

A Study on Japanese Death Culture: Using the Movie Departures as an Entry Point

Shangzhi Hu

*Department of Biological Sciences, University of Toronto Scarborough, Toronto, Canada
Shangzhi.hu@mail.utoronto.ca*

Abstract. This paper takes the Japanese film *Departures* as a point of entry to explore the multiple dimensions of contemporary Japanese death culture. In particular, it examines cremation as the dominant funerary practice in Japan, situating it within broader processes of institutionalization and social transformation surrounding death, religion, and social relations. The discussion highlights shifting attitudes toward religion to provide a comprehensive context for understanding how "death" has been perceived, regulated and practiced in Japan since the Meiji era. Furthermore, the paper approaches the subject from a socio-economic perspective, paying close attention to changes in family structure and the challenges of population aging. Taken together, this analysis demonstrates how Japanese death culture is being reconstructed at the intersections of tradition and modernity, religion and secularity, as well as individual and collective values. In the 80 years after World War II, with the development of the nuclear family and the aging population with fewer children, the Japanese people's views on life and death became increasingly diverse. It is of great significance for people to accurately understand the profound meaning of Japanese death culture for the diversified development of Japanese society and the integration of foreign talents under the background of globalization in the 21st century.

Keywords: Death Culture, Undertaker, Religion, Impurity, Cremation

1. Introduction

In 2008, the release and popularity of *Departures* (Okuribito, 2008) brought Japanese death culture firmly into public awareness. Through the perspective of an undertaker, this film detailed illustrated how death has been treated, imagined, and remembered through rituals. For undertakers, their task is to clean the body and put a shroud on it; make up the female deceased and shave and dress up the male deceased, which were previously borne by family members. Reconsidered within the broader socio-cultural context after World War II, the story of *Departures*, as it will be argued in this paper, reflects a shifting image of death. With the popularization of nuclear families, opportunities to live with the elderly became increasingly rare, and people did not have the chance to witness their grandparents falling ill and dying in their old age. Today, funerary responsibilities are largely entrusted to professionals, with undertakers completing the funeral ceremonies while families accept this delegation as natural. This shift is further reinforced by the Japanese medical insurance system,

which prevents family members from accompanying patients in hospitals, leaving both care in life and management after death to professionals.

In Japan, the study of death and dying emerged with the establishment of "The Japanese Association for Clinical Research on Death and Dying (JARD)" in 1977. Institutionally, the research addressed topics such as end-of-life care, brain death, organ transplantation issues, funerals, and so on. Modern concern in death-related matters has been increasing [1,2]. Beginning with the movie *The Funeral* and the debates on brain death in the 1980s, the exploration of death culture received attention [3].

A study by Kariya & Watarai showed that when it comes to thinking about the causes of death, the answer "death of people around us" accounts for the highest proportion, accounting for 36.3% of respondents, followed by "death of family members" (29.8%) and "death of pets" (19.9%) [4]. These findings underscore that death is a universal and unavoidable topic.

Japanese death culture reflects a complex mixture of multiple values, including reincarnation (Rinnetensei), beliefs about "the world after death" (Takai-kan), Buddhism, Shintoism, ancestor worship (Sosen suhai), and among others [5]. These diverse approaches to death reveal the cultural and religious transformations that have occurred throughout modern Japanese history. Against this background, this paper takes the movie *Departures* as an entry point, based on existing research, to examine Japan's death culture around (a) why there is no religious sense when bidding farewell to the deceased, (b) why undertakers are despised in Japan, and (c) why are Japanese people cremated instead of buried.

2. The story of Japanese movie departures

The movie *Departures* focuses on the story of an undertaker who cleans, applies makeup, and prepares the deceased for their final journey. Daigo Kobayashi was originally a cellist in an orchestra. Due to the dissolution of the band, he had to give up his career as a performer and return to his hometown of Yamagata Prefecture. Struggling to find a job, he applied for a position advertised as "travel assistant" but discovered it was actually an assistant for Nokan, who prepares bodies for funerals. Although he was reluctant to work with the dead, he stayed in the job to make a living.

