

German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ)
DIJ Social Science Study Group

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Managing one's own death: The shūkatsu industry and the enterprising self in an ageing society

Japan ranks among the first in the world in terms of average life-expectancy, but its combination of high-age with a low birthrate is gradually turning it into a “society of many deaths” (*tashi shakai*). With the current change in family structures, the need to make arrangements for one's own passing is felt by an ever growing number of people. Trying to cash in on this demand, the ailing funeral industry has started to urge individuals to take care of their own future grave, funeral, inheritance, elderly care and property clean-up, promoting these activities under the label “shūkatsu” (end of life activity).

In this talk I describe the variety of activities that *shūkatsu* encompasses and the societal background that led to its boom. I then ask, first, what kind of ideal consumer subject is discursively constructed by the industry and second, how the consumers themselves react to that. Based on data from qualitative interviews I have conducted between April and August 2016, I will show that the consumers' understanding of *shūkatsu* differs from that of the industry and explain why they are nonetheless drawn into engaging with *shūkatsu* activities.

Following the concept of subjectivation and governmentality theory, I argue that the *shūkatsu* subject formation is very similar to the enterprising self in the works of Michel Foucault and Ulrich Bröckling. The *shūkatsu* subject is supposed to act according to principles of an economic enterprise, like cost-effectiveness and self-optimization, turning the individual into a model citizen that saves welfare costs as well as into a model consumer of the “silver market”. At the same time, *shūkatsu* offers people the chance to become the designers of their life and death, which may be perceived as a step toward self-empowerment.

Dorothea Mladenova is a research assistant and PhD candidate at the Institute for Japanese Studies at Leipzig University in Germany. She holds a master's degree in Japanese Studies from the same university and is currently a doctoral researcher at the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ).

The DIJ Social Science Study Group is organized by S. Brucksch, S. Heinrich, P. Holdgrün and D. Kremers. All are welcome to attend, but registration (heinrich@dijtokyo.org) is appreciated.

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