Signs of Life: Grounding the Transcendent in Japanese Memorial Objects

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ABSTRACT

Memorial tablets (*ihai*) and memorial portraiture (*iei*) are important parts of Japanese funerary ritual, serving as focal points during the wake, funeral, and subsequent ritual observances. Far more than static material representations of the deceased or the social relationships they inhabited, these memorial objects display a complex and complementary relationship with the deceased and serve to ground the persistent spirit of the departed (known as *hotoke*), which is simultaneously of this world and transcendent to it. Furthermore, I demonstrate how both everyday and ritual interactions with *ihai* and *iei* reveal a dynamic and decades-long semiotic process that guides this entity through its transformation from a living human being through a "lifetime" as a *hotoke* and, ultimately, into a household ancestor.

For centuries, memorial tablets (*ihai*) and memorial portraiture (*iei*) have been mainstays of Japanese funerary ritual. Even today, *ihai* and *iei* remain nearly ubiquitous in Japanese households, as common even as tables, cooking utensils, and televisions. While periods of mass urbanization and fluctuations of economic fortune over the past seventy years have altered the way funerals are performed and memorial rites are observed, these two objects remain easily recognizable and accessible to the average Japanese.

This article attempts to provide an understanding of the way these memorial objects "work" in everyday life and in ritual practice. By analyzing the semiotic relationships between the *ihai* and the *iei*, between the memorial objects and

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the deceased, and between the living and the dead, I seek to understand how these material objects mediate how the Japanese represent and experience the transcendent in both memorial ritual and in their daily interactions.

The spirits of the Japanese dead, known as *hotoke*, share many of the qualities that we commonly understand as "transcendent," existing as they do beyond the sensory limitations of human existence and experience. But the *hotoke* are also strikingly "ordinary." These are not gods, spiritual virtuosos, or even charismatic public figures. Rather, these are the spirits of everyday people, mothers and fathers, grandparents and children. Death has taken them across the threshold from one life to the next, but the *hotoke* remain very human in their desires and needs, in addition to their requiring constant food, company, and care. I therefore consider the *hotoke* to be members of a category that I will call the "ordinary transcendent."

Much has been written on the semiotics of Buddhist icons, relics, and imagery (see, e.g., Faure 1998; Sharf 2001; Rambelli 2007), but here I wish to broaden the scope to examine how material culture—specifically, the *iei* and the *ihai*—enables the living to both represent and interact with the "ordinary" dead. The present work is a preliminary attempt to make sense of these relationships, as seen through the lens of ethnography[1] and semiotic theory. The goal is not to come to a firm conclusion, but rather start a discussion about what semiotics can tell us about the material and discursive relationships that govern the everyday interactions between the living and the dead.

While this approach will allow us to discuss the transcendence of the ordinary, it will also allow us to reflect upon the ordinariness of the transcendent. In addition to moving away from simple dichotomies of human/divine, natural/supernatural, and material/spiritual, I will reconsider the category of transcendence itself. Is it transcendence if the life of the transcendent greatly resembles bounded and finite human experience? As the discussion below will show, it is not that *hotoke* are not transcendent; rather, it is that a relationship with transcendent is an essential part of Japanese experience of the everyday, immanent world.[2]

1. As a genre of scholarly writing, ethnography traditionally privileges research data gleaned from participant observation, interviews, and historical sources to produce an account that works to lay bare the logic of a culture, cultural practice, or cultural phenomenon. While ethnographic data-gathering methods are scientifically rigorous, the resulting ethnography often straddles the fine line between objectivity and subjectivity, since the ethnographer is both the instrument of observation and the interpreter of that data.

2. The ethnographic portion of this research was conducted between 2006 and 2008 in the area of eastern Japan known colloquially as the Keihin Industrial Corridor, which includes parts of metropolitan Tokyo, Kawasaki, and Yokohama. In addition to participant observation of memorial rituals and funerals (including the funeral of a close informant who had taken on the role of my "Japanese grandmother"), I conducted interviews with clergy, laypersons, and funeral company employees. Because my research focused on the Sōtō

The *Ihai* and *Iei*

At the core of this analysis are two material artifacts, the *ihai* and the *iei*. These are the key objects in what has been called the practice of ancestor "worship" or "veneration" (*senzo kuyō*). In the home, these objects often placed in and above a cabinet known as a *butsudan*, commonly translated as "Buddha altar" or "household altar." Following the funeral, the *butsudan* will provide the majority of the context for the interaction between the *ihai* and the *iei*, as well as for the interaction between the living and the dead (Plath 1964; Reader 1991; Kawano 2005).

The memorial photograph, or *iei*, can be either a formal portrait or a snapshot of the deceased in life. Like a passport photo, the photograph chosen is usually one in which the person is looking directly into the camera. If part of a larger picture, it is cropped to show only the head and shoulders. A good picture is often preferred over a recent picture—several memorial photographs I saw during my research were clearly taken years before the person passed away. As can be expected, it is sometimes difficult for a grieving family to locate an appropriately flattering picture in the hours immediately following a death. Since the presence of the portrait during the wake is essential, a recent, blurry picture taken on a cell phone will often be given to the funeral company as arrangements are being made. As soon as possible, this picture is replaced by a more flattering picture of the deceased that will serve as the permanent portrait.

The most important characteristic of the memorial photograph is that the person be depicted alone. Any other contextualizing features that may have been in the photograph—for example, landscape or other people—are removed and replaced with a gray or light-blue background.[3] Since *iei* are often taken from recreational or formal photographs that are only later converted for memorial purposes, they generally lack a "posing" that makes reference to a "historical grammar" of imagery concerning the transcendent dead (Barthes 1996, 201). Still, their uniformity as a genre (a frontal head shot, cropped from the chest level; gray or blue background) renders their significance as a memorial portrait immediately apparent to any Japanese who, even if they have

Zen sect of Japanese Buddhism, the majority of the wakes and funerals I attended were officiated by Sōtō Zen clergy, though all were arranged by private funeral companies hired by the family. Additional interviews with clergy and laypersons were conducted in Saitama, Nagano, Kanazawa, and Yamagata prefectures (see Irizarry 2011).

3. All of my questions regarding the memorial picture indicate that the choice of the background color is a matter of preference and does not constitute any belief as to the qualities of the place where the dead currently resides.

not seen an *iei* hanging in the home or the home of a relative, have certainly seen such pictures on television, especially as reports on a "newsworthy" death often use the memorial photograph as received from the mourning family in their coverage.