After Daigo began his life as a new undertaker, he encountered various deaths such as a lonely old woman whose body was rotting badly, a man who dress as a woman, and a mother who abandoned her young daughter in death. Unconsciously, Daigo began to understand the job of an undertaker, but when neighbors and friends learned that he was working as an undertaker, they showed disdain; After learning that he was working as an undertaker, his wife was very disgusted with him and said "dirty" before returning to her parents' home. Despite personal loss, he performed his duties with sincerity, eventually regaining his sense of purpose and reconnecting with his cello.

In this way, in each job, Daigo felt a sense of responsibility and calmness. As the president of NK agency said, "This (Nokan) is your destiny." During this period, Daigo faced the pregnancy of his wife, the death of the bathhouse owner, and the death of his father who had been missing for 30 years. When he truly found his value in this job, and then picked up the cello to play, he became a man with a story. The scene of him playing the cello against the wind on the riverbank is breathtaking. In the end, his wife returned to him due to the birth of another little life, but she still hoped that he would give up this job for the sake of their child. Until the death of his friend's mother, who was also the owner of the bathhouse, Daigo's wife witnessed him how to placing the old woman in the coffin and finally understood him. She accompanied him to participate in the old woman's cremation.

The most touching part of the film is when Daigo is notified to deal with the aftermath of his father who left home and ran away from home many years ago. He has no impression of his father, only remembering that he once told him: in ancient times, people did not invent language, but in order to convey emotions to each other, they would find a suitable stone and put it in the other person's hand. When the other person holds the stone, they can feel his feelings. But his father and he only exchanged the stone once, and then he left home, leaving only him to keep the stone. When he was tidying up his father's remains, he slowly opened his father's hand and noticed the stone in his father's palm. "What kind of person is father? He has lived for 70 years, but only has this little relic." The movie does not tell us how Daigo's father spent these years, but when Daigo was cleaning his father's body, he saw the stone in his father's palm and felt his father's love.

3. Japanese death culture behind departures

3.1. Main beliefs are Buddhism and polytheism

The movie not only illustrates how undertakers have emerged as new mediators of farewells, replacing the role traditionally held by family members, but also highlights a contemporary, secularized approach to death in Japan. This section will review the changing landscape of religion in modern Japan.

Nishi conducted a survey on the religious beliefs of Japanese people during the screening of the movie in 2008 [6]. Regarding the question "What religion do you believe in?", 39% of respondents answered that they believe in religions such as Buddhism and Shintoism. Among them, 34% believe in Buddhism, 3% believe in Shintoism, 1% believe in Christianity, and 1% believe in other religions. 49% of people answered "do not believe in religion", exceeding the number of people who believe in religion. Among them, less than 20% of males aged 16-29 and 40-49 believe in religion, over 40% of males aged 50-59 believe in religion, and more than half of males aged 60 and above believe in religion. The proportion of women aged 30-39 and 40-49 who believe in religion is higher than that of men. The proportion of men aged 40-49 who believe in religion is 19%, while that of women is 39%, almost twice that of men. Compared to the 1998 survey, there has been almost no change in men, with the percentage of women aged 16-29 who believe in religion increasing from 10% to 20%, and the percentage of respondents aged 30-39 increasing from 17% to 28%. In the past 10 years, the number of young women practicing religion has increased. Among them, the number of people who believe in Buddhism has increased from 30% in 1998 to 34%, while there has been no change in other religions.

The highest proportion of respondents regarding the role and effects of religion indicated "the ability to obtain spiritual comfort and happiness" (50%) and "healing difficulties and sadness" (45%). About half of the people achieve spiritual peace and emotional healing through religious faith. The specific religious actions that are often done are "grave sweeping" (Ohaka-mairi, 66%), "New Year worship" (Hatsumode, 55%), "having an amulet" (26%), "worship at a shrine" (26%), "drawing lots" (22%), "reading the Bible and Classics" (6%), "accommodating religious gatherings" (5%), "going to the church to worship" (1%).

