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# Shinto and Buddhist Metaphors in Departures

## **Abstract**

Cinematic language is rich in examples of religious metaphors. One Japanese film that contains religious “tropes” (figurative language) is the 2008 human drama, *Departures*. This paper focuses on the analysis of religious metaphors encoded in select film shots, using semiotics as the theoretical framework for film analysis. The specific metaphors discussed in the paper are the Shinto view of death as defilement and Buddhist practices associated with the metaphor of the journey to the afterlife. The purpose of this paper is to augment the previous reviews of *Departures* by explicating these religious signs hidden in the film.

## **Keywords**

Departures, Japanese film, semiotics, Buddhism, Shinto

## **Author Notes**

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*Departures* is a 2008 Japanese film about an unemployed musician who takes a job as undertaker, mistakenly thinking that this new job has something to do with traveling. The film opens with the scene of a car driving through a blinding blizzard. This scene denotes the snow-heavy winter that is characteristic of Yamagata, a northeastern region of Japan, where the film was shot. The pure white snow falling from the grey sky also prepares the viewer for the somber atmosphere of death and mourning foreshadowing an upcoming scene of a funeral. In a flashback, the film takes the viewer to the time when the protagonist, Daigo Kobayashi, discovers that his orchestra had just disbanded, ending his professional career as a cellist after playing Beethoven's Symphony No.9 for the last time.<sup>1</sup> Optimistically, Daigo and his cheerful wife Mika decide to relocate from Tokyo to his hometown in Yamagata and embark on their new life, living in the little house which Daigo's deceased mother left for her only child. Their optimism, however, is short-lived. One day, Daigo sees a help wanted ad in the newspaper for a business called the NK Agency. The viewer is soon informed that these initials, NK, stand for *nōkan*, or "casketing a corpse." Thinking this is a travel company, Daigo imagines himself helping clients plan their tours. When Daigo shows up for an interview with Mr. Sasaki, this funeral-home owner blithely explains that there was a typo in the ad and the job actually entails preparing bodies for burial. Daigo's thoughts of working as a travel agent quickly dissipate. Yet, he takes the job because of his urgent need for income. This job pays over \$500 on the first day, quite a generous wage for a start-up mortician. As Mr. Sasaki's undertaker apprentice, Daigo begins to arrange a special kind of travel: the deceased's eternal journey to the afterlife.

A top box-office film of the year in Japan, *Departures* was awarded the Grand Prix at the Montreal World Film Festival in 2008, and then the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 2009, indicating that the film's appeal went far beyond domestic audiences. Many themes in the

film's story of life-altering events are indeed human experiences that cross cultural boundaries. The story reveals a deeply wounded father-son relationship, as well as a family's grief over a transvestite youth who committed suicide. Director Yōjiro Takita (*Onmyōji*, *Onmyōji II*, and *The Yen Family*, or *Kimura-ke no Hitobito*) stated in an interview that the film also depicts a man who makes life-altering choices during a time of unemployment.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Takita appropriately treated the grim theme of death with a healthy mixture of humor and plot twists. Media reviews of the film, such as ones written by Roger Ebert,<sup>3</sup> similarly highlight the film's topics to which American audiences can relate easily: discrimination against the job of dealing with corpses, rough spots in a young marital relationship caused by financial and communication issues, love and respect for the deceased shown on a sophisticated level, and so on. One rare review by Mark Schilling describes the film in a more cultural framework, reflecting upon his own experience at a funeral in Japan.<sup>4</sup> Even though he initially points out that this film showcases a type of "Japanese death custom," Schilling shifts the focus of his film review to more common human experiences, such as social prejudice, marital discord, and the reaffirmation of life upon witnessing death.

As emphasized in the media reviews, this film does feature contemporary social and personal issues that are beyond the confinement of Japanese spiritual roots. In this paper, however, I focus on teasing out religious metaphors derived from Japanese religious views on death and bereavement that were not explored by the media reviews and examining these metaphors at a deeper cultural level.<sup>5</sup> I certainly do not claim that my analysis is the only correct interpretation of this film. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to augment the media's more universal, humanistic interpretations of the film with a culture-specific analysis by identifying and explicating religious tropes (i.e., figurative language such as metaphors) encoded in

*Departures*. Before proceeding to the analysis of religious symbolism, however, the paper first provides a synopsis of the film's original story as a backdrop to the discussion.