In the memorial photograph, the deceased is both there and not there: "a photographic print simultaneously evokes presence and absence. It constitutes on the one hand a compact and proximate object, yet it manifestly depicts something separated from the viewer in space and time" (Schattschneider 2003, 204). A case in point: during a visit to the home of an informant, I was shown pictures from his wedding several years earlier. I immediately recognized a family portrait as the source from which his father's memorial photograph—visible from where I was sitting, mounted on the wall over the household altar—had been taken. While it was undoubtedly a distinguished picture of my informant's father, seeing the two pictures simultaneously was an uncanny experience: in the memorial portrait, gone were the flowers and decorations of the wedding reception hall, and absent were his smiling wife, his newlywed son, and his new daughter-in-law. The image in the photograph, carefully decontextualized from its original source, communicated the father's continued presence and involvement in the life of the family. However, what struck me as uncanny was the fact that in order to accomplish a sense of presence here, the image in the photograph had to first be carefully decontextualized to be forever nowhere.

Interestingly, this was not always the case. As Yamada (2002) has shown, prior to the end of the nineteenth century, the Japanese—specifically, those who could afford to do so—typically produced devotional portraits that contextualized the dead in the "other world" (*ano yo*), surrounded by food, riches, as well as objects (a favorite pipe, or the name plaque of a store) or people (children or spouses) that defined them in life. Other portraits showed the dead as travelers embarking on a journey or of Amida Buddha coming to retrieve them to bring them to their salvation in the Pure Land. With the advent of the use of photographic images for memorialization, however, the emphasis in funerary portraiture in Japan shifted from imagining the dead living happily in a parallel yet contemporaneous "other world" to a permanent freezing of images of the dead into the faces of their former lives (Yamada 2002, 45). Yamada concludes his article by commenting that this is not necessarily a good thing: by fixing a *hotoke* into their appearance in life, it has become difficult for modern Japanese to conceive of the dead in a physically or spiritually transformed state.

However, Yamada's analysis does not take into account that acts of negotiation and recontextualization necessarily occur when deciding on a suitable image for the memorial portrait. The picture that is chosen for the *iei* may depict the deceased as they wanted to be remembered, but more often than not depicts the deceased in a manner that reflects how the living wish to remember them. It is for this reason that a flattering picture is preferred to a recent one: the photograph chosen for the memorial portrait is intended to indexically direct the viewer toward an idealized depiction of the deceased that will be the image of reference for many years to come. If the portrait differs enough from the mourners' most recent memories of the deceased—through age or illness, for example—the discrepancies between image and memory must be reconciled for them to be said to be "of" (i.e., formally resemble) the person the portrait memorializes.

The memorial tablet, or *ihai*, in contrast, bears no formal resemblance to the person to whom it belongs. Modern memorial tablets are usually constructed of black lacquered wood, standing between 13 and 42 centimeters (5 1/2 and 16 1/2 inches) from base to tip. The feature common to all *ihai* is the vertically standing tablet known as the *fuda*. On *ihai* that are dedicated to an individual, the posthumous "precepts name" (*kaimyō*) is engraved in gilded calligraphy on the front of the tablet, with the age and date of death engraved on the back.

The appearance of an *ihai* can range from the simple to the ornate. The style of the *ihai* is somewhat standardized by the particular sect of Japanese Buddhism to which the deceased's family belongs. However, I was told that the purchase of an *ihai* remains largely a personal choice: a sales representative will suggest a style that is approved by the sect, but it is up to the purchaser to make the final decision. The price for an *ihai* ranges from around 20,000 yen to 200,000 yen (as of 2013, approximately $200 to $2,000) and often higher, depending on size, style, and optional features. Virtually all sects of Japanese Buddhism and many of the New Religions use *ihai*, with the notable exceptions of the Jodō Shinshū sect, which make use of scrolls upon which the posthumous name is calligraphed onto hanging scrolls to indicate that the spirit is no longer in this world but rather in the Pure Land, and Sōkka Gakkai, which encourages its members and converts to do away with the *butsudan* and its paraphernalia entirely.

Unlike the memorial photograph that points to one (and only ever one) person, *ihai* can be shared by two or more individuals. One variation is a wider *fuda* tablet with room for two names to be inscribed side by side. These *ihai*

are often purchased when one spouse predeceases another, and it is common to see the living spouse's posthumous name engraved in red lettering alongside the gilded name of the spouse who has passed away. The color red indicates life; when the living spouse joins her or his partner in death, the red lettering is replaced with gold characters. Similarly, many households choose to have a communal *ihai* dedicated to the generations of ancestors of the family.

Copies of an *ihai* are often made so that the *ihai* can be simultaneously venerated in multiple places. Prior to World War II, it was the legal responsibility of the oldest son to take responsibility for the family's memorial rituals and, therefore, for possession of the family's *butsudan* and *ihai.* Today, however, it is not uncommon for all the siblings of a generation to want a copy of an *ihai* that has been made for one or both of their parents. Many families will likewise entrust their parish temples with a copy of an *ihai*, to ensure that the spirits receive the proper respects every morning. It is relevant to mention that the mechanical replication of the *ihai* does not weaken the efficacy or the significance of the tablet, nor do the bearers worry as to which *ihai* is the real one and which are copies: all replicas of a single *ihai* are considered to be identical and identically efficacious.

Iei and *Ihai* in Historical Context

The history of these memorial objects can be traced to China during the fourth century CE, where they were primarily used during memorial rituals for elite Buddhist priests. As early as the fifth century CE, exemplary funerary portraiture was believed to "accurately capture the 'living spirit' of the subject, rather than his mere outward appearance" (Shi 1988, 69, cited in Foulk and Sharf 1993, 160). By the medieval period in China and Japan five centuries later, Buddhist memorial portraits were no longer taken to be merely accurate representations of the subjects they depicted. Rather, the ritual contexts in which they were deployed had over time transformed the portraits into simulacra that participated in the same essence as its subject and could be used interchangeably in the absence of a living body in a ritual context.

By the tenth century in China, the ritual use of memorial portraiture by Buddhist monastics had fully integrated with Confucian practices of ancestor veneration, notably the use of the spirit tablet (Gerhart 2009, 150). As Foulk and Sharf (1993, 206) observe, the portrait and memorial tablet were considered to the "functionally equivalent" and served the same function as vessels that were inhabited by the spirit of the departed.

Obviously, Chinese religious practice from a millennium ago cannot be expected to explain contemporary Japanese cultural practices. However, we can envision a series of evolutions in which the former came to indirectly influence the latter, echoes of which can still be heard. The key here is understanding the premodern underpinnings of contemporary Japanese funerary and memorial practices and, specifically, the mass marketing of monastic-style funerals adapted from China to the Japanese laity.

As Glassman notes, "ancestor worship entered Japan as an imported commodity" (2009, 391) beginning in the early Heian Period (794–1185 CE), precisely as Buddhist and Confucian memorial practices were being syncretized in China. The practices of crafting memorial tablets and portraits likely arrived in the Japanese archipelago from the Asian mainland during this period as part of the sustained cultural exchange that shaped much of early and medieval Japanese aristocratic culture. At first, the practice of commissioning funerary portraits and memorial tablets was the purview of the wealthy and influential, such as charismatic priests and important political and cultural players.