The "Religious Statistical Survey" released by the Agency for Cultural Affairs shows that there are 179,339 religious corporations across Japan. Among them, Shinto accounts for 47.1%, Buddhism accounts for 42.9%, Christianity accounts for 2.7%, and other religious groups account for 7.4% [7]. The total number of religious believers in the country is 162,991,299, of which 51.5% advocate that they believe in Shinto, Buddhism accounts for 43.4%, Christianity accounts for 0.8%,

and other religions account for 4.3%. These figures showed that the Japanese believers are mainly Shintoism and Buddhism.

In addition, data released by the Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Japan's total population is 123.340million [8]. The difference between 162 million believers and the total actual population of 123 million shows that some Japanese believers believe in more than one religion. Polytheism is a characteristic of Japanese religious beliefs.

3.2. Reasons for undertaker being despised

In the movie *Departures*, Daigo is despised by his neighbors for working as an undertaker in the funeral industry, and as a result, his wife returns to her parents' home. When Daigo first learns that he will become an undertaker, he also feels resistant in his heart. This scenario illustrates the marginalized position undertakers occupy in Japanese society.

This stigma can be traced back to Engi-Shiki, a legal and ritual code completed in the mid-10th century. The Engi-Shiki refers to the practice of uncleanness (Kegare), such as the dirtiness of human death, reburial, and burial. Since ancient times, there has been the impurity of death (Shie). The distinction between the death of a member of the community and the death of others who are not is apparent. It can be inferred that it was quite common to bury the deceased next to the house. Death itself is also a calamity. In Amami islands and Okinawa, the dead body of a natural death that died on Japanese straw mats (Tatami) is buried in a village cemetery, but accidental death is abandoned to the boundary of the village for several years, and there is a custom of being buried in a funeral. In this way, it is thought that the accidental death might cause the crisis of order of the social community, and it might have been regarded as uncleanness. White is believed to be accompanied by yin energy and can drive away evil spirits [9].

According to Kotani, the impurity of death is an unclean and contagious monomeric concept [10]. Meanwhile, cultural anthropology believes that filth is a different element that disrupts stable order. According to the taboo of black impurity (death) and red impurity (menstruation, childbirth) in Shintoism, which bring changes to a stable family structure, it can indeed be explained as impurity. The opportunity for the impurity of death to take root in Japan was the implementation of the legal book Engi-Shiki in 967, which stipulated the application of legal rules. For example, a person who has passed away from a family member is considered impure, so it is stipulated that civil servants must mourn for 49 days. The Engi-Shiki describes impurity as transmissible through successive contact. The bereaved household was regarded as the origin. The first visitor to that household, along with their family, became impure. A subsequent visitor to this now-defiled household also became impure, though the transmission ended with them and did not extend to their kin. If a third person later entered the second household, their body alone would be considered entirely defiled, but the chain of transmission would cease thereafter.

3.3. Cremation

In the movie *Departures*, the deceased are cremated rather than buried. Historically, in Japan's agrarian society, burial was emphasized as a way to ensure a peaceful rest. For much of Japanese history, burial was the dominant funerary practice, while cremation was exceptional. In the process of transitioning from traditional burial to cremation, Buddhist teachings, the need for hygiene management, and the development of legal systems have all played important roles [11].

Firstly, throughout Japan's history, earth burial had long been the mainstream practice. From the Kofun Eras (250-538) to the Edo Period (1603-1868), burial was mainly carried out locally, and

cremation was limited to a few people such as monks and nobles. During the Edo Period, cremation began to be promoted in cities due to hygiene issues and space constraints, but cremation was very limited. After the Meiji Period (1868-1912), there was no policy to promote cremation at the national level, and local burials continued to be carried out. In other words, cremation was historically exceptional.

Several factors contributed to the shift from burial to cremation. The first factor is the new requirement for hygiene. From the late Edo Period to the Meiji Period, urban population growth and inadequate sanitation made burial-related infectious diseases a social problem. The decay of the remains leads to foul odor and pollutes groundwater, and it is difficult to guarantee the burial space in the city. The second factor is the Meiji government's policies which prioritized the modernization of the country and rewarded sanitary and efficient cremation. Although the "Cremation Prohibition Order" (Kaso kinshi rei) was temporarily issued in 1873, it was withdrawn in 1875 after which cremation was actively encouraged, particularly in cities. The third factor is the reform of legal regulations for local governments. In 1948, the tomb burial law regulated cemeteries and burial practices, was implemented. Local authorities were granted the right to stipulate burial methods, and many municipalities made cremation mandatory. As a result, local authorities have formulated regulations to restrict burials, and cremation has since become the predominant method of interment in Japan.