### **The Original Narrative**

The film's plot originates from Shinmon Aoki's autobiography, *Nōkanfu Nikki*, or *Coffin Man: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician*.<sup>6</sup> According to the interviews conducted by Japanese mainstream media, it was Aoki's own request to be excluded from the film's credits. For example, the Asahi Newspaper reports how and why Aoki refused his original story to be adapted in the ways that the producer Toshiaki Nakazawa wanted to make the film version achieve a commercial success.<sup>7</sup> In the end, the producer had the screenplay writer Kundō Koyama rewrite the plot with radically different episodes, such as the motif of Daigo's estranged father taken from the manuscript Koyama was composing as a novel at that point. The Mainichi Newspaper similarly describes how the screenplay had to depart from the original story for commercial purposes because of Aoki's own peaceful yet unshakable decision to separate his authorship from the film in order to protect what he believed to be the central theme of *Coffin Man*.<sup>8</sup> This background of the plot was also provided in a brief note at the film's official site in 2012, four years after the film's release in Japan. The Mainichi's interview summary reveals the central theme of *Coffin Man*: the symbolic connection between life and death.<sup>9</sup> That was the message Aoki attempted to advocate drawing from the Pure Land Buddhist teachings of the immeasurable light, as well as from the philosophical perspective of death expressed by a devoted Nichiren Buddhist and well-known poet of Japan, Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933). In a short piece, "Monthly Dharma Thoughts: The Confessions of the Coffinman," Aoki himself points out that the film "does not direct the audience to the same point I want to make in my

book.”<sup>10</sup> In the essay, Aoki illustrates the differences between his autobiography and the film’s storyline, emphasizing that the film’s focus on the significance of grief care is similar to yet not exactly the same as the main message of *Coffin Man*. What Aoki intended to chronicle in his original story is not just the societal prejudice that Aoki himself encounters as an undertaker, but also his own spiritual growth, as he moves from his initial repulsion toward the job to the opposite pole of taking professional pride in his work with the dead.

The story in *Coffin Man* begins when Aoki’s saloon business fails. As his debts accumulate, he is forced to take on any available job to pay his debts. As an aspiring novelist, he decides to work part-time for a mortuary in his hometown of Toyama, located in the central part of Japan, so that he would be able to write in his spare time. He is quickly shunned by his relatives because he has taken on such a “shameful” line of work. His wife develops a loathing for him and threatens to leave if he doesn’t quit his job. While facing prejudice, both within his family and from society, Aoki turns himself into a skilled encoffiner, washing and dressing the deceased with genuine care and grace. His solemn yet respectful and heartfelt attitude towards the corpses attracts special attention and praise from the townspeople, earning him an honorable new title, *nōkanfu-san* (“Mr. Coffin Man”). Contrary to the impression that the film viewer might have, witnessing an undertaker’s graceful preparation of a corpse is not a common Japanese experience. Furthermore, no standardized encoffining practice is performed in modern-day Japan, nor is it standardized among Japanese morticians.

The word *nōkanfu* is not commonly used in Japanese. In fact, the word did not exist when Aoki started the job in Toyama, nor for that matter did it exist anywhere else in Japan. The word *nōkan* refers to the act of putting the body into the coffin, and the suffix – *fu* is an older term

used for an adult male, or a man of employable age. Thus, the literal translation of *nōkanfu* is coffin man.<sup>11</sup> This job title was coined by some of the bereaved families that Aoki took care of as the encoffiner. As he explains, although the primary goal of the encoffiner is to lay the deceased in a coffin, the encoffiner must also make the corpse look presentable to the mourning family. The encoffiner has to clean and dress the body and prepare the face so that the deceased appears to the family to be “resting in peace.” Because the body begins to stiffen quickly after death, the corpse’s hands must be softened by massaging them so that the fingers can be crossed in prayer style, after which a Buddhist rosary is placed over them. During the process, it is important not to expose the skin, as the body begins to change color. This is often an unpleasant reality for the family.

In contrast to Aoki’s own description of this profession, the film idealizes the job of the encoffiner to some extent. In the film, in the early days of Daigo’s apprenticeship, he too learns that being an undertaker is more than just moving a corpse into a coffin. Some careful steps to “prepare” the body before this final move are shown in the film’s ritual scenes, albeit more theatrically. Daigo soon discovers that working at a funeral home is actually one of the most despised occupations in Japanese society. The film indeed demonstrates that the job is both physically and mentally demanding as the encoffiner has to deal with all types of corpses, including a decomposed one left undiscovered for days. However, except for this ominous undertaking, which the film avoids showing directly, the rest of the deceased in the film are presented from a more agreeable vantage point, some being young and others already made up. They are the best representatives of the dead in the sense that the viewer can easily tolerate these images on the screen. There is a poignant scene in which through few words and rather subtle behaviors, Mr. Sasaki tells Daigo that benefiting from other forms of life is part of a life cycle –

be it eating, gardening, or anything in between. By contrast, Aoki warns the reader that corpses are not always so easy to manipulate. In fact, most of the time, they are difficult to manage, he writes in his autobiography. For example, by the time the *nōkanfu* gets to the corpse, the body has already stiffened and its skin has changed color. We can pass over the graphic details, but it is important to point out Aoki's observation that in Japan not all encoffiners treat the body equally with such care and dignity. In fact, because in reality most cases are handled less compassionately, Aoki felt compelled to write about it. In a sense, it is his way of using his pen to protest the status quo and advocate for changes on behalf of the deceased.