By the fifteenth century, itinerant Sōtō Zen priests were pioneering the performance of Buddhist funerals and mortuary rituals for the Japanese laity, especially the agrarian classes. The funeral propagated by these priests was based on the liturgical practices of Chinese monastics for use in clerical funerals; its adaptation for use with the laity was a uniquely Japanese innovation (Bodiford 1993, 195). The widespread popularity and appeal of the Sōtō Zen funeral were such that competing Buddhist sects followed this model in establishing their own sectarian funerals. In the intervening centuries, what had begun as a Japanese interpretation of a Chinese ritual practice mingled with local funeral traditions to establish the foundation for modern Japanese funerary customs (Williams 2005, 2008; Walter 2008).

While commissioning *iei* remained prohibitively expensive for all but the wealthy and powerful of Japanese society, wooden memorial tablets were cheaper and easier to craft. Not surprisingly, *ihai* were widespread throughout all strata of Japanese society by the sixteenth century (Smith 1974, 79). By the rise of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1600, *ihai* were virtually ubiquitous on household altars throughout Japan. This prevalence created an opportunity for the Tokugawa government to institute a unique mechanism of social control by employing the existing network of Buddhist temples and priests to monitor the populace. All households were required to register with a specific parish temple, and the government mandated that the parish priest must oversee all

funerary and memorial rites. The parish priest was tasked with annually visiting each parishioner household to recite sutra over the home altar (*tanagyō*). While this was ostensibly done for the benefit of the ancestors enshrined upon the altar, the political motivation behind the visits was to enforce the government's prohibition of Christianity by enabling the priest to regularly inspect the altar and its *ihai* for any subversive iconography. A properly maintained *butsudan* and its *ihai* were, therefore, not only a religious but also a civil obligation.

Throughout the Edo period (1600–1868), the commissioning of *iei* remained the purview of the upper stratum of society. With the advent of photography, however, this situation quickly reversed. Many Japanese first encountered photographic portraiture in the portraits of the Meiji emperor and empress that were enshrined in every classroom. Later, the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) brought photographic portraiture to the public eye as newspapers and magazines published predeployment portraits of the soldiers who later fell in combat in service to their country. As with Victorian-era memorial portrait photography in the United States, the style of photographic memorial portraits in Japan was modeled after the portraits of the powerful, the famous, and the respected that appeared in newspapers and magazines (Ruby 1995, 122). The popularization of memorial photography in Japan dates from the Shōwa period (1912–24); consequently, the first uses of the photographic *iei* as part of the funerary process date from this time (Murakami 2000, 344; Gerhart 2009, 148).

In a reversal of nearly fifteen centuries, today it is the memorial tablet that is considered to be the "high-end" purchase in Japanese memorial rituals. Like the painted *iei* of the time before photography, the *ihai* must now be specially commissioned, usually from a company that specializes in memorial items. Especially in households where a new *butsudan* and the associated paraphernalia must also be purchased to enshrine the memorial objects, the *ihai* can often seem like a luxury item; the memorial package can often total more than 500,000 yen ($5,000) once all is said and done. In contrast, memorial portraiture can now be produced quickly and cheaply by anyone with photo-editing software and access to a printer. Nevertheless, the printing of the *iei* largely remains a service provided by the funeral company and still can cost the mourning family several tens of thousands of yen.

As I have shown, the memorial use of the *ihai* and *iei* has a long history in Japan and an even longer history in China. Centuries after the practices associated with these material items were first imported into Japan, they are still

considered to be essential parts of the Japanese funerary and memorial process. As we will see, these two material items are essential to Japanese representations of the transcendent.

"Waking" Semiosis

In Japan, death of the corporeal body is just the beginning of a multidecade path whereby the dead are thought to undergo a process of cultivation and maturation before they can be counted among the generations of tutelary household ancestors. To understand the processes of signification that begins upon crossing the threshold of death, it is important to consider the Japanese conceptualization of the *hotoke*, which is often glossed as "spirit" or "soul."[4] *Hotoke* is a multivalent concept with deep cultural significance to the Japanese, despite questions about the etymological derivation of the word itself (see esp. Smith 1974; Sasaki 1993; Williams 2008). In one meaning, *hotoke* refers to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, the enlightened being whose teachings serve as a path for all who would escape the pain and suffering of the world. As lay funerals began to promise immediate salvation for the deceased during the medieval period in Japan, *hotoke* likely took on additional significance. Since the dead are ostensibly granted enlightenment through the funerary practices, the phrase *hotoke ni naru* (or its alternate, *jōbutsu suru*)—"to become a buddha"—soon became a euphemism for death in the Japanese popular imagination. As such, a person who has recently died is also referred to as a *hotoke*. The two terms are used somewhat interchangeably when honorifically referring to *hotoke-sama*, and context is often necessary to establish whether a person is talking about the Buddha himself or about a deceased ancestor or relative.

A *hotoke* does not appear "fully formed" at the moment of death. Rather, the Japanese funerary process establishes a context for the future interactions that will take place between the living and dead. Most of the ceremonies pertaining to the body itself are private affairs. The events immediately following the death mdash;the washing of the body, the Buddhist last rites said over the newly dead body (*makuragyō* 'Pillow Sutra'), and the encoffining—are usually attended only by close family members. The funeral itself (*sōgi* or *sōshiki*) is similarly intimate, most often attended only by immediate family and close friends. Finally, the last moments with the body before and after cremation are also small, private events, usually attended again by close family members.

4. Walter (2008), however, cautions against "soul" as a gloss, since the former may come with Christian connotations that are not necessarily found in the Japanese concept of *hotoke*.

In contrast to these private rituals is the *tsuya*, or wake. In most scholarship on Japanese funerals, the *tsuya* is generally mentioned as a minor part of the mortuary process, despite the fact that it is the ceremony that will see the greatest attendance from relatives, friends, and guests. Rather than being an anomaly in an otherwise intimate and subdued private familial ritual, I argue instead that the *tsuya* plays a crucial role in laying the groundwork for all future social interactions between those on either side of the threshold of death by establishing an initial semiotic relationship between the body, the *ihai*, and the *iei*.

The *tsuya* is typically held the evening of the day after death, with the funeral proper taking place the following day. At a symbolic level, a *tsuya* is a sending-off party: the deceased is a traveler or pilgrim celebrating their last night with family and friends before undertaking a great journey. Grief is expected; so too are large quantities of food and alcohol. Indeed, feasting alongside the dead is an essential part of the goings-on.

The most conspicuous feature of modern outside-of-the-home funeral proceedings is the *saidan*, an elaborate multitiered wooden altar that dominates the room. The *saidan* is newly constructed for each funeral from fresh cypress wood. Like most trappings of the ceremony, the *saidan* is supplied by the funeral company with the size and intricacy varying by price.