Secondly, during the post-war period of rapid economic growth (1955-1973), burial practices underwent significant changes. The state and local authority provided subsidies for the construction of crematoriums, reduced operating costs, and actively promoted the improvement of cremation facilities. At the same time, public crematoriums were offered free of charge or at a low price, while the issuance of new burial permits was strictly controlled. These government's measures have accelerated the transition from burial to cremation, and within a few decades, the cremation rate has exceeded 90%, eventually reaching 99.9%. This rapid transition was largely driven by the government's push for rationalization in terms of systems, infrastructure, and costs, rather than by changes in religious beliefs.

Thirdly, in Japan, beyond the ordinary understanding of cremation, there are also practices such as the "no tomb system" and "bone divided tomb system" after cremation [12]. Nenbutsu ojo refers to the birth of Amida Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism (Jodo Shinshu sect), a Japanese Buddhist tradition founded by the monk Shinran during the Kamakura Period (1185-1333). It refers to the teachings of Amitabha Buddha's original aspiration of reciting the Buddha's name and passing away. In some non-remote areas, cremation is carried out in places called Sanmai, where some bones are preserved while others are left. Pure Land Buddhism believes the deceased will be reborn in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, so they do not return to this world. The preserved bones are placed in the temple and there is no cemetery. There are places like this in Japan that do not have cemeteries. In addition, there are graves where remains and corpses are stored in different locations, known as the "double-grave system" (Ryobosei). These practices reflect distinct religious, cultural, political, and historical contexts in Japanese death culture.

Fourthly, there have been changes in the personnel responsible for cremation and funeral customs [13]. Cremation in Japan has been carried out by individuals connected through blood or local ties, as well as by professional funeral practitioners. In areas transitioning to cremation, some communities still follow the traditional practice of having mutual assistance personnel responsible for burying the deceased continue to bear the responsibility of cremation. In areas served by professional funeral practitioners, the approach may differ. Whether it is a professional funeral

professional or traditional mutual-aid personnel, key rituals such as ignition and bone picking are performed according to established customs by the deceased's family and loved ones.

During the period of rapid economic growth, many municipalities and towns in Japan established public crematoriums. In some cities and suburbs with rapidly increasing populations, private crematoriums were established earlier than public ones. Many private crematoriums were converted into public ones through donations or acquisitions before World War II. However, now there are still private crematoriums that undertake the cremation of the deceased in the local area. They replace public crematoriums to meet the needs of local residents who cannot supply crematoriums.

Regarding cremation personnel, due to the popularity of cremation, most of them have shifted from traditional mutual assistance between geographically related individuals to entrusting crematorium staff and other businesses. Nevertheless, in some areas, traditional practices persisted for a time. For example, the public crematorium in Oonanchou, Shimane Prefecture, was operated by a group of local volunteers and the community continued to select cremators in their own areas according to longstanding local traditions.

After the 1960s, the participation of funeral industry practitioners can be divided into the following three stages. Firstly, they provide funeral supplies and tools. Second, they offer funeral services and labor, and the third, they provide a funeral venue. Over time, the managers of the funeral home gradually take control of the whole funeral arrangements.

With the widespread use of public crematoriums across Japan, both the treatment of the remains and the roles of those handling them have changed, which in turn has influenced funeral customs. For example, in areas where the funeral team is still retained, the body is no longer necessary to be carried to the crematorium, but transported in a hearse. Similarly, offerings that were originally dedicated to the burial grave will now be taken directly to the crematorium. While specific practices vary across regions, these examples illustrate that Japanese folk customs surrounding death are undergoing gradual and phased transformations.

