in the afternoon of November 8th 1999 at the International Hall "Pamir" of the Prince Hotel New Takanawa, as in the case of Ibuka. Obviously, internationally well-known businessmen as well as important personalities from all over the world were present. Besides, the ceremony was transmitted simultaneously by Sky Perfect TV throughout the country. The people who attended the event were about 10,000. I also was admitted at the ceremony in the Hokushin Hall.

Morita's funeral service was characterised by the presence of music; even though the ceremony did not follow the general pattern, the invitation card reported the following program:

Memorial Service Program

1. Procession
2. Ave Maria F. Schubert
3. Moment of Silence
4. "Chatō no gi" Tea Ceremony, Sen Sōshitsu, Grand Tea Master of the Urasenke
5. Video Tribute to Akio Morita
6. Memorial Service Eulogies
7. Norio Ōga, Chairman of the Board, Sony Corporation
8. Yōtarō Kobayashi. Chairman, Japan Association of Corporate Executives
9. Minoru Oda, President, Tokyo University of Information Sciences
10. Thomas S. Foley, US Ambassador to Japan
11. "Dies irae" "Lacrimosa" from Requiem, W.A. Mozart
12. Telegram of Condolence
13. Ave Maria, J.S. Bach / C. Gounod
14. Remarks from Hideo Morita
15. Conclusion and Floral Offerings
16. Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra
17. Soprano: Satsuki Adachi
18. Conductor: Norio Ōga / Yōichirō Ōmachi
19. Sony Philharmonic Choir

### 3 The Arrangement and the Creation

#### 3.1 The Arrangement of the Company-Sponsored Ceremony

The company-sponsored ceremony is usually held to commemorate the company's founder or chairman. Many extant companies were built by their founders immediately after the war. Specifically, in some cases the vice-president, the executive president and the managing president receive a company-sponsored funeral, whereas in other companies there is a distinction between 'formal funeral' (*honsō* 本葬) for the executive president and 'cooperative funeral' (*kyōryokusō* 協力葬) for the managing president. In any case, the company usually arranges the funeral and the funeral oration for the top-level administrators and the salaryman élite, even though they are not the founder himself or part of his family.

The founder's funeral, if compared to other company-sponsored funeral, is distinguished by numerous differences. First, the company assigns the organisation of the funeral to its most valuable members. In the case of Matsushita Kōnosuke, the selection of the personnel part of the organisation team preferred 'considerate', 'reliable' and 'diligent' people, selecting six hundred employees among the best members of the company (Deguchi et al. 1999, 151). Another peculiarity was the supply of a desk in the head office for the death care company (*kōekisha* 公益社) during the funeral.

In the case of the ceremony of Sony's founders, the top management elaborated a rather complicate plan on their own. They did not rely on the funeral company, yet the chairman in charge composed and personally performed the funeral music, awakening attendants' admiration. During the entrance of Ibuka's ashes, the wife of the president and chairman Ōga Norio, Matsubara Midori, played Chopin's Piano Sonata no. 2, op. 35 "Funeral March". Moreover, Ōga's composition "To the memory of Ibuka" was played by trumpet during the silent prayers. During Morita's ceremony, Ōga also conducted the Tōkyō Philharmonic Orchestra. Interestingly, there was the singular case in which the President, Idei Nobuyuki, presided the funeral. This is an extremely rare case, as it is usually performed by the head of the general affairs department.

Another important point that need to be further investigated is the presence of VIP guests who are not part of the company. They can be founders of important companies based in Japan, which are also internationally well-known. In the case of Matsushita and Sony's founders, the VIP guests from abroad were particularly noticeable. A memorial address was read on behalf of George Bush, the 41st President of the United States; during the ceremony, also the business partner and Philips's president, Wisse Dekker, expressed his sorrow. During the funeral service, every local administration offered a floral tribute, formed by white chrysanthemums.

The funeral ceremony of Ibuki was not attended by guests from abroad.