The arrangement of the *saidan* differs somewhat between funeral companies and religious sect, but some commonalities can be seen. On the uppermost tier is the *iei*, with black ribbons adorning the upper left and right corners of the picture frame. On the tier below the picture sits a temporary paper *ihai*, upon which is written the deceased's newly bestowed posthumous name (*kaimyō* 'precepts name'). Immediately below this lays the body in its unadorned pine coffin elevated on wooden supports. In front of the coffin, a small altar is set up, usually dominated by a sand-filled incense holder, from which lit sticks of incense give off a steady plume of smoke. Large bouquets of colorful flowers are arranged on the sides of the *saidan*.

The room where the *tsuya* will take place is arranged according to the perspective of the object of veneration, in this case, the deceased's spirit that now hovers close to the body. The funeral arrangement spatially references the frame in which Buddhist images are enshrined in a temple setting, and this reference is an essential aspect of the semiotic processes that are to follow. From the spirit's perspective, the immediate family—those who will be observing the mourning rituals—is given the place of honor on the left-hand side, and the extended family is seated on the right. If the room is large enough, guests paying their respects will sit at the back of the room, facing the *saidan*.

The liturgical format of the *tsuya* is not standardized—in fact, *tsuya* vary not only by regional custom but also by religious sect, and even by choice of funeral company—but they tend to follow a general pattern. First, the religious officiant—most often a Buddhist priest—will open the proceedings by addressing the assembled guests giving a brief explanation as to what will be taking place during the ceremony. An important part of this introduction is the explanation of the posthumous name of the deceased and its cultural and religious significance. The bestowing of a *kaimyō* does not mark the transition of a person from life to death, but rather, the transition from the life of a layperson to the life of a world-renouncing monastic. During the funeral the following day, the deceased will take monastic vows (their assent acknowledged by their silence) and will have the forelock of their hair shaven as a tonsure. By taking a new "precepts name" the monastic takes on a new identity as a disciple of the Buddha, distinct and separate from their former social lives and responsibilities. Similarly, for the deceased, the *tsuya* ceremony represents the moment of social transition from one life state to another: the family and guests attending the wake will be the first to greet the deceased—transformed, but very much alive—in their new social identity as a *hotoke*.

This explanation of the *kaimyō* is therefore of importance because it establishes a linguistic connection between the body that possessed the deceased's name in life and the *ihai* upon which is written the new name of the *hotoke*.[5] By explaining the significance of the name and the reasons that this particular name was bestowed upon the deceased, the officiating priest reinforces this linguistic connection, and in so doing, "marks the social status of the deceased in his or her new relationship with the living family" (Covell 2008, 300).

After this, the officiant will chant from Buddhist sutra or other liturgical texts while the family and guests offer incense as a show of respect for the *hotoke*. The incense is offered first by the mourning family, followed by the extended family, and after by the assembled guests. Following the offering of incense, the officiant will usually take the opportunity to give a short eulogy about the deceased, often doubling as a homily that contextualizes the cere-

5. Contemporary *kaimyō* are usually between six and twelve characters in length, with longer names customarily being bestowed on individuals who have demonstrated their devotion to Buddhism, either through a lifetime of religious activity or through generous donations to a temple (often made posthumously in their name). The first four characters of the *kaimyō* are usually chosen to reference the person in life, or at least how their descendants choose to remember them. For example, auspicious characters may be borrowed from the family or personal name, or characters might be selected to communicate biographical aspects of the individual such as hobbies, occupations, or personality traits. The remainder of the *kaimyō* comprises honorific titles that differ by sect (Matsumoto 1992, 45; Covell 2008, 299).

mony in the greater context of Buddhist teachings. For many of the attendees, this homily will often be their first exposure to Buddhism.

Finally, food and drink are served to the assembled guests. In many ways, this meal can easily be considered the most important part of the *tsuya*, even more so than the previous ritual proceedings. In the pain of loss and haze of tears, it is difficult to remember that the *tsuya* is ostensibly a celebration: not only of the deceased's successful transition from life to new life, but also a celebration of the bonds of affection and relatedness that join all of the assembled participants—family, loved ones, and friends—to one another through the deceased. As with other mortuary celebrations in cultures throughout the world, eating and drinking with the dead are vital aspects of the Japanese *tsuya*, reaffirming social bonds in the face of trauma that would otherwise threaten to sever them. The feasting may start somber, but the quantities of food and alcohol and the mandate not to restrain themselves give the guests the opportunity to freely share stories and memories with one another. The deceased, who is given a portion of the food and a cup of sake or beer, is a silent participant in all that is taking place. Gazing down from the *saidan*, they are thought by those in attendance to rejoice in the opportunity to share a meal with their family and guests one last time.

Grounding the *Hotoke*

In scholarship, the *tsuya* is usually conceived to be analogous to a Christian "wake," that is, a gathering where grief, sympathy, and memory can be performed and expressed, where familial or social relations and obligations can be acknowledged and repaid and, occasionally, even celebrated. In this interpretation, it is not surprising that the *tsuya* is considered a preliminary to the funeral proper, which is considered the "main event."[6]

I argue, however, that such a limited scholarly conceptualization does not do justice to the significance of the *tsuya*. Indeed, an overlooked aspect of the event is that it is the first public appearance—a debut, if you will—of the new *hotoke*, who, having crossed the threshold of death, has moved into a new category of social person and into a new social identity. The visual frame created through the ritual space of the *tsuya*, and particularly by the archi-

6. By focusing here on the *tsuya*, I do not mean to imply that the funeral proper is of less importance or significance. Japanese funerals, be they religiously or professionally performed, remain significant moments of transition in an individual's, a family's, and a community's life and have been extensively covered elsewhere (Smith 1974; Walter 2008). Today, the funeral is a far more private ceremony than the *tsuya* and is usually only attended by family and close friends (see Murakami 2000). As a consequence, over the last century, the *tsuya* has become the more public of the two ceremonies.

tectural arrangement of the *saidan*, is therefore essential for establishing in the attendees a recognition of a relationship of signification between the material objects—the *iei*, the *ihai*, and the corporeal body—that that will be necessary for navigating all future interactions between the living and the *hotoke*.

Visually, both the frame and arrangement of the ritual space communicate that the corporeal body is the object of signification. As a portrait of the deceased, the *iei* stands in a relationship of formal resemblance—that is, in an iconic relationship—to the body in the coffin. This is the picture that the attendees will recognize as being the face of the person to whom they are paying their respects. The attendees further assume (hopefully correctly) that the portrait being displayed is the one that belonged to the person who is now the body in front of them, even though the picture was taken long before death. The visual arrangement thus provides an easily perceptible semiotic link between the portrait and the corpse.