4. Transformation and connotation

4.1. Believing in Buddhism and the increasingly weak religious belief

Departures was released in 2008. In the same year, NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute (NHK) conducted the second "International Social Survey Programme" (ISSP) survey, following the first survey conducted in 1998. The theme of the third survey in 2018 remains religion [14]. The survey results can grasp the time series changes of Japanese people's religious beliefs, and are also important data for understanding the changes in Japanese religious views over the past 20 years.

In 2008, NHK conducted the second ISSP research. Its results are as follows: 39% of respondents reported having faith in religion, while 49% reported no religious belief. More people do not believe in religion. Among those who do, women are more likely to believe than men, and older people more than younger people. Regarding the religion that feels "familiar", Buddhism is cited by the most people, accounting for 65%, which is a significant increase compared to 49% in 1998. In religious action, about 90% of people went to "grave sweeping" and "New Year worship". As for "amulet" (Omamori) and "a paper fortune" (Omikuj), One in every two people answered "yes, I have done it." When asked if there are "religious things" such as "spiritual power of ancestors", "afterlife", "reincarnation", etc., about 40% of people answered "yes". The proportion of people who believe in the existence of such "religious things" is higher among younger people and lower among the elderly. Especially over 70% of women in their 30s believe in the existence of "religious things".

The 2018 ISSP survey results are as follows: the proportion of people with no religious belief far exceeds that of people with religious belief. In the 2018 survey on "What religion do you usually believe in", options such as Buddhism, Shintoism, Christianity, etc. were listed. In addition, it also added "What religion do you usually believe in besides wedding and funeral ceremonies?". 36% of people answered that they believe in a certain religion, while 62% answered that they do not believe in any religion. The number of elderly female Buddhists is decreasing. 17% of people aged 18–39 believe in Buddhism, while more than 60% of those over 60 years old believe in Buddhism. Compared to the 2008 survey, there has been no overall change, but the number of women who believe in Buddhism has decreased from 35% to 30%, and the number of "women over 60 years old" has decreased from 54% to 43%. The most significant change in Buddhism over the past decade is the decrease in the number of older women who believe in Buddhism. According to the 2008 survey, 26% reported having religious beliefs, while 52% reported having none. Compared to the 1998 survey, the proportion of people who answered "have faith" decreased from 32% to 26%, while the proportion of people who answered "no faith" remained unchanged. However, the proportion of people who answered "completely no faith" increased from 14% to 22%. The faith in religion has become increasingly weak.

4.2. "Not believing in religion" means "not liking to be limited by a specific religion"

Ama's research shows that many Japanese people who answer "not believing in religion" are not atheists in the sense commonly understood by Christians and others [15]. Rather they mean that they are not followers of a specific religion. In fact, many Japanese people have a rich religious belief, but they have resistance to limiting themselves to a specific religion. For example, the cemetery promotion advertisement published in the newspaper reads "no religion restrictions", as if "tomb sweeping" is not religious, but in fact, "tomb sweeping" has a clear religious heart. A non-religious funeral does not follow a specific religious ceremony and does not require attendees to be atheists offering flowers to the deceased and playing their favorite music are all "no religious" religious rituals. Although the ceremony itself is "no religious", those attending the funeral are surrounded by a strong sense of religion. In other words, many Japanese people do not like to be confined by specific established religions.

4.3. "Natural religion" compared to the "advocating religion"

According to Ama, the term "advocating religion" (Sosyo syukyo) refers to the practice of advocating a specific doctrine to particular individuals and following their own religion [15]. It is characterized by founders, scriptures, and organized religious groups. Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam are typical representatives of it. By contrast, "natural religion" (Shizen syukyo) is unconsciously inherited from ancestors and continues into the present, occurring naturally without a specific founder, scripture, or religious groups. The distinction between advocating religion and natural religion is particularly useful for analyzing the religious sensibilities of the Japanese people. "Natural religion", unlike "advocating religion", passed down unconsciously from generation to generation. Many Japanese people claim that they "do not believe in religion", but in fact, they are not aware that they are naturally inheriting the beliefs of their ancestors. Practices such as "tomb sweeping" and "New Year worship" are typical examples of natural religious behaviors.