On the other hand, in the case of Morita, many international businessmen were present, e.g. the US Ambassador to Japan, Thomas Foley, who made a funeral address. Furthermore, there were innumerable condolatory telegrams from abroad sent, among others, by the President of France, Jacques Chirac; the former US Ambassador to Japan, Michael Mansfield; the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger; David Rockefeller.

Obviously, there were many important Japanese personalities and the big names from the political world were at the ceremony. During Matsushita's funeral, the eulogies were given on behalf of the Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru and on behalf of Mitsuzuka Hiroshi, Transport Minister; a memorial address was also made by the Honorary President of the Kansai Electric Power, Ashihara Yoshishige. For the incense burning were selected Edo Hideo, President of the Mitsui Fudōsan Co.; the Governor of Ōsaka Prefecture, Kishi Sakae; the Unaffiliated Director, Nakayama Sohei, in charge as special consultant for the Industrial Bank of Japan; the President of Japan Business Federation, Saitō Eishirō. At Ibuka's and Morita's funerals, the memorial service eulogies were given by Sakura Bank's Honorary President and Consultant, Koyama Gorō; Reona Esaki, past Rector of Tsukuba University, for the former. Ambassador Foley; Kobayashi Yōtarō, chairman of Japan Association of Corporate Executives and chairman and executive director of the Fuji Xerox Co.; the President of the Tōkyō University of Information Sciences, Oda Minoru, for the latter. Among the participants to Matsushita's funeral ceremony, the presence of leading figures from the financial world of the Kansai area emerges, whereas in the case of Sony's founders the participation of the Prime Ministers, both from the past and in charge, is particularly relevant.

If we compare Panasonic's and Sony's memorial addresses, some peculiar features emerge. At Matsushita's funeral, the memorial addresses of the most important public figures, namely the Prime Minister, the Transport Minister and the President of the US, were given on their behalf. The Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru and the Honorary President of the Kansai Electric Power used 'Matsushita-san' to refer to the deceased, whereas President Tanii and the representative of the labour union preferred the title of 'Counselor'. President Bush and Decca's Chairman chose 'Mr. Matsushita'.

During Sony's founders' funerals, no memorial address was given by the former or actual Prime Minister. Indeed, some of their closest friends were selected for the memorial eulogies. Sakura Bank's Honorary President and Consultant, Koyama Gorō, and Ibuka were about the same age and knew each other from Tōkyō Tsūshin Kōgyō's times; furthermore, Koyama worked at the company for several years as Outside Director. Reona Esaki was employed at Sony for four years as researcher and became famous for receiving the Nobel Prize for the Esaki Tunnel Diode. They both used 'Ibuka-san' during the memorial address. Morita's friends also preferred

'Morita-san' (Kobayashi Yōtarō and Ambassador Foley) or 'Morita-kun' (Oda Minoru, a classmate during the period at the Faculty of Physics at Ōsaka University). The head for the funeral organisation and company's chairman, Ōga, referred to Sony's founders as 'Ibuka-san' and 'Morita-san'. The usage of the name ending 'san' derives from a practice within the company, as it was used indiscriminately for both the founders and the directors.

The memorial address at Ibuka's ceremony is distinguished by a particular element. At the time, Morita was having medical treatments in Hawaii, so he could not take part in the funeral. The memorial address preceded Ōga's one and was given by his wife, Morita Yoshiko, who read it after recalling some memories about Ibuka. Hence, this is how Sony arranged the ceremony, celebrating the relationship between Ibuka and Morita.