In contrast, the relationship between the *ihai* and the corpse is not immediately obvious and requires contextualization. It is for this reason that it is so important to begin the *tsuya* with an explanation of the posthumous name of the deceased by the officiating priest. The attendees, knowing the deceased by their name in life, must essentially be "reintroduced" to that person, who as a *hotoke* now occupies a new social identity. One can draw parallels here to baby-naming ceremonies and weddings, which both require a vested authority and witnesses to legitimate important social transformations. Further, this name is largely unrecognizable as a name to the attendees: the *kaimyō* does not follow everyday naming conventions but is rather a compilation of references and titles that carry obscure religious significance. While the presence of an *ihai* is itself culturally indicative of a memorial setting, it must be established that *this* name on *this ihai* refers to *this* body. The task of the officiant, therefore, is to do the initial semiotic legwork for the attendees by clearly establishing the relationship between this token *ihai* and the body lying before them. The *ihai* thus can be said to have an indexical relationship to the deceased, establishing its signification to the body through its proximity in both space and time, in the sense that we might think of a name tag or label.

The establishment of the relationship of signification between the *ihai*, the *iei*, and the body is all the more important since the *tsuya* and the first part of the funeral proper are the only occasions in the funerary and memorial process where these three material representations are all visibly in the same place at the same time. At this point in the process, however, the corpse itself is not treated as if it an empty shell. Rather, the spirit is still treated as if lingering

about the body, and in many instances, even treated as if it is present in the body; for example, when the officiating priest bestows the monastic precepts and tonsure on the body during the funeral proper, or when an attendee reaches into the coffin to lovingly touch the cheek of their loved one a final time.

I have established that the *tsuya* is significant for establishing the semiotic connection between the *iei*, the *ihai*, and the body. Throughout the funerary ritual, however, the mortal body—the object of these sign relationships—becomes increasingly abstract (Rowe 2000, 369–70). At the beginning of the funerary process, the body is treated with the utmost care, being ritually washed and ceremoniously placed in the coffin. As the rituals progress, the encoffined body is physically transformed away from her or his former "lay" (i e., living) appearance to that of a tonsured monastic. Next, the body is concealed under a layer of flowers individually placed by the attendees, with the immediate family laying flowers around the deceased's head. The most overt displays of grief of the ritual process accompany the affixing of the coffin lid, a moment made poignant by it being the last time any of the family or attendees will see the body in its mortal form. Following the closing of the lid, the attendees will make their last farewells to the body of the deceased as the coffin is loaded into a waiting hearse and, accompanied only by close family, taken to the crematory. Here, the mortal remains will be cremated in a private ceremony, collected by the family, and placed into a reliquary urn.

For a period of forty-nine days following the funeral, the frame of the *tsuya* will be replicated in miniature in the family home by the construction of a special altar where the *iei*, the *ihai*, and the reliquary urn (encased in a brocaded box) will again be presented in visual proximity. Like a newborn child, the new *hotoke* is expected to be spoken to and cared for with daily offerings of food, flowers, incense, and sutra recitations at this altar.[7] At the end of this period, the urn is typically interred in a grave, or the ashes disposed of by other means. The *iei* and the *ihai* will be placed prominently on the family *butsudan*, where they will likely remain for many years.

Reestablishing Relationships

Without dismissing the emotional weight of the funerary and memorial process, the cremation of the body sparks an important reconfiguration of the

7. If the family cannot, or is unwilling to, keep the ashes, I was told that the reliquary could be left with a temple priest, who will give the ashes the appropriate care.

semiotic relationship that was previously established at the *tsuya*. By destroying the body, the material object that initially grounded the sign relationships of the *iei* and *ihai* is no longer a part of the semiotic equation. While the temporary presence of the cremated remains in the home postpones this "ungrounding" somewhat, once the urn is removed from the house, only the *ihai* and the *iei* will remain accessible to facilitate everyday interaction between the *hotoke* and the living.

How is this accomplished in the absence of any trace of the mortal body? Recognizing the increasing abstractness of the corporeal body throughout the funeral process may provide a clue as to what is actually going on: it is no longer the mortal body that is the object of signification, but rather the still-present spirit that previously called the body home. A semiotic sleight of hand is taking place, pressing the mourner to pay less and less attention to the body as the object of the sign relationship, and to instead see the *hotoke* that is now the object of the sign relationships. This process, however, will take time: in semiotic terms, there is still a lot of work to be done.

Having been physically separated from the object that initially grounded their signification, the enshrined *iei* and *ihai* have now fallen into a somewhat ambiguous state. For a limited time—perhaps as long as memory of the original relationship of signification lasts—neither icons nor indexes have any problem signifying an absent object: both a photograph of a flame and the lingering smell of smoke can signify a specific (but now extinguished) fire. Similarly, the *ihai* and *iei* retain their significance by the recent memory of the process of signification that was previously established at the wake and the funeral.

However, both the icon and index are ultimately dependent on the object, or at least a memory of it, to create a lasting ground for their signification (Parmentier 1994, 6). To continue the above example, the photograph of a flame can lose its iconicity to a specific fire if records or memory do not preserve it. This would render it a photograph of a generic "fire," but not a sign of the previous fire. Similarly, once the smell of smoke and evidence of burning are cleared out of a room, there will be no physical signs to indicate any previous fire. As memory fades, so too does the index, which requires a spatiotemporally present object to "latch" onto, otherwise it cannot properly be called an index.

Peirce knew that understanding the relationship that icons and indexes had to their object in reference to space and time was essential to understanding how the signs themselves functioned and persisted. As Parmentier (1987, 107–8) describes: "Signs [Peirce] calls 'icons,' in which the relationship between the

expressive sign vehicle and represented object is grounded in some formal resemblance, are inherently oriented toward the past, since these signs function meaningfully without the actual spatiotemporal existence of the represented object. In contrast, signs he calls 'indexes' require some relationship of contiguity between expression and object and are thus necessarily anchored to present experience." Seen in this light, the *iei* can be seen to have an "easier" time maintaining the relationship of signification with the absent body, since it perpetuates an image (however idealized) of the person as they were in life. As an icon, the *iei* points perpetually to the past, not just to the body, but to the social person who previously lived. As in the above example, as long as memory (or records, which are a form of remembering) exist to connect the portrait with a particular name and identity, we can say that the *iei* is "of" that person, even if that person is no longer around. It is consequently easier to conceive of the *iei* as embodying some remnant of the social person's spirit or identity, as it participates in a relationship of resemblance to the body that used to house the spirit when it was alive.

The *ihai*, in contrast, has a fundamentally different spatiotemporal relationship to its object. We have already seen that the indexical significance of the *ihai* was not obvious from the get-go: it had to be initially spelled out to the attendees of the funeral. Even as a recognizable cultural sign that communicates the presence of an object worthy of veneration, the aniconic nature of the *ihai* is such that it is unclear exactly who or what the tablet is signifying. Verbal explanation and visual contextualization (as was done during the *tsuya* and funeral) can only temporarily provide the spatiotemporal context for the *ihai* to perform as an index. Ultimately, the *ihai* needs its object to be present in both time and space. While the tablet may have biographical details about the person's former life—such as the age and date of death—this is not enough. The challenge, therefore, is how to get the *ihai* to function "properly" as an index of the *hotoke* once the body is gone.