4.4. Persecution of Buddhism

The widespread claim of "no religion" in Japan is closely tied to the Meiji government's early policies of the persecution of Buddhism (Haibutsu kishaku).

In general, the policy of "persecution of Buddhism" means the destruction of Buddhist facilities caused by the government's promotion of Shinto as a state religion (Shinto kokkyo) and the unification of Shinto and politics (Saisei itchi). This included the Ordinance separating Shinto and Buddhism (Shinbutsu Bunri Rei), issued by the Grand Council of State on April 5, 1868, and the Great Teaching Campaign (Taikyo Senpu), an imperial edict issued on February 3rd, 1870.

Following the 1868, the law of separation of Shinto and Buddhism was issued to divide shrines and temples, which led to violent conflict between the two. Many Buddhist temples were burnt, and the sutra was abandoned. These forceful regulations had a profound influence on people's perceptions of religion. When Ama went to Higashishirakawamura Village in Gifu Prefecture, he found out that the villagers unanimously emphasized that they had "no religion". The denial is largely result from "persecution of Buddhism". At that time, Buddhist temples were destroyed, monks were returned to secular life and exiled, and the entire village began to believe in Shintoism. The village government still has a large stone monument with the words "Namo Amitabha" written on it, which has been damaged into four pieces. Researchers note that this village is particularly well known for declaring itself as having "no religion." Nevertheless, what should be highlight is that villagers do not consider Shintoism to be their religion. Despite maintaining grand shrines and conducting annual festivals to honor Shinto deities, they continue to insist that they "have no religion." At the same time, they still pray to become Buddhas (Hotoke) after death.

4.5. "Burial Buddhism" and "no religion"

The Japanese word "Hotoke" has two meanings [16]. The first meaning is the enlightened saint of Buddhism, and the second meaning is (the soul of) the deceased who accepts Buddhism. According to Ama, in Japan, calling the deceased "Hotoke" is closely related to Japan's natural religion [15]. "Hotoke" was originally a traditional Japanese "god". However, referring to the deceased as "Hotoke" was a practice in modern times after Buddhist monks popularized funeral ceremonies and rituals [17]. In Japan, it is commonly believed that even if a person did not formally convert to Buddhism during his/her lifetime, he/she can become a disciple of Shakyamuni Buddha and attain Buddhahood by receiving a posthumous Buddhist name (Kaimyo) conferred by monks. Contemporary Japanese media sometimes refer to the deceased as "Hotoke", a term that has largely lost its overt Buddhist connotations. In this context, a person is regarded as a "Buddha" after death not because of his/her actions or beliefs during life, but through the proper performance of Buddhist rites (Hoji) during his/her funeral, timed according to the date of death. In this way, peace and well-being in the afterlife are secured without requiring individuals to formally commit to any particular religion. Consequently, many Japanese can confidently identify themselves as "non-religious," even while participating in practices deeply rooted in Buddhist ritual.

In fact, Japanese people nowadays have limited opportunities for direct contact with organized religions such as Buddhism, Shintoism, Christianity. The awareness of religious groups is shaped by practices like "New Year worship" and by frequent media coverage. Yet even when people go to shrines for worship during the New Year or temples or go for tomb sweeping during the Obon Festival, they often do not recognize these activities as a form of religious belief. Only a small percentage of Japanese people consult with clergy, monks, priests, and pastors on major issues in life, which is a very low proportion [18,19].

4.6. The impurity of death is gradually weakening and disappearing

In today's Japanese society, attitudes toward death are becoming increasingly diverse with age, yet traditional beliefs and views on life and death remain deeply embedded. For example, ideas such as "the impurity of death", "the separation of this world and the next", the belief that "the dead become gods", and the notion of "the returning spirits" continue to persist. Practices such as placing Buddhist niche (Butsudan) and "a shrine for idols or ancestral tablets" (Kamidana) at home, and "putting one's palms together devoutly" (Gassyo) have declined compared to the past. However, natural religious activities such as "New Year worship" and ancestral tomb sweeping remain common. Awareness of popular beliefs (Zokushin) about death is high among people of all ages and genders, indicating the continuity of Japanese death culture. Apart from popular beliefs such as "tomobiki sorei" (spirits associated with "tomobiki" days in the Japanese calendar) and "kiyome no shio" (salt used for purification), most people no longer place importance on other folk practices, suggesting that their persistence is largely tied to habituation and tradition at funerals. Notably, the impression of death differs depending on the relationship to the deceased: when the body is that of a stranger, it often evokes disgust, fear, or reluctance to approach, whereas if it is a family member's body, this impression is softened [9].