This synopsis of the original narrative shows that there are some clear discrepancies between the book and its film adaptation. The film spotlights surviving families, particularly their grieving and sense of closure that are most poignantly expressed in the final scene where Daigo himself experiences his emotional catharsis while preparing the body of his estranged father. This particular episode, as mentioned earlier, was crafted by the screenplay writer Koyama, helping the film end with some sense of happiness as Daigo releases his own childhood pain. It is at this climax that the protagonist finally comes to terms with the parent for whom he felt contempt for the past 30 years or so. This final scene conveys the film's thematic message: to reflect upon *death* (symbolically represented by the father's corpse) is to reflect on *life* (illustrated with the scenes of melting snow, cherry blossoms, and pregnant Mika's bulging belly – all symbols of spring, the time of birth). These visual metaphors for the cycle of life and death were cinematically created for the film's commercial success. By contrast, the theme Aoki intended to explore in his book was the theme of afterlife. He asks the reader, particularly those of us who tend to be engrossed in the urgency of living, to give some serious thought to the transcendent question of where souls are destined to go.<sup>12</sup> Although the film also reminds us of



our own impending “journey” as the camera peeks out of the coffin as if we were about to depart with the grieving family and friends looking on, that scene is not the plot’s centerpiece. In spite of these differences in focus, however, the symbolic religious codes embedded in this film are drawn from the original prose and represent a shared cultural perspective of the general Japanese viewer. Those specific codes that are not elaborated in the previously mentioned media reviews are now described below.

### **Analysis of Religious Metaphors in the Film**

Cinematic language is rich in examples of religious symbolism. Films that are seemingly unrelated to any particular faith can carry a “religious power”<sup>13</sup> by offering transcendent messages or fostering mythological values. These go beyond conventional definitions of religion and religious doctrines, but still bring a moral or ideological undercurrent to the film. In these cases, the film’s text can be analyzed not simply as a source of entertainment, but as material that seeks to seriously promote certain attitudes and values that affect our daily lives. *Departures* uses this approach, as we see in the previous reviews of the film. However, rather than rehashing the humanitarian aspect of this film, as already discussed by media film critics, my purpose is to explicate the symbolic meaning of religious tropes encapsulated in the film. To achieve this end, I will tease out certain religious metaphors encoded in *Departures* and uncover their hidden messages derived from Japan’s spiritual roots, focusing on the signs of religious symbolism hidden in the film’s dialogue and props. These signs carry significant cultural meaning, particularly to the viewer who is an insider of the culture. By a “sign” I mean an indicator of something else, something symbolic of the actual object or action. A certain image in a scene may serve as a “sign” symbolizing the underlying meaning of the scene. That particular

cinematic image is “the signifier,” and a symbolic, connotative meaning that image carries is “the signified.” In this paper, I will elucidate such signifiers (words, gestures, sounds, colors, etc.) that visually, acoustically, or linguistically allude to religious symbolism. I will then interpret the signifieds (implied meanings; encoded messages) associated with Buddhism and Shinto metaphors that are in the foreground of key cinematic moments in *Departures*.<sup>14</sup>

### **Death as Defilement**

Mr. Sasaki’s clerical assistant explains that “it used to be that families prepared the bodies. Then, undertakers took it on, and places like ours (companies that do encoffining) started up. It’s a niche market.” The service that NK Agency provides to fill that niche is no ordinary encoffining service, however. Through a highly scripted, well-practiced performance, the agent of this ritual – the encoffiner – gradually creates an impression of the deceased’s *yasurakana tabidachi* (peaceful departure). This linguistic signifier of the peaceful departure will be explored later with the discussion of Buddhist metaphors. Classical music playing in the background also implies that this performance is a sacred moment. The film’s use of the color white (e.g., snow, white chrysanthemum, white death robe), classical music, and ritualized gestures of the encoffining performance signify the level of purity and sacredness to which death is elevated, thus setting the positive tone of the film.

In sharp contrast to this signified sacredness is Daigo’s wife, Mika. Her initial reaction upon her discovery of what Daigo does in his job reflects the larger societal view of this occupation. At first, she glares at her husband in silent protest. Then she begs Daigo to quit this job immediately. When Daigo sheepishly refuses, since he has begun to find meaning in being a *nōkanfu*, she threatens to leave him. As Daigo tries to grasp her, she screams at him, “*Sawara*

*naide, kegarawashii!* (“Don’t touch me. You’re unclean!”). In this particular scene, the word *kegarawashii* signifies the metaphor of death as *kegare*, or defilement. In a similar manner to Mika, Daigo’s childhood friend also begins to alienate him by saying, “Get yourself a proper job!” The film thus uses another linguistic sign signaling (and reflecting) the public viewpoint that the act of handling lifeless bodies is “improper.” An ill-tempered man even cynically tells Mr. Sasaki and Daigo, “You make your living off the dead.” Through several other characters’ speech and body language, the film reiterates the same general societal attitude toward occupations that deal directly with death. Although his faith with this “niche” business does waver on occasion, Daigo is convinced that his job helps restore the dead “to beauty for all eternity” with “a calmness, a precision, and above all, a gentle affection,” and endures the loneliness for a while after Mika leaves. Both Mika and Daigo eventually grow into mature parents-to-be with a deeper understanding of each other. However, Mika’s acceptance of Daigo’s socially “despised” job is not so readily forthcoming because of the ancient myth about death as a source of impurity – a concept that is deeply ingrained in the Japanese psyche.