The answer to this question lies in the performance of the "eye-opening ritual" (*kaigen kuyō*) for the memorial tablet. Ethnographic accounts of the eye-opening ritual can be found throughout the literature on Buddhism in Asia.[8] The eye-opening ritual is commonly performed as a consecration for religious images—of the Buddha, various bodhisattvas, or local deities—at the completion of their crafting. On a painted images or statues, the eye opening is

8. See, e.g., Gombrich (1966); Swearer (2004); Glassman (2012).

often the final painting of the irises and pupils of the eye, thereby completing the work. On images without painted eyes, the ritual is often symbolic, with a brush tracing the eyes of the work. By ritually opening the eyes of the image, the *kaigen kuyō* transforms an otherwise inanimate work into a living body with which social interactions can take place (Gell 1998, 120). With its eyes thus opened, the animate image can do much more than see and be seen in turn; it can also be spoken to, held, bathed, cared for, cleaned, and given nourishment through food offerings. Further, the animated image has desires and needs that can possibly be considered biological: the image that does not receive these interactions or nourishment at regular intervals is described as "lonely" and "starving," and such neglect may lead to the image punishing those who have abandoned it.

At first glance, the *ihai* would appear to be an odd entry for this set. For one, the *ihai* differs from the rest in that, as little more than engraved standing tablet, it is nonanthropomorphic and therefore lacks "eyes" with which to "open." For another, as an index, it bears no qualitative resemblance to the signified object. Unlike a statue of the Buddha, for example, which is iconic in respect to cultural ideas of what the Buddha looks like, the *ihai* does not in any way qualitatively resemble the person for whom it was crafted, either as they were in life or as they are in death. (No one says that the *hotoke* "looks like" a tablet.) And finally, for the vast majority of people for whom an *ihai* will be made, the person is of no religious consequence. The same obviously cannot be said of images of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, or deities.[9]

As an index, the *ihai* is "odd man out" to all of these representations in that it does not share in these formal qualities and must therefore have its object regrounded for it to have significance. This regrounding of a new object of signification is precisely what the *kaigen kuyō* accomplishes by animating the tablet by calling the *hotoke* into it. In so doing, the ceremony ritually reconfirms the indexicality of the *ihai* by formally reestablishing its relationship of signification with its new object, the *hotoke*. Whereas previously the *ihai* required contiguity with an external object (the corporeal body), the consecrated tablet is once again established as an index whose primary sign-function is to call attention to the presence of the *hotoke* that dwells within it. Fascinatingly, this indexing is accomplished now through the *ihai*'s own

9. Complicating this calculus is the fact that the memorial portrait, by virtue of having a formal resemblance to the deceased, does not need any further ritual attention to enable it to serve as a vessel for the *hotoke*. To my knowledge, eye-opening ceremonies are not held for the *iei*.

presence. An *ihai* on the household altar referentially points at itself, as if to say, "if there is an *ihai* here, there must also be a *hotoke*." Circuitously, the memorial tablet can properly function as an index of the *hotoke* as a consequence of it having been animated by its own object of signification.

One has to ask if all this was even necessary. As mentioned above, the portrait has long been considered a suitable home for the spirit to reside. One may think that the animation of the *ihai* would be seen as excessive and that the memorial tablet could more easily reclaim its indexicality by being placed into a relationship of dependency on the portrait. In this scenario, the portrait would be inhabited by the spirit, and the *ihai* would reclaim its indexicality through reference to the relationship between the portrait and the *hotoke*.

However, this is not the case. After consecration, an *ihai* and an *iei* are "functionally equivalent." In fact, as Sharf and Foulk (1993, 193) document, historical commentary indicates that having both a memorial tablet and portrait was conceived as an unnecessary redundancy, since each object satisfies the same function as the other (see also Cho 2010, 224–25). Nevertheless, the end result of the efforts to reground the object of signification for both the *iei* and the *ihai* is to create what I term a "multiplicity of immanence." Properly consecrated, the *hotoke* can now simultaneously inhabit both the memorial portrait and the tablet, seemingly without contradiction. Further, and as noted above, both the *ihai* and the *iei* can be replicated without diffusing or weakening the spirit that dwells within them. Unlike images of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, or deities, which are often "regarded as separate individuals with unique personalities" and whose "individuation extends to the powers associated with specific icons" (Sharf 1999, 83), a singular *hotoke* can be said to dwell simultaneously and without paradox in all replicas of the memorial items.

The Ordinary Transcendent

Culturally speaking, this multiplicity of immanence creates virtually no logistical problems for the Japanese. In fact, the Japanese are quite comfortable in the knowledge that an individual *hotoke* can simultaneously be in a variety of places, and in interviews my informants were happy to suggest other locations that the *hotoke* might be encountered: for example, at family gatherings, at the parish temple, and at the family grave. Moreover, the *hotoke* may have multiplicities in other planes of existence; even *hotoke* that are thought to inhabit the household *butsudan* might also live in the Buddhist Pure Land, in heaven (in the Christian sense), or simply on "the other shore" (*higan*). In fact, many of the annual celebrations that are observed throughout Japan are predicated

on this idea of a "return" of the spirits of the dead to the land of the living, even though the *hotoke* is technically present in the house every day out of the year. Perhaps the closest I came to an acknowledgment of the ontological problems created by a *hotoke*'s many presences came from a Sōtō Zen priest, who had likely encountered such questions before. After pausing for several moments to consider my question, he replied that he believes that "the *hotoke* 'are' wherever they are being honored.[10] A person can honor the *hotoke* at home, or at a temple, or at a grave visitation. The most important thing is *that* you honor them."

In this sense, the multiplicity of immanence is the *hotoke*'s most transcendent quality. Generally speaking, human beings are said to be located in one (and only one place). Even technologies that allow for communication across great distances are predicated on the temporal location of the body in space. The *hotoke* are seemingly freed from this requirement. While they are not conceived of as omnipresent (as Augustine and Aquinas, for example, thought of the transcendent divine), the *hotoke* has no problem being in many places at once, provided there is an appropriate vessel for them to inhabit.

In nearly all other senses, the *hotoke* are almost startlingly "ordinary." Other than having changed physical state, the *hotoke* is believed to have the same personality, the same tastes, and the same likes and dislikes as it had in life. The *hotoke* retain agency in their new form: they can be spoken to, asked for advice, and generally called upon for assistance. A *hotoke* can feel happiness and pride, and it can get lonely, sad, or even angry.

In some senses, the *hotoke* are more dependent on the living than the living are on them. For all of their multiple presences, the *hotoke* cannot travel independently, as they must be carried by physically transporting the *ihai* or *iei*, provided with a means of transportation,[11] or else the living have to come to them at the altar, temple, or grave. The bodies that the *hotoke* inhabit must be fed and cleaned on a regular basis, something that they cannot do themselves.

This is not to say that the *hotoke* are powerless, as they do have the ability to influence the world around them in ways that are not generally available to the living. The *hotoke* can work on behalf of the family to make good things happen such as health, financial prosperity, love, and children. An angry *ho-*

10. I have translated *kuyō suru* 'to make offerings' here as "to honor" in the hopes of making the priest's sentiment clearer for nonspecialists.

