

FACT SHEET

Columbarium facilities in Tokyo

1. Background

1.1 The Government is considering feasible alternatives to increase the supply of public columbarium niches to deal with the shortage of burial plots in Hong Kong¹. One of these alternatives is to convert unused industrial buildings into multi-storey columbarium blocks. Given that there are successful experiences of some cities in Japan in using high-rise buildings as columbaria, the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene has requested the Research and Library Services Division to look into the development of columbarium facilities in Tokyo, which is one of the most densely populated cities in the world having similar problem with burial land shortage. General information about Tokyo and relevant details on its columbarium facilities are provided in Tables 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1 – General overview of Tokyo

Land area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tokyo, officially named Tokyo Metropolis, is the capital city of Japan. In terms of land area, Tokyo is the third smallest prefecture among Japan's 47 prefectures (administrative divisions), occupying a total area of 2 187 sq km.
Demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In terms of population, Tokyo is the largest city in Japan. As at February 2010, Tokyo's population was estimated to be 12 989 726, which were defined according to three age categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) juveniles (below 15): 1.48 million (11%); (b) working age population (15 to 64): 8.54 million (65%); and (c) aged population (65 or above): 2.49 million (19%). • In 2009, there were 6.21 million households in Tokyo, with 2.1 persons per household on average. • In 2008, the number of deaths in Tokyo was 97 641. Cremation rate was almost 100% (in Japan overall). • In 2005, the average life expectancy for men and women living in Tokyo was 79 and 85.5 years respectively.

¹ In Hong Kong, the waiting time for a reused niche in a public columbarium to hold the ashes of the deceased may take seven to 56 months. See 香港電台網上廣播站 (2009年).

Table 1 – General overview of Tokyo (cont'd)

Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The major religions in Tokyo are Buddhism and Shintoism.
Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 2008, Tokyo was ranked the world's largest metropolitan economy, with an estimated gross domestic product at purchasing power parity of US\$1,479 billion (HK\$11,487 billion).⁽¹⁾ According to the Worldwide Cost of Living survey conducted by the Economist Intelligence Unit in 2009, Tokyo topped the list of the world's most expensive cities to live in. As at December 2009, the monthly household income in Tokyo was ¥1,035,661 (HK\$89,170) on average.⁽²⁾

Notes: (1) The exchange rate in February 2010 was US\$1 = HK\$7.767.

(2) The exchange rate in February 2010 was ¥1 = HK\$0.0861.

Table 2 – Issues relating to columbarium facilities in Tokyo

Regulatory framework	
Major regulatory and administering authorities	(a) Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare; (b) Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism; and (c) municipal governments.
Major legislation	(a) <i>City Planning Act</i> (1968), which ensures that the establishment or demolition of graveyards, crematoria and columbaria is in accordance with the city development plan; (b) <i>Land Readjustment Act</i> (1954), which ensures that the establishment or demolition of graveyards, crematoria and columbaria is in accordance with the land readjustment projects implemented in metropolitan regions; (c) <i>Law concerning Graveyards and Burial</i> (1948), which governs the management of graveyards, crematoria and columbaria, as well as issues concerning interment; and (d) <i>Law concerning the Prevention of Infectious Diseases and Medical Care for Patients of Infections</i> (1998), which provides exemptions from the prohibition of cremation or burial of people dying from pandemic diseases within 24 hours of death, as stipulated in the <i>Law concerning Graveyards and Burial</i> .

Table 2 – Issues relating to columbarium facilities in Tokyo (cont'd)

Operation of burial facilities in Tokyo	
Brief facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • According to Article 10 of the <i>Law concerning Graveyards and Burial</i>, any person who wants to operate a columbarium, graveyard or crematorium must obtain permission from the prefectural governor. • The columbaria in Tokyo are usually attached to or part of a Buddhist temple.
Number of columbaria, crematoria and graveyards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2006, there were 316 columbaria, 27 crematoria and 9 725 graveyards in Tokyo: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) the 316 columbaria were operated by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) religious corporations (宗教法人): 298; (ii) local public entities (地方公共團體): 10; and (iii) legal persons (民法法人) and others: four each; and (b) the 27 crematoria were operated by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) local public entities: 19; and (ii) legal persons and others: four each; and (c) the 9 725 graveyards were operated by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) individuals (個人): 6 876; (ii) religious corporations: 2 809; (iii) local public entities: 38; and (iv) legal person and others: one each.