The film also uses purely visual (non-linguistic) signifiers to keep directing the viewer’s attention to the metaphor of death. In an earlier scene, Mika discovers that the octopus she bought at the supermarket is still alive and wriggling, and she begins to scream in the kitchen. Daigo then goes and releases the octopus into the dirty waters of Tokyo Bay. At the surface level, the limp body of the floating octopus symbolizes the misery of the protagonist who just learned that his orchestra has been dissolved, and as a result, Daigo is now feeling lost in the metropolis of Tokyo. These are precisely the feelings that screenplay writer Koyama intended to portray. However, for some viewers, this octopus scene may be seen as an allegory of our own unexamined attitudes toward life and death. It is incongruous that we are content when our

“dinner” is dead but are repulsed and fearful when a human is dead. This symbolic message is “anchored” (i.e., having the viewer tune into a certain message)<sup>15</sup> by the film’s dialogue in a later scene at Christmas celebration, when Daigo happily devours fried chicken down to the bone, while Mr. Sasaki and his clerical assistant do the same. Mr. Sasaki says: “It is normal that the living eat the dead. There is no big difference. This is the fate of all flesh and we have to accept it.” Both the octopus and these words appear to signify the film’s (and also the author’s) quiet yet persistent protest against the centuries-old prejudice shown toward people who deal with death and the dead. As with the *nōkanfu* Daigo, the true identity of Mr. Hirata, an elder bathhouse customer, is revealed in the scene of the crematory. The film shows Daigo greeting Mr. Hirata, who is wearing the cremator’s work uniform, with a “gotcha” look. This brief yet awkward moment is another signifier for the occupational stigma.<sup>16</sup>

Having a job of a mortician or cremator is perceived as having an “improper” job, chiefly because Japan’s old concept of *kegare* (defilement) is associated with death, and historically those who disposed of dead animals or human corpses were of the lowest class – the untouchables. For thousands of years, the untouchables engaged in tasks that no other class of society would undertake, including jobs involved with death.<sup>17</sup> With this historical background, occupations involved with the disposition of corpses are still frowned upon by society today. The author of *Coffin Man*, Aoki, protests that there should be no class distinction of professions at all.<sup>18</sup> Criticizing Japan’s century-old equation of *kegare* and death, he laments that as long as the Japanese view death as taboo, discrimination against the *nōkanfu* will continue. As an insider in this business, he also harshly condemns those who choose the job of undertaker because of its lucrative pay while hating the job itself. He argues that the negative perception of the job stems partly from the worker’s own disrespect for the dead, which in turn prevents any meaningful

social change. To explore the issue of the prejudice toward this occupation at a deeper level, one should examine how the long-standing concept of *kegare* (defilement) derived from the ideology called *shokue shisō* (literally, ideas regarding impurity) developed in medieval Japan.

The Japanese association between death and defilement originates from the *shokue shisō*, originally a Shinto-based ideology developed during the Heian Period.<sup>19</sup> *Engishiki*, or *The Book of the Constitution*, compiled by the Heian aristocrats, spells out specific examples of *kegare* in the section, *Shokue no Jō*, or *The Article of Impurities*. The term *shokue* is comprised of *shoku* (touching) and *e* (impurity), where *e* is the Chinese reading of the same *kanji* character for *kegare*, the Japanese reading. One example of the act of touching “impurity” is having meals in the same room where a corpse is laid out while visiting a grieving family, since the decaying body is considered a source of *kegare*.<sup>20</sup> According to Japanese ethnologist Noboru Miyata, the modern word *kegare* evolved from its ancient form comprised of *ke* (energy, life source) and *karu* (to leave).<sup>21</sup> In those days, the onset of death was determined when the person’s hands and legs started to change color and the body began to decompose. This condition was thought to be a result of one’s life force leaving the body (p.127).

Among the several categories of *kegare* in the Shinto perspective, what led to discrimination most were *shie* and *ketsue*.<sup>22</sup> *Shie* is a pollution thought to spring from death and from corpses. Anything or anyone involved with these two types of defilement, including those who work in morgues or graveyards, is also placed in this category. Professor Sokyō Ono of Kokugakuin University, Tokyo, argues that “Shinto regards death as evil or a curse; but it is incorrect to say that the reason shrines have no contact with the dead or (funeral or anniversary) rites for the dead is in order to avoid pollution.”<sup>23</sup> He explains that the word *kegare* associated with death in Shinto, actually means more than just impurity; it connotes abnormality or

misfortune. Thus, Shinto priests do not normally get involved in funerals, which are largely conducted by Buddhist monks in accordance with their religious traditions in Japan, not because death is pollution but because the core mission of Shinto priests is serving its deities, *kami* (divine beings).