Another main difference between the memorial addresses during Panasonic's ceremony and that of Sony's is the presence of a labour union delegate. Matsushita Konosuke was famous for adopting a family-oriented policy in his company. Therefore, the labour unions were never seen as a mere antagonist, because at the centre of Matsushita's business philosophy there were mutual respect and sustain for his employees. The particular attention given to the employees was the reason why the labour union delegate, Maekawa Tomohisa, was included with a memorial address in Matsushita's funeral. In order to commemorate the soul of the deceased employees, Panasonic Company erected a memorial tower at Kōya-san where the president and minor managers can, along with the labour union delegates, burn incense (Nakamaki 1992, 74).<sup>5</sup> Thus, it appears clear that the participation of Maekawa at the funeral service is not an exceptional event, yet it aimed at the maintenance of the natural balance within the company. However, the presence of the labour union at company-sponsored funeral is not very common in the Kansai area; also at the Sony-sponsored ceremonies there was no memorial address given on behalf of a labour union. Therefore, the memorial address from a labour union's chairman further emphasised the great importance given by Panasonic and his founder to labour-management relationship.

Lastly, another peculiarity of the company's arrangement is the ornament of the altar. In a company-sponsored ceremony, the altar adorned with flowers is usually displayed with a picture depicting the defunct at its centre; in some cases, posthumous ranks, decoration or medals may also appear on the altar. At the company-sponsored ceremony of both Panasonic's and Sony's founders, the donation provided by the Emperor and the Imperial Prince was added to the usual ornaments, making it very

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5 A labour union delegate also participates and burns incense at the memorial services organised by the Nankai Dentetsu (1992, 62-3).

different and unique if compared to the common altar used in this type of ceremony.

Noticeably, at Ibuka's funeral there was only one portrait displayed, whereas in the case of Morita there were three of them. At the centre, one with a smiling face; on the left and on the right, a portrait at work and one with crossed arms respectively. In these images, Morita clearly resembled an international businessman in his formal suit. The portraits from three different perspectives, rather than one single image, were useful to awake people's imagination about Morita. Moreover, the portraits were not photographs, as the company preferred pictures. According to the organisation, placing a backlight for a constant illumination was extremely difficult, but it was possible thanks to Sony's special technologies.

The audacious idea to place three different pictures was elaborated within the internal board of the company and did not depend on the undertaker. Indeed, the ornament of the altar at Ibuka's ceremony was left to the undertaker, whereas in the case of Morita it was not.

The relationship with the undertaker varies if we compare the case of Panasonic with Sony, emphasising once again the differences between the two companies. Panasonic closely cooperated with the undertaker, to the extent that they provided the death care company with a desk. On the contrary, in the case of Sony, the company dealt with Sudō's flower shop for Ibuka's ceremony and collaborated only with the hotel for Morita's funeral.

### 3.2 The Creation of a Company-Sponsored Funeral

The company-sponsored ceremony is a funeral ceremony with a plot. In order to display the ceremony it takes about twenty-five days of accurate organization, albeit it does not always take place as it was programmed.<sup>6</sup> For instance, there might be important condolence caller not included in the guest list, or ad lib memorial addresses. The weather condition also greatly influences the result of the event. Moreover, when the number of cars is limited due to the parking space, the concern of the people in charge is considerably higher. Then, even though the importance of the guests is always kept in mind, some faults always happen.

The funeral usually goes according to plans and, unless something unexpected happens, the condolence callers follow the given indications. If we analyse the ceremony from the point of view of the construction of its

<sup>6</sup> The data refer to the analysis published in the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun*, from January 1996 to March 1997, regarding the obituaries about the organisation-sponsored funerals, e.g. the company-sponsored funerals in the Tokyo area and neighbouring prefectures. See Murakami 1999.

etiquette by the organisation and the participants, some interesting features emerge from the cases of both Panasonic and Sony.

At the very beginning of Matsushita's funeral, there was a light rain, but during the ceremony it became heavier and heavier. A great number of umbrellas were arranged for the long line of guests waiting in front of the gymnasium. Furthermore, the organising committee promptly ordered some hundreds of towels from the nearby training center, entrusting the female employees to bring the towels back and wipe the guests' back. According to Mitsui Izumi, it was intimately connected to the 'protection of trust' (*hoshin* 保信) that Matsushita himself transmitted during his life, thus the company-sponsored ceremony was the stage where this 'protection of trust' was greatly displayed as a value (Deguchi et al. 1999, 154).