The research of Horie, a scholar of life and death, shows that the concept of viewing death as a taboo is coming to an end, while the awareness of openly discussing death is gradually growing [20]. Historically, death has long been regarded as "unclean" and the culture of taboo talking about things related to death has been deeply rooted in Japan. The specific practices and rituals of sending away the deceased are also based on this taboo culture. However, in modern Japan, this taboo culture is gradually being greatly simplified, which is a concrete manifestation of the gradual decline of the death culture that treats death as a taboo in Japanese society. For example, some Japanese people keep the remains of the deceased at home as decorations or ornaments and perform indoor memorial rituals known as Temoto kuyo, creating personalized altars with photographs and mementos. These practices illustrate a shift in attitudes toward death, demonstrating how the traditional perception of death as Kegare has diminished in everyday life.

4.7. Family forms of shrinking population and the end of the cemetery

In the decades after World War II, the family structure in Japan underwent the significant changes, with a clear trend towards smaller family size [21]. According to the National Census by the Ministry Internal Affairs Communications, there have been significant changes in the family structure in Japan. In the 1950s, large families with three or several generations living together became the mainstream of society. In recent years, there has been an increase in nuclear families consisting only of couples or couples with children. In 1950, large families accounted for 60% of the total number of households, and in 2020, nuclear families accounted for 60% of the total number of households. The "Basic Survey on Social Life" conducted by the Ministry Internal Affairs Communications shows that the proportion of single person households accounted for about 20% of all households in 1980, and increased to 35% in 2020. The Cabinet Office's "White Paper on Aging Society" also indicates that households with only elderly people accounted for 8% of the total number of households in 1980, and increased to 28% in 2020.

Shimada & Yoshikawa pointed out that the outflow of young people to major cities and increasing aging in local areas make it increasingly difficult for younger generations to inherit cemeteries, which leads to an increasing number of cemetery closures [22,23]. The changes in population structure and the shortage of heirs are the main reasons.

5. Conclusion

Japanese movie *Departures* depicts ordinary people in Japanese society. After their death, the undertakers from the funeral home clean their bodies, place them in coffins, and then send them to the crematorium for cremation. In real life, the remains of the deceased are placed in the family cemeteries. In families with descendants, there is usually a memorial tablet for the deceased, which is also the inheritance of love between family members.

As mentioned above, *Departures* is a movie closely related to Japanese death culture. After becoming an undertaker, the protagonist Daigo was despised and considered impure, and there was no clear religious atmosphere throughout the entire work process. In Japan, the culture of viewing death as impure has a long history; identifying as having no religion reflects the tendency of Japanese people not to be confined by any specific religious tradition, and it does not mean that they truly do not believe in religion. Behind it is the profound influence brought about by the "abolition of Buddhism and destruction of Buddhism" in the early Meiji period; natural religions such as "tomb sweeping" and "New Year worship" have fully penetrated into people's daily lives. In modern Japanese society, death is no longer a taboo topic. The taboo of discussing death is gradually weakening. At present, cremation remains the mainstream funeral method in 21st century Japan.

In the 80 years after World War II, with the development of the nuclear family and the aging population with fewer children, the Japanese people's views on life and death became increasingly diverse. In this sense, the popularity of *Departures* after its release in 2008 not only brought widespread attention to the profession of undertakers in Japanese society, but also provided an opportunity for people to rethink the topic of death. It is of great significance for people to accurately understand the profound meaning of Japanese death culture for the diversified development of Japanese society and the integration of foreign talents under the background of globalization in the 21st century.

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