The types of people tabooed by this medieval ideology of *shokue-shisō* were the dead, and those who directly dealt with corpses, but also people with physical disabilities, people of ethnic minorities, and two groups of untouchables: *eta* and *hinin*. The *eta* group worked as butchers, tanners, and gravediggers, while the *hinin* group was made up of criminals, beggars, and lepers. It was thought that all these types of people were “impossible to purify” by any ritual or with any purifying substance (salt, fire, and water). However, it should be emphasized that, even if death may be considered an “abnormality” that befell a person,<sup>24</sup> the deceased have a chance to be reborn as a *kami*-spirit as long as their souls are pure in the contemporary Shinto perspective.<sup>25</sup> Without denigrating Shinto or any other religion, *Departures* successfully delivers the message about dying that the author Aoki intended. In the scene of a heated argument with Mika, who challenges Daigo by asking, “Aren’t you ashamed of having a job like that?,” Daigo responds by emphasizing that everyone, including he and Mika will die eventually and that death is “normal.” The protagonist’s position promotes the reframing of death not merely as a cessation of biological functions but as a departure, ideally a “peaceful departure,” to the afterlife. The spiritual image of peaceful departure amicably created with the linguistic signifier, “*yasurakana tabidachi*,” is cinematically re-emphasized in various scenes of the film, including one in which Mr. Sasaki points to a typo in the job advertisement. The concept of this peaceful journey to the afterlife will be examined in the context of Buddhism, below.

## The Metaphor of Journey

The original Japanese title of *Departures* is *Okuri-bito* (literally, “people who see off”), alluding to the professionals that “send off” the departed by cleaning, clothing, and applying makeup to them before burial. In the Japanese vernacular, however, the word *okuri-bito* does not refer to people in that profession. Rather, *okuri-bito* is the screenwriter’s coining of the term, using the verb *okuru*, or “to see off,” as a euphemism for “preparing someone for a funeral.” The film’s focus is on encoffiners. However, they are not the only “send-off” professionals in this story. In the screenplay, the cremator Mr. Hirata serves as a metaphorical “gatekeeper.”<sup>26</sup> Toward the end of the film, in a scene at the crematory, Mr. Hirata sees off his best friend, Tsuyako, the elderly bathhouse owner, who is also the mother of Daigo’s childhood friend. There, the metaphor for dying not as ceasing but as an act of departing is expressed in Mr. Hirata’s farewell speech: “Maybe death is a gateway. Dying doesn’t mean the end. You go through it and on to the next thing. It’s a gate. And as the gatekeeper, I’ve sent so many on their way, telling them, ‘Off you go. We’ll meet again.’” After a momentary hesitation, Mr. Hirata turns on the burners and quietly bids his final *adieu*. As this scene fades, a riverbed emerges in the next shot, showing a flock of white cranes – another allegory of death and departure in Japanese mythology.

A crematory is a metaphorical gateway where the departed start their journey, as the living see them off. In this sense, if the cremator is the gatekeeper, then the *nōkanfu* is akin to the guide for the traveler. The film occasionally shows, behind the building of the NK Agent, an old shrine, a visual sign signifying the gate for “the other world,” suggesting the spiritual proximity between the *nōkanfu* and the realm of life hereafter. Similarly, in several other scenes, the metaphor of death as “journey” to the afterlife is signified by the objects placed around the deceased, such as white silk boots and straw hats, which are the items to be taken for this

symbolic travel. In the emotionally heightened finale, Daigo ends up encoffining another closely related individual – his own estranged father – on his day of departure. Daigo performs his role of the traveler’s guide by shaving, massaging, and washing his father in an utmost caring manner. The following section will discuss how this Buddhist metaphor of death as the journey is symbolically manifested in two types of encoffining rituals – *yukan* and *shini-geshō* – featured repeatedly throughout the film.