11. Providing means of transportation for *hotoke* and household ancestors to and from "this world" is commonly associated with the summer festival of *O-Bon*. Special altars constructed in the home for the festival (*bondana*) often feature an "eggplant cow" or "cucumber horse" (a vegetable with four toothpicks for legs) for the spirits to ride. Similarly, the visually striking custom of releasing paper lanterns into bodies of water (*tōrō nagashi*) is believed to ferry the dead back to the "other shore."

toke, on the other hand, can punish through illness and misfortune if not getting the care it deserves (Nelson 2008, 312).[12]

On an everyday basis, interactions between the living and the *hotoke* take place through the medium of the *iei* and the *ihai*. How meaningful or frequent these interactions are depends, of course, on the person or family in question. Far and away the most common practice is the offering of food on the *butsudan*. Many of my informants reported interacting with their ancestors at least once a day, usually at mealtimes. The ritual was surprisingly simple. A small candle and a stick of incense would be lit, the food (often a portion of rice and tea) would be placed, and the performer would place their hands together and bow their head, after which the candle flame would be blown out. In many instances, this interaction took no more than twenty seconds. Others reported making more elaborate offerings on the days of the month that correspond to the date of death, such as providing the deceased's favorite food or drink, or reciting a sutra as part of the offering. Many also observed annual death dates with visits to the grave, donations to a temple or other charitable organization, or other personalized practices. Properly maintained, the relationship between the *hotoke* and the living matures and deepens over the course of many years.

Preserving Communication

Aside from solidifying the social relationship between the living and the *hotoke*, regular interactions such as I have just described have the secondary function of reinforcing the semiotic relationships that were established between the *iei* and *ihai* and the *hotoke* that dwells within them (cf. Sharf 1999, 82). What is interesting to note, however, is that while *ihai* and *iei* on a household *butsudan* and Buddhist imagery in a temple setting both require regular interactions from their living caretakers (ideally, several times a day), the relationship between the material image and object of representation differs dramatically between the two groups. As noted above, material images of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, or deities are generally conceived to be individuated instances—that is, unique incarnations—of the transcendent being in question. Indeed, many religious images have legendary origin stories that establish the image as "the

12. The notion of a "vengeful *hotoke*" has, to a large degree, lost traction on a cultural level. A small-scale survey administered to lay participants at Daihonzan Sōjiji during my field research found that more than half of the respondents (36 of 64) "strongly disagreed" with the idea that *hotoke* would seek to harm their families if not properly cared for. If the responses for "leaning toward disagreement" (9) are included, the figure jumps to more than 70 percent (see also Smith 1974, 124).

way in which a specific deity manifested itself in a specific locale during a specific historical time" (Rambelli 2002, 292). Often, these images are also associated with a specific miracle or benefit for which they are famous—for example, protecting women in childbirth, or healing diseases of the eye—making them suitable subjects of pilgrimage (Reader and Tanabe 1998, 61–68). Since the image is a unique entity in itself, its potency generally does not transfer to other images of the same being, or to replicated copies of the image. Ultimately, even for less famous images, the properly animated image "is" the being in question. If the image is destroyed, so is that unique incarnation, and with it whatever personality and powers it possessed.

In contrast, while an *iei* and an *ihai* can "embody" the *hotoke*, neither is thought to actually "be" the deceased person they memorialize (cf. Freedberg 1989, 31).[13] In this regard, the *iei* and *ihai* are simply culturally appropriate vessels for the *hotoke* to inhabit when attended to by the living. The untimely destruction of an *ihai* or *iei*, therefore, does not destroy the *hotoke* any more than a broken telephone destroys the person on the other end of the line: it merely renders communication between the living and the *hotoke* inaccessible until the means of communication is restored. From a ritual perspective, a restored *iei* or a properly consecrated replacement *ihai* will "work" just as well as the original. Moreover, as a consequence of their functional equivalency, either one can serve in the absence of the other. In the absence of both (due to financial constraints or other circumstances), visiting and maintaining the grave site will fulfill the living's responsibility to the dead. As stressed by nearly all of the Buddhist clergy I interviewed, the important thing is the regularity of interaction between the living and the dead.

However, if communication between the living and the dead is interrupted, it must be restored as soon as possible. It is for this reason that, following a major catastrophe such as the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011, the search for "surviving" *ihai* and *iei* in the wreckage and debris is an important part of disaster recovery efforts in Japan (Graf 2012; McLaughlin 2013, 24).

There are several logics at play here. The first is that the longer a *hotoke* goes without contact from the living, the closer it gets to loneliness and starvation. Being so abandoned, however unintentionally, will ultimately result in the *hotoke* becoming a *muen botoke*—literally, a "*hotoke* without connections." A *muen botoke* is a pitiful and dangerous thing, capable of bringing all manner of misfortune upon the living. As Rowe (2011, 47) notes, contemporary Japa-

13. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this crucial distinction.

nese understand this not only as a tragic fate for the *hotoke* but as a social and moral failure on the part of the living: "the only thing worse than becoming *muen* oneself . . . is to be the one who allows this fate to befall the family ancestors." There is therefore an understandable pressure to recover or replace the memorial objects should they be lost or destroyed.

A second logic is that the recovery of these memorial items represents a psychological return to normalcy, however small, through the reestablishment of familiar affective relationships. The reunion with the *iei* or *ihai* of one's household is often taken as a sign that the dead have likewise not abandoned the living.

Moreover, the emotional and sentimental attachment one feels for *ihai* or *iei* that one has cared for and interacted with for years may override the material realities of its reproducibility. As things with unique "biographies" (Kopytoff 1986), every *ihai* or *iei* has a story that makes it singular—of who it represents and their relationships to the living, how it was made or acquired and by whom, how much it cost, how long it had been in the household, and so on. Further, the memorial items have been "held in the hand, features delineated with the touch of a finger, an object passed around . . . and carefully placed, dusted and cared for" (Edwards 2012, 224). In this regard, *ihai* or *iei* can often matter to the living far more than a simple analysis of their pragmatic or ritual functions would otherwise indicate.

And, of course, in many cases such items actually are irreplaceable. While it is customary to retire an *ihai* after a certain period of time has passed (more on this below), several informants that I spoke with told me with pride that their household *butsudan* enshrined several *ihai* that dated from the 1800s.[14] In one instance, individual tablets on an informant's (presumably crowded) household altar provided a record of family members over the past three hundred years. Were these families to suffer a household catastrophe, these antique *ihai* would be impossible to replicate: the value of the individual tablets stems from their longevity, not from their function. Similarly, prior to the very recent advent of digital photography, photographs were virtually impossible to replace in the absence of the original or negatives. A lost painted or pho-

14. The vast majority of my informants were part of the postwar mass urbanization that saw record numbers of Japanese relocating from rural areas to urban Tokyo and Yokohama or were the children or grandchildren of these emigrants. Because of this neolocality, it should not be surprising that so few of my informants had such antique *ihai* on the family *butsudan*; the urban households with the most numerous and oldest *ihai* were those that not only had a long history in the area but whose altars had also survived the firebombing of Tokyo and Yokohama in the closing days of World War II.

tographic *iei* was likely lost forever, along with other memories contained in photo albums that could not be recovered.