For Panasonic the protection of trust is particularly important. Therefore, the company considers the business partners as 'sustainers' (*onkosha* 恩顧者) and constantly expresses them its gratitude, working for the maintenance and the enhancement of the trust within the company. In order to control the company's trustworthiness, in the main quarters, a "Trustworthiness Division" was established and placed under the direct control of the president. It was first established in 1938 as "Trustworthiness Department", representing the beginning of a long tradition. At first, it aimed at the improvement of the welfare, beginning with heating the bath for its employees. Nowadays, it has established a state-of-the-art system to satisfy the needs of the 'sustainers'. Among the duties of the "Trustworthiness division", there are: firstly, visit of congratulations or call of condolence in case of mourning; secondly, preparing telegrams of congratulations or condolatory telegrams; thirdly, arranging letters of sympathy and greetings cards; fourthly, arranging the gifts during festive periods such as *chūgen* and *seibo*; fifthly, the duties regarding the yearly events. For example, they organise mourning memorial services for deceased employees and administrate the cemetery at Mount Kōya; they are also responsible for the administration matters regarding the company-sponsored funeral. The demonstration of the ability to promptly satisfy guests' needs, being polite and express the company's gratitude toward supporters are an expression of 'protection of trust'. Hence, it is clear why Mitsui saw a manifestation of the so-called 'protection of trust' in the wiping of the guests' shoulders.

In the case of Sony's founders, at Morita's ceremony the funeral music abounded with references to Sony brand, yet under the point of view of the creation of the ceremony, the memorial address of US Ambassador to Japan, Thomas Foley, need to be further analysed.<sup>7</sup> Foley referred to Morita

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7 I am particularly grateful to Morimoto Masayoshi and Katsuta Tadao, respectively Senior Managing Director and Head of Secretarial Section, for their support during my research at Sony.

as 'Morita-san', the most famous person in Japan, after the Emperor; in describing Morita he said that "he was able to overcome the boundaries of different cultures" and "as a Japanese spokesman he played a remarkable part in this process"; as a businessman he showed "his loyalty toward the responsibilities in the company". At end of his address, Foley used 'Akio' instead of 'Morita-san'.

The participation of an ambassador at a private citizen's funeral and the related memorial address following the Japanese etiquette seem to belong to a different age. Moreover, the use of Morita's first name during the memorial address given by the US Ambassador was extremely unexpected, since an informal name was used during the company-sponsored funeral, which is one of the most formal events. However, the usage of the first name is common in American culture, and in the case of Morita, it is not to be considered as impolite, rather it overcomes the formalities of diplomatic language stressing the spontaneity of the memorial address.

Under the point of view of the creation of the ceremony, this element is particularly important as Foley modified his memorial address before the funeral. Sony had arranged the Telop transmission device for the translation, which revealed to be unnecessary. On the contrary, this unexpected change proved the sincere friendship between Foley and Morita.<sup>8</sup>

## 4 Conclusions

In conclusion, the given examples show the adaptation of a solemn ceremony such as the company-sponsored funeral to different circumstances, mainly created by the guests' originality. This type of funeral reveals its creativity within an extremely complicated one-time-only planning, avoiding being an event with a strict schedule. In this sense, the individuality of both the deceased and the company emerge, revealing the unique business philosophy of the founder along with many other important details.

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<sup>8</sup> In the special memorial issue for Morita Akio "Family" (Commemorative number for the founder and honorary president Morita Akio, December 2000, Sony Corporation Public Relations Department), Thomas Foley's memorial address was entirely translated (100-101) using exclusively 'Morita-san'. However, it should be noted that, in the last part of his address, Foley referred to Morita as 'Akio'.

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