### *Yukan*

As mentioned in the discussion of *shie*, death was envisioned as something impure and contagious in ancient Japan. Thus, a certain ritual of purification had to be performed on the departed.<sup>27</sup> The ancient rite of *yukan* (literally, “hot water ritual”), developed as a Buddhist tradition, consists of a series of grooming tasks applied to the deceased for their metaphorical travel to the world of eternity. One of the oldest methods of *yukan* is to wash the body with a bucket of cold water into which hot water has been added (a reversal of the regular way of making lukewarm water). Nowadays it is more common to clean the body with swabs of alcohol.<sup>28</sup> This grooming is done at a funeral home. Once cleaned, the body is dressed in a special death robe, *shini-shōzoku*.<sup>29</sup>

The practice of *yukan* as a “purification ritual” for the dead before their final departure expresses a Japanese belief in and attitude toward the soul.<sup>30</sup> Thus, involved in this purification ritual are the acts of cleaning and dressing the body in the death robe. Traditionally, this ritual was performed not by the employees of a funeral home, but by the deceased’s grown children or siblings at their own home. The main purpose of performing ritualized *yukan* was to “prevent” the impurity of death from spreading to other people within the community. Some of the actions,



such as removing the floorboards where the corpse was placed, and disposing of the water with which the corpse was washed by throwing the water into the river, would make sense hygienically. Many other *yukan* actions (e.g., posting a screen upside down, avoiding any scratches on the corpse, etc.) are based on Buddhist myths or folk-beliefs. According to the author Aoki, however, this old ritual of *yukan* is still performed in his hometown prefecture, Toyama, a northeastern region of Japan.<sup>31</sup>

### *Shini-geshō*

To complete the encoffining process, the *nōkanfu* combs the deceased's hair and makes up the face. In the film, we see Daigo applying cosmetics to the corpse after he has observed Mr. Sasaki's work and has grown accustomed to the procedures. This cosmetic task is traditionally called *shini-geshō* (literally, "death makeup"). More modern or Westernized terms such as *Angel-Makeup* are also used in this context. The careful application of makeup, including lipstick, as seen in the film, is usually done only to a female body. The *shini-geshō* for a male body involves just shaving (as in the case of Daigo's father). Only when the skin has begun losing color, are some cosmetics applied to the male body as well. It is also important to note that the ancient idea of *keshō*, or makeup, was of spiritual nature in Japan: for example, to become spiritually ready to perform the ritual and to fend off evil spirits, female shamans wore red lipstick and white face powder in olden times.<sup>32</sup>

In the earlier part of the film, NK Agent boss Mr. Sasaki performs these encoffining tasks with expert deftness. His own grief over his deceased wife adds a personal touch. He understands a family's grief and treats the deceased with respect, just as he did his wife, telling Daigo, "I made her beautiful and sent her off." When Mr. Sasaki utters these words, this usually gruff old

man brightens up as if he were reliving that moment. The viewer can also see the emotional impact that this death makeup has on other families. In the scene where Daigo is applying the *shini-geshō* to a high-school transgender who committed suicide, we see the corpse being transformed into a beautiful girl with a calm composure. This visual transformation deeply moves the mother, who wanted to honor her son's wish to live as a woman in his afterlife, as well as the father, who opposed his son's sexual orientation. When Daigo and Mr. Sasaki are about to leave, the father comes out and thanks them personally. As the father expresses his heartfelt gratitude, his gaze shifts from Mr. Sasaki to Daigo. The camera first shows Mr. Sasaki turning around to look at Daigo and then zooms in on Daigo's face. The film thus creates the image of Daigo's mastery of this profession mostly with non-verbal actions, portraying Daigo quietly performing each ritualized step in changing the clothes and cleaning the body. At one point, a series of encoffining scenes at different homes is shown, interspersed with the image of Daigo playing his cello out in the field. His elegant finger movement on the cello seems to signify his ability to conduct his job with his musician's elegance and precision as well as the high level of professionalism that he has finally achieved as the experienced *nōkanfu*.

Daigo's professionalism is also signified linguistically with the film's text. In his voiceover, Daigo explains that the encoffining is the task of "sending the dead on their way" to ensure "everything done peacefully and beautifully" on the final day of parting. By seeing each family's reaction to the apparent changes made on the person in the coffin, the viewer realizes that performing the rituals of *yukan* and *shini-geshō* is a way of demonstrating compassion to the dead and providing grief care to the living. Even though close to 90% of the Japanese choose cremation over other methods of burial,<sup>33</sup> it is not considered a waste of time and effort to neatly dress and make up the corpse and then simply burn it. Such elaborate encoffining does serve as a

form of grief care or support for those who suffer the loss. Therefore, the journey to the afterlife is not simply a metaphor of a faith, but a coping mechanism within the culture for the very basic and universal human expression of grieving. In his interview at the Toronto film festival in October 2009, Director Yōjiro Takita commented:

“This film is dealing with very universal issues and very basic feelings of human beings. In one way, the film presents a “Japanese” approach to death and grieving, but in another way, it attests to the basic human emotions.”<sup>34</sup>

During the interview Takita also said:

“Death up to now was a far away thing for me. I didn’t want to see the death. But gradually as I’m getting over 50, death becomes closer and closer. The film is obviously about death, which is a necessary thing in life, but the important thing is that there is no pessimistic view – that life is together with death. That’s the most important point... that it’s not pessimistic.”<sup>35</sup>

