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A Society of Many Deaths End-of-Life Planning and Governmentality in Super-Aging Japan

A hybrid *u:japan* lecture by Dorothea Mladenova

Thursday
2025-05-22
18⁰⁰~19³⁰



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Discussions about Japan's "super-aging society" (*chō-kōrei shakai*) often focus on elder care, pension and long-term care funding, the low birthrate, labor shortages, and rural depopulation. In my research, I explored this discourse through the lens of death and dying. As thanatologist Kotani Midori noted in 2014, "The flipside of a super-aged society is a society of many deaths (*tashi shakai*)". From the perspective of governmentality studies, such labels frame social conditions as problems and prescribe ways of dealing with them.

One such response is *shūkatsu* (終活, end-of-life planning), a practice introduced by the funeral industry and briefly turned into a media buzzword. Here, responsibility is individualized: "We have entered an era in which everyone must think about their own death," claimed the Shūkatsu Counselor Association in 2014. While making arrangements for one's own death is not new, *shūkatsu* takes a specific form within neoliberal contexts—as a technology of the self aimed at optimizing outcomes and aligning personal responsibility with collective benefit.

In the first part of the lecture, I examine how

the *shūkatsu* industry mobilizes demographic discourse to activate individuals to manage their own death.

At its core, however, this content marketing strategy is a response to declining revenues in the funeral industry, triggered by changing consumer behavior and the emergence of online discount platforms, as well as an attempt to tap into the wealth of older urban residents.



https://www.irasuloya.com/2016/01/blog-post_58.html

In the second part, drawing on structured interviews, I explore how those targeted by the *shūkatsu* program respond—ranging from active engagement and pragmatic adaptation to hesitation and outright rejection. They share a common desire not to become a burden on their children or society, and to die as quietly and smoothly as possible (*pin pin korori*).



Dr. Dorothea Mladenova is a Research Associate for Japanese Studies at the East Asian Institute at Leipzig University. Taking the perspective of Cultural Studies, Governmentality Studies, and discourse theory, her research focuses on everyday culture, identity formation and power structures in and related to Japan. She has worked on culinary nationalism and glocalization, the 2011 Fukushima triple disaster, the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the culture of death and dying in Japan. In her current research, she explores the post-migrant shift of memory culture in Berlin concerning the memory of sexual violence in wartime. Her research outputs are available in German, English, and Japanese.

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