Endings and Beginnings

The interactions detailed in this article are part of a many-year—and likely a many-decade—process. The semiotic relationships between the *iei*, the *ihai*, and the *hotoke* that are established amid the grief of the wake and funeral represent only one step of a very long road, the first overtures of a new relationship that will change and mature over a span of years. As the living continue to care for the dead through offerings and regular interactions, context and perspective will largely determine whether the person believes they are relating to the *hotoke* directly or with a mere representation of it. There is no reason to assume that a person will experience either the memorial portrait or tablet in a consistent fashion throughout their own lifetimes, and it is fair to reason that people at different stages of remembering will report different relationships to the memorial objects and different understandings of the semiotic processes in which they have been engaged.

Still, one thing is certain: with each passing year, as personal memory of the *hotoke* begins to fade and fewer and fewer people remember the dead as they were in life, the individuality of the spirit begins to fade. As the years become decades, memories die with the living as they too pass into the "other world." As the *hotoke* fades from memory, so too the iconic *iei* loses its iconicity, and the indexical *ihai* loses its indexicality (cf. Schattschneider 2004, 158). The appropriate time for the retirement of the *ihai* and *iei* varies by religious sect, but thirty-three years and fifty years after death are the most common numbers given. No longer remembered by the living, the *hotoke* is elevated to the status of tutelary ancestor (*senzo*) and is believed to join the collective spirits of the generations of household ancestors (*senzo daidai shoshōrei*). Without a *hotoke* present to animate them, and thereby lacking an object to ground their significance, the *ihai* and *iei* can be removed from the *butsudan*, their ritual work finally accomplished.

How consistently this ceremonial "retirement" of the memorial objects is actually observed by the living is a question that begs for further inquiry. As observed above, it is not uncommon for households to retain an *ihai* or an *iei* far beyond the limits of living memory, and indeed past a point where anyone alive has ever known the person for which the portrait or tablet was made. In research performed during the early 1960s, Smith observed that almost half of the 3,000 *ihai* he documented as part of his census of household *butsudan*

were older than fifty years, beyond the "traditional" upper limit of an *ihai*'s lifespan. Fifteen percent of the tablets in his sample were over a century old (Smith 1974, 176).

Smith correctly predicted that the mass migration away from rural areas (occurring during his research) would have dramatic effects on the customs pertaining to memorial ritual and ownership of *ihai* and *iei* in urban areas. Further, he predicted that in the cities, there would be "less and less emphasis on the observances for the remote dead . . . and an increasing tendency to demonstrate affection for recently deceased kinsmen only, in the form of simplified memorialism" (Smith 1974, 223). Rural households whose claims to land and property were based on inheritance were most likely to hold onto memorial objects past the fifty-year mark; in contrast, neolocal urban households for whom living space would be at a premium would be more selective as to the *ihai* and *iei* on the *butsudan*, or whether to even have a *butsudan* at all.

Fifty years on from his survey, Smith's predictions seem to have largely been borne out. My sample of informants in 2006–8 mostly comprised neolocal households that were established by emigrants to Tokyo and Yokohama, and the *butsudan* I personally saw during my research held at most two pairs of *ihai* and *iei*. Further, the *ihai* and *iei* I observed were no older than twenty years, with the majority having been purchased after the death of a parent or spouse within the past decade. Nevertheless, it is instructive that every urban household I visited during my research did have a *butsudan* enshrining at least one *ihai* and *iei*.[15] It therefore remains to be seen whether *butsudan* passed down within urban households will come to resemble their rural counterparts, if not in size, then at least in the age of the memorial objects found upon them.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to demonstrate how a semiotic approach to memorial objects helps us to understand a complex cultural process. In showing how we might "read" the wake and funeral as the beginning stages of a process of signification and mediation, I demonstrated how the *ihai* and *iei* followed a semiotic logic that allowed them to first represent and then to act as vessels for the *hotoke*, allowing for a mutual relationship between the living and the dead. I further demonstrated that the *hotoke*, understood in this

15. Since a significant portion of my field research addressed lay participation at a large urban Buddhist temple, my informants may be a nonrepresentative sample by virtue of being precisely the kind of religiously minded people one would expect to make *butsudan* ownership and memorial observances a priority.

manner, was far from an abstract, otherworldly concept. Rather, the *hotoke* is an "ordinary transcendent," a spirit with agency that has transcended its earthly existence but can nevertheless be interacted with in the most mundane of ways. Rather than conceiving of the *hotoke* as an unknowable, numinous transcendent divine, I have tried to demonstrate that there is much to be gained though a scholarly recognition of the ordinariness of the transcendent. Through such an inquiry, we can better understand how processes of representation and signification can be used to establish meaningful relationships that enable a human being to live and act in this world far beyond the lifespan of their mortal bodies.

Especially in the days, months, and now years following the March 11, 2011, disaster in Japan, images of funerals and memorial rituals, as well as the accompanying material paraphernalia, returned with urgency to the forefront of the Japanese cultural awareness. Alongside images of the horrifying destruction and images of the Herculean efforts of the survivors and volunteers were images of the mass funerals and memorial rituals for the 13,000 victims of the disaster. Video and stills of survivors paying their respects to rows of dozens of *iei* and *ihai*—many belonging to victims whose bodies would never be found—communicated to those in Japan and abroad that properly honoring the dead was a prelude to the survivors' rebuilding of their communities and their lives. These images writ large what is otherwise an everyday occurrence in Japan: the close interaction between the living and the dead through the medium of material objects.

It is, of course, difficult for an article of this length to follow all of the possible directions that this analysis might have led. I acknowledge that the *ihai* and *iei* are only two objects out of a constellation of Buddhist ritual paraphernalia and that other investigations might find insight by bringing other ritual objects into this group. For example, a future offshoot of this investigation might consider how family graves participate in the process of signification through which a relationship with the *hotoke* is established. Another investigation might fruitfully examine how changes in the funeral and memorial rituals through history (and especially in the past century) might have led to other semiotic relationships being established between the *ihai* and the *iei*, and between the *hotoke* and the living.

In conceiving this article, the challenge I set for myself was to consider how we might broaden a conversation about "representations of the transcendent" to include concepts of transcendence that might not ordinarily make the cut. In the final analysis, what I have attempted here is ultimately an experiment,

one that I hope can provide useful discussion and insight into better understanding memorial practices in Japan and elsewhere in the world. As I consider the potential comparisons to be made in the ethnographic record, I am struck by how accessible, familiar, and ordinary the transcendent can be. Perhaps we have more in common with the transcendent than we think.

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