Table 2 – Issues relating to columbarium facilities in Tokyo (cont'd)

Other relevant issues	
Columbaria and natural burial	<p><u>Multi-storey columbaria</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Tokyo, multi-storey columbaria may be built within Buddhist temples or housed in high-rise buildings (including conversion from reused warehouse space). Information on the number of multi-storey columbaria in Tokyo is not available. • A few multi-storey columbaria in Tokyo make use of mechanized facilities to reduce the storage space per urn. Instead of adhering to the conventional practice of displaying all columbarium niches permanently, ashes of the deceased in such kind of columbaria are kept in urns on shelves in a vault. Visitors use smart cards and computer facilities (e.g. a touch screen) to activate a robotic arm to retrieve the correct urn and place it in one of the several viewing areas for remembrance ceremonies. The viewing area may come with a computer screen showing images of the deceased person and other decorations, such as a floral background. • The multi-storey columbaria are primarily managed by religious corporations or private companies. Some examples of multi-storey columbaria operated in Tokyo are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Tokyogobyō (東京御廟): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) a four-storey mechanized columbarium operated by a religious corporation; (ii) opening hours daily from 10 am to 7 pm; and (iii) an urn space for an individual costing ¥380,000 (HK\$32,718), with an annual management fee of ¥8,000 (HK\$689); (b) Temple of Higashi-Honganji, Asakusa (東本願寺慈光殿浅草浄苑): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) a five-storey hall built in 2009 as part of a Buddhist temple; (ii) mechanized columbarium facilities provided on the third and fourth floors of the hall, which can store around 3 000 urns; and (iii) an urn space for an individual costing ¥980,000 (HK\$84,378), with an annual management fee of ¥12,000 (HK\$1,033);

Table 2 – Issues relating to columbarium facilities in Tokyo (cont'd)

Other relevant issues (cont'd)	
Columbaria and natural burial (cont'd)	<p><u>Multi-storey columbaria (cont'd)</u></p> <p>(c) 興安寺本郷陵苑⁽³⁾:</p> <p>(i) mechanized columbarium facilities provided in a recently completed five-storey extension to the main building. Around 4 600 urns can be held in this new extension. The basement of the six-storey main building is an indoor graveyard; and</p> <p>(ii) burial services managed by a religious corporation. An urn space for an individual costs ¥800,000 (HK\$68,880), with an annual management fee of ¥15,000 (HK\$1,292); and</p> <p>(d) 浅草正法寺墓苑⁽⁴⁾:</p> <p>(i) a nine-storey indoor graveyard operated by a private company. It is the largest indoor graveyard in Tokyo; and</p> <p>(ii) a burial place for an individual costing around ¥500,000 (HK\$43,050).</p> <p><u>Natural burials</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural burials in Japan mainly consist of scattering ashes at sea or in the mountains. • In Japan, there is no law prohibiting the scattering of human ashes. While the <i>Law concerning Graveyards and Burial</i> (Article 4) states that remains of the deceased must be buried in a cemetery, such prohibition applies only to conventional burials.⁽⁵⁾ • Natural burial has been gaining popularity in Japan since the establishment of the Grave-Free Promotion Society (GFPS) in 1991, a civic group for promoting the scattering of human ashes in Japan. Natural burial services are offered by GFPS and a number of companies, such as the JASDAQ-listed Sun Life Group. Commercialized sea scattering services were first offered by the Tokyo-based funeral company, Koueisha (公営社), established in 1994.⁽⁶⁾

Notes: (3) Name of the columbarium available in Japanese only.

(4) Name of the columbarium available in Japanese only.

(5) Japanese Economy Division (2006).

(6) Rowe (2003).

Table 2 – Issues relating to columbarium facilities in Tokyo (cont'd)

Other relevant issues (cont'd)	
Columbaria and natural burial (cont'd)	<p><u>Natural burials (cont'd)</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples of charges of natural burials are as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) sea or mountain scattering offered by GFPS: ¥100,000 to ¥180,000 (HK\$8,610 to HK\$15,498), plus a documentation fee of ¥2,000 (HK\$172); and (b) sea scattering offered by Koueisha: ¥283,500 (HK\$24,409) for individual services or ¥105,000 (HK\$9,041) per person for group ceremonies.
Related information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a survey conducted in 2009, 41% of Tokyo residents responded that they did not own a burial plot, and 61% of them would like to have one. • In central Tokyo, it costs around ¥10 million (HK\$861,000) to purchase a three-square-meter cemetery plot in perpetuity, while graves of a similar size are available at about one-tenth of the price in remote areas of Tokyo.

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 3 May 2010
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