
FACT SHEET

Columbarium facilities in Tokyo

(as at 30 August 2010)

1. Background

1.1 The Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene ("the Panel") has decided to conduct an overseas duty visit in September 2010 to study columbarium facilities in Tokyo. This fact sheet aims to provide the Panel with general information on relevant issues.

Shortage of burial space in Japan

1.2 Coupled with land scarcity, a steadily growing death rate¹ resulting from the aging of the baby-boom generation has led to a shortage of burial space all over Japan.² In major Japanese cities such as Tokyo, the demand for grave plots is even higher as a result of the huge influx of people into such cities over the years.

1.3 Due in part to the difficulty in securing burial plots in Japan's densely populated urban areas, cremation has gained wide acceptance. At present, the nationwide cremation rate in Japan is almost 100%.

Situation in Tokyo

1.4 Being the third smallest prefecture among Japan's 47 prefectures, Tokyo is home to the largest population of around 13 million. The key demographic information of Tokyo is summarized in **Table 1**. As the most populated city in Japan, the need for new graves in Tokyo each year has far exceeded supply for the past two decades³. For instance, in 2003, a public sale of 50 burial plots at a cemetery, located at the heart of Tokyo and operated by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, attracted over 2 200 applicants.⁴ These burial plots varied in size from 1.6 to 3.65 sq m, with prices ranging from ¥4.5 million (HK\$399,600)⁵ to over ¥10 million (HK\$888,000). The successful purchasers were winners of a lottery draw.

¹ The annual number of deaths in Japan has been on the rise since the 1980s.

² Buerk (2009) and Perfect Memorials (2008).

³ Kotaka (2009).

⁴ The Associated Press (2003).

⁵ The exchange rate in July 2010 was ¥1 = HK\$0.0888.

1.5 As described in a book published in 2005, only four out of the eight graveyards operated by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government had any openings.⁶ It also reported that the cremated remains (or ashes) of as many as 1 million deceased in Tokyo were kept at home by families who were unable to make suitable burial arrangements.

1.6 Additionally, the results of a survey conducted by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in 2009 revealed that among the Tokyo residents⁷ interviewed, 41% did not own a burial plot, and 61% would like to have one. In selecting a burial plot, 76% of the respondents said that they would take into consideration proximity and convenience of access.

Table 1 – Major demographic information of Tokyo

Total land area	2 187 sq km.
Population	12 591 643 as at January 2010, which were classified into three age categories: (a) juveniles (below 15): 1.49 million (11.8%); (b) working age population (15 to 64): 8.54 million (67.9%); and (c) aged population (65 or above): 2.56 million (20.3%).
Number of households	6.21 million as at 2009, averaging 2.1 persons per household.
Number of deaths	98 600 in 2009.
Life expectancy	79 and 85.5 years respectively for men and women living in Tokyo in 2005.
Religion	Buddhism and Shintoism being the major religions.

⁶ Karan (2005) p.176.

⁷ Information on the total number of survey respondents is not available.

2. Cremation and burial facilities in Tokyo

2.1 In Japan, the cremated remains of deceased persons may be buried in a cemetery plot or placed in a niche within a columbarium. According to law, only certain types of entities such as religious corporations (宗教法人), public corporations (公益法人) and local governments are allowed to operate burial and cremation services in Japan. In particular, profit-seeking enterprises are not allowed to run a graveyard.⁸

2.2 In Tokyo, the total number of graveyards, columbaria and crematoria in 2008 amounted to 9 724, 335 and 28 respectively. As shown in **Table 2**, the crematoria in Tokyo were primarily operated by local public entities (地方公共團體), whereas most of the columbaria were run by religious corporations, and the graveyards were predominantly owned by individuals (個人) and religious corporations. The columbaria in Tokyo are usually attached to or a part of a Buddhist temple.

Table 2 – Number of graveyards, columbaria and crematoria in Tokyo in 2008

	Individual	Religious corporation	Local public entity	Others	Total
Graveyard	6 912	2 772	38	2	9 724
Columbarium	Nil.	307	13	15	335
Crematorium	Nil.	Nil.	20	8	28

3. Alternative burial arrangements

Multi-storey columbaria

3.1 In Tokyo, some multi-storey columbaria have recently been built within Buddhist temples or been converted from abandoned industrial buildings.⁹ These columbaria are primarily managed by religious corporations or private companies. Some examples of multi-storey columbaria operating in Tokyo are listed in **Table 3**.

⁸ 《日本、韓國殯葬業考察報告》(2004).

⁹ Information on the number of multi-storey columbaria in Tokyo is not available.

3.2 A few of these multi-storey columbaria have made use of mechanized facilities to reduce the storage space per urn. In such a columbarium, instead of adhering to the conventional practice of displaying all columbarium niches permanently, ashes of the deceased 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.

Table 3 – Some examples of multi-storey columbaria in Tokyo

Columbarium	Major characteristics
Tokyogobyō (東京御廟)	(a) A four-storey mechanized columbarium operated by a religious corporation (opened in July 2009); (b) opening hours daily from 10 am to 7 pm; and (c) an urn space for an individual costing ¥380,000 (HK\$33,744), with an annual management fee of ¥8,000 (HK\$710).
Temple of Higashi-Honganji, Asakusa (東本願寺慈光殿 浅草浄苑)	(a) A five-storey hall built in 2009 as a part of a Buddhist temple; (b) mechanized columbarium facilities provided on the third and fourth floors of the hall, which can store around 3 000 urns; and (c) an urn space for an individual costing ¥980,000 (HK\$87,024), with an annual management fee of ¥12,000 (HK\$1,066).
興安寺本郷陵苑 ⁽¹⁾	(a) 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 (b) burial services managed by a religious corporation; an urn space for an individual costing ¥800,000 (HK\$71,040), with an annual management fee of ¥15,000 (HK\$1,332).
浅草正法寺墓苑 ⁽¹⁾	(a) A nine-storey indoor graveyard operated by a private company; (b) the largest indoor graveyard in Tokyo; and (c) a burial place for an individual costing around ¥500,000 (HK\$44,400).