As the director claims, while appealing to the international audience, *Departures* does present a culture-specific approach to death and grieving comprehended and embraced by its home audience. In the film, we see only the NK Agency’s clients that are pleasant looking, some even young and beautiful. But in reality, the appearance of corpses can be quite unpleasant.<sup>36</sup> Some bodies are gaunt and ghostly after years of battling debilitating illnesses, and other bodies are bruised or maimed from accidents. It is not a sight that the bereaved family wishes to sustain as the lasting memory of the deceased. Therefore, the main purpose of the death makeup is to restore the deceased’s healthful state and make him/her look as alive as possible in the eyes of the bereaved. The significance of making up the deceased’s face appears to be associated with

the Japanese ideal of dying *yasuraka ni* (in a comfortable and peaceful manner), which Orpett-Long extensively discusses in her book, *Final Days: Japanese Culture and Choice at the End of Life*.<sup>37</sup> No one wants to be reminded of the pain and suffering of the dead. The desire for *yasuraka ni* is so strong in the living that they wish their last glimpse of the deceased to show only a peaceful appearance. In many scenes of the film, the traditional rituals of *yukan* and *shinigeshō* rituals are being revived by the encoffiners, Daigo and Mr. Sasaki, forcing the Japanese viewer to re-examine our own modern-day attitudes of dealing with death. The urban lifestyle of Japan has been detached from such traditions, unfortunately. This spiritual loss, probably felt more strongly by city dwellers, appears to be the niche filled by *Departures*, a big success in the domestic market, having swept ten prizes at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Japan Academy Award Ceremony held in Tokyo in 2009.

## Conclusion

This paper analyzed a 2008 Japanese human drama *Departures* from a cultural insider's point of view. The film carries an important message for those living in the *muen shakai* (a society of no relationships), where more and more Japanese are "living and dying alone as never before – an inevitable consequence of declining marriage, declining childbirth, and a sharply extended lifespan."<sup>38</sup> As a nuclear family becomes a common unit of family and the Confucian concept of kinship slowly dissolves in Japan, funeral traditions that used to be carried out by family members are slowly being abandoned. Through the discussion of religious metaphors encoded in the film, the paper illustrated how those metaphors were used for the film to re-capture the traditional view on death and bereavement of Japan, an aspect that was not thoroughly examined by the U.S. media film critics.<sup>39</sup>

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1. For classical music fans, Symphony No.9 in D minor, Op.125, perfectly anchors the scene when Daigo's musical career is abruptly terminated by fate, as this symphony is known to be the final complete work composed by Ludwig van Beethoven before his death in 1827. However, this piece is also a cultural trope to the Japanese viewer, as this particular symphony is popularly performed at the very end of every year at concert halls throughout Japan. Thus, the score serves as a metaphor for "ending" and signals the "somber" season of winter to the Japanese.
  2. MaGee, (2009) <http://jfilmpowwow.blogspot.com/search/label/Interviews>.
  3. Ebert, (2009) <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090527/REVIEWS/905279995/1023> and Roger (2011) <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20111205/REVIEWS08/111209995/1023>.
  4. Schilling (2008) at <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/ff20080905a3.html>.
  5. In this paper, I attempted to describe Japanese spiritual roots in a normative approach. I do not belong to any religious organization. Thus, this paper was written, not from a particular religious perspective to promote, but rather from the "emic" perspective of a cultural insider who was born and raised in Japan.
  6. Aoki, *Coffin Man: The Journal of a Buddhist Mortician*. This 1996 autobiography *Nōkanfu Nikki* is Aoki's first book and has won literary praise and accolades in Japan. The Buddhist Education Center published its English translation by Wayne Yokoyama in 2004. The book was adapted into a screenplay by Kundō Koyama (without direct credit to the author) for the film. Koyama's screenplay was also made into a book by Shinō Momose through the publisher Shogakukan, in 2008.
  7. The Asahi Shimbun Digital (2010). [www.asahi.com/jinmyakuki/TKY201005260270.html](http://www.asahi.com/jinmyakuki/TKY201005260270.html).
  8. The Mainichi Newspaper (2009) <http://www.asyura2.com/08/bun1/msg/363.html>.
  9. The Mainichi Newspaper (2009) <http://www.asyura2.com/08/bun1/msg/363.html>.
  10. See page 1 of Aoki "Monthly Dharma Thoughts: The Confessions of the Coffinman" (2010).
  11. A common reference to undertakers in Japanese is *sōgiya*, although *saijō shokuin* ("funeral-house employee"), a less known term to most Japanese outside the business, is used as the professional title.
  12. The Mainichi Newspaper (2009) <http://www.asyura2.com/08/bun1/msg/363.html>.
  13. Lyden, 11
  14. For those readers unfamiliar with Japanese religions, Shinto refers to Japan's indigenous religion in which ancestral spirits are worshipped and the mysterious power of divine beings (*kami*) and other nature spirits is believed to protect the nation. Based on the teaching of Siddartha Gaudama, Buddhism was brought to Japan from India through China in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Many elements of the indigenous religion of Shinto were incorporated into those of the imported religion of Buddhism mostly in the Heian period (794-1185). For more detailed information about each faith, I recommend books such as Kasulis's book, *Shinto: The Way Home* and *Buddhas and Kami in Japan* – a book edited by Teeuwen and Rambelli.
  15. The semiotic term "anchor" was introduced by Roland Barthes in the chapter "The Rhetoric of the Image" in his book, *Image-Music-Text* (1977). In his view, ideological meanings conveyed by the media such as advertisement and film are "anchored" (to direct the viewer to a certain message when multiple other signs coexist) or "related" (to add meaning) by the use of text (e.g., a caption on the poster). See pp.32-51 for more detail.