Note: (1) Name of the columbarium available in Japanese only.

Natural burials

3.3 In Japan, natural burial (also known as green burial) has been gaining popularity since the establishment of the Grave-Free Promotion Society (GFPS) in 1991, a civic group for promoting the scattering of human ashes. In Japan, there is no law prohibiting the scattering of human ashes. While the *Law concerning Graveyards and Burial* (Article 4) states that remains of the deceased must be buried in a cemetery, such prohibition applies only to conventional burials.¹⁰

3.4 Natural burial in Japan mainly consists of scattering ashes at sea or in the mountains. 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 1994.¹¹

3.5 Charges for sea or mountain scattering offered by GFPS range from ¥100,000 to ¥180,000 (HK\$8,880 to HK\$15,984), plus a documentation fee of ¥2,000 (HK\$172). Sea scattering services offered by Koueisha cost ¥283,500 (HK\$25,175) for individuals, and ¥105,000 (HK\$9,324) per person for group ceremonies.

Web-based services

Cyberstone

3.6 Cyberstone is a website run by the Buddhist temple, Kudokuin, located in Toshima Ward of Tokyo. This online system allows people to pay respect to the deceased via the Internet at any time, sparing them the trouble of visiting the grave in person. By subscribing to the Cyberstone service, a person obtains a user ID and a password for getting access to a web page via his or her cellular telephone or home computer which displays the "Internet grave" of the deceased. Carved on such a grave is the photograph and some descriptions of the deceased, such as name and date of death. The ashes of the deceased are kept in an urn in the temple's tomb with other urns. The cost of the Cyberstone service is ¥250,000 (HK\$22,200), including the fee of placing the ashes in the joint tomb. A religious service is also held every month at this tomb by the temple's monks. No annual management fee is charged.

¹⁰ Japanese Economy Division (2006).

¹¹ Rowe (2003).

Online tomb services

3.7 Other web-based services feature images of graves streamed online, where cameras are set up in the graveyard to enable real-time transmission of images to personal computers and Internet telephones. One of the companies in Tokyo providing such a service is the Nichiryoku Co., which has made images of indoor graves at Hokokuji Temple in Yokohama and Hotoin Temple in Nagoya available to the subscribers. By entering a user ID and password, the subscriber can view live images of his or her family's grave and the entrance to the graveyard for up to five minutes. The annual subscription fee is ¥5,250 (HK\$466).

4. Operation of burial and cremation facilities

Legislation

4.1 Major legislations governing burial and cremation services and facilities in Japan are:

- (a) *City Planning Act* (1968), which ensures that the establishment or demolition of graveyards, crematoria and columbaria is in accordance with the city development plan;
- (b) *Land Readjustment Act* (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; and
- (c) *Law concerning Graveyards and Burial* (1948), which governs the management of graveyards, crematoria and columbaria, as well as issues concerning interment.

Relevant authorities

4.2 At the central level, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) is responsible for the implementation of the *Law concerning Graveyards and Burial* and the enforcement of policies concerning the management of graveyards and related facilities. MHLW also provides guidance to the heads of local governments to help them carry out their duties in relevant areas.

4.3 Governments at the local level are given the autonomy to handle funeral and interment matters. According to Article 10 of the *Law concerning Graveyards and Burial*, any person who wishes to operate a columbarium, graveyard or crematorium must apply for approval from the prefectural governor. Where it is deemed necessary, the prefectural governor is authorized to send environmental health officers to conduct on-site inspections of the relevant facilities, request the operators to provide a report, as well as issue improvement orders to the operators and cancel their business permits.¹² Meanwhile, any establishment or demolition works and change of use of a columbarium, graveyard or crematorium in accordance with the *City Planning Act* and *Land Readjustment Act* are exempted from approval.¹³ Both the *City Planning Act* and the *Land Readjustment Act* are administered by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT), which is the competent authority for overall land use planning in Japan.

4.4 Under the *Law concerning Graveyards and Burial*, municipalities (i.e. cities, towns, villages or special wards) are responsible for issuing permits for burial and cremation and ensuring appropriate implementation of such activities in individual localities. Operators of burial and cremation services are required to provide the responsible person's personal and contact details such as name, birthplace and address to the appropriate municipal government where the facility is located after obtaining approval from the prefectural governor. The operators also have to provide the number of cremations or burials to the heads of the municipalities on a monthly basis.

Zoning considerations

4.5 According to MLIT's "Guidelines on City Planning"¹⁴, some major criteria for selecting a location for graveyard are:

- (a) not close to urban areas;
- (b) the location not expected to be developed into an urban area in the future; and
- (c) accessible location with good transport connection.

¹² 《日本、韓國殯葬業考察報告》(2004) and 鮑元(2009).

¹³ 鮑元(2009).

¹⁴ 国土交通省(2010) p. 211.

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