16. Until recently, however, cremators had been bluntly called a discriminatory name *onbō-yaki*, especially in the Tokyo area, derived from the Edo-period term of *onbō*. The word *onbō* was a reference to people who handled cremation or worked as gravediggers. During the Edo period, people who belonged to this occupation came from the social class of the untouchables. Such jobs were wanted by no one else. Because of this historical background, people who assumed the job of *onbō-yaki* (and also their families) suffered overt discrimination. For example, when my mother was young, the children whose father was *onbō-yaki* were isolated in school, and nobody dared to play with them even after school hours. Whether the occupation is called *onbō-yaki* or the modern-day equivalent *kasō-nin*, the connotations of working in this “low-brow” job have not changed.

17. Miyata (2010) *Kegare no Minzokushi* and Shintani (2004) *Nihonjin no Tabū*.

18. Aoki (1996) *Nōkanfu Nikki* (Coffin Man: The Journal of Buddhist Mortician).

19. Miyata (2006) *Reikon to Tabi no Fōkuroa* (Folklore of Souls and Journeys) and Harada (2010) *Nihonjin wa Naniwo Tabete Kitaka*. (The Food that the Japanese Have Been Consuming).

20. Miyata (2006) *Reikon to Tabi no Fōkuroa*.

21. Miyata (2006) *Reikon to Tabi no Fōkuroa*.

22. The word *ketsue* literary means “blood impurity.” Because of the perceived impurities of menstruation and childbirth, women were thought to be permanently “polluted.” To read about the status of the female gender in Japanese religions in English, one may find Patricia Kanaya Usuki’s 2007 book, *Currents of Change* insightful. She discusses the current status of female Buddhists in *Jōdo Shinshū*’s context.

23. Ono, *Shinto: The Kami Way*, 108.

24. Ono *Shinto: The Kami Way*.

25. To learn more about this Shinto background, see “Purity and Taboo,” pp.47-48, in Kasulis’s book, *Shinto: The Way Home*. There is a good discussion there of perceived sources of pollution or defilement with the Shinto context.

26. Momose, *Okuribito* (Film Script).

27. Miyata (2006) *Reikon to Tabi no Fōkuroa*

28. Aoki (1996) *Nōkanfu Nikki* (Coffin Man: The Journal of Buddhist Mortician).

29. This particular attire is usually white (unlike several colorful robes we saw in the film) and in the traditional *kimono* style. Metaphorically, *shini-shōzoku* is the garb of “the travel to eternity” based on Buddhist eschatology. Besides the white robe, the traveler’s kit includes long white socks, a white triangle head scarf, a knapsack, and other items that are placed on the deceased as part of a traveler’s kit.

30. Miyata (2006) *Reikon to Tabi no Fōkuroa*.

31. Aoki (1996) *Nōkanfu Nikki* (Coffin Man: The Journal of Buddhist Mortician).

32. Miyata (2006) *Reikon to Tabi no Fōkuroa*.

33. Hoffman, 14

34. MaGee, (2009) <http://jfilmwow.blogspot.com/search/label/Interviews>.

35. MaGee, (2009) <http://jfilmwow.blogspot.com/search/label/Interviews>.

36. Aoki (1996) *Nōkanfu Nikki* (Coffin Man: The Journal of Buddhist Mortician).

37. Orpett-Long, *Final Days: Japanese Culture and Choice at the End of Life*.

38. Hoffman, 15

39. Since I wrote the first draft of this analysis as a lecture for my film course, several people have contributed to the improvement of the paper. First, I thank Prof. Wayne Yokoyama, the U.S. translator of Aoki's autobiography, *Coffin Man*, for reading and commenting on my earliest draft of this paper. I am equally grateful for Dr. Laurence Rogers for providing advice on the definitions of Japanese terms. Two anonymous reviewers' feedback also helped me make the final revision of the paper. Most critically, the Hawaii Council for the Humanities (HCH) supported my project, allowing me to stay in Sakata City, Yamagata, where *Departures* was shot, and to conduct archival research on Japanese ethnology at the Library of the National Diet in Tokyo and Kyoto. Without the HCH assistance, the revision of this paper would have not been thoroughly done.

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