

Japanese firm to offer 'drive-thru' funeral service

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Drive-through mourners can register their names on a touchscreen tablet device and make a traditional offering of incense just by rolling down a car window

A Japanese funeral parlour is set to offer relatives the chance to pay their final respects to deceased loved ones without leaving the comfort of their cars.

The firm claims that the "drive-thru" service is a first in Japan, where a

rapidly ageing population means funerals are anything but a dying trade.

Elderly mourners can register their names on a touchscreen tablet device and make a traditional offering of incense just by rolling down a car window—a process relayed to screens inside the venue for the grieving funeral host to watch.

The initiative aims to speed up funeral services and also to give infirm relatives the chance to participate, said the firm's president Masao Ogiwara.

"Older people may hesitate to attend a funeral because they have to ask for help to get out of the car," Ogiwara told AFP.

"But we want as many people as possible to be able to come to say farewell to their friends or neighbours," he said.

It usually takes at least 15 minutes for someone in a wheelchair to offer incense at the altar during a traditional Japanese funeral ceremony.

Ogiwara said the time is cut down to just a few minutes by the service, which the Kankon Sosai Aichi Group in the central Nagano prefecture expects to offer from December.

'Rent-a-monk'

With a high [average life expectancy](#), Japan is on the verge of becoming the first "ultra-aged" country in the world, meaning that 28 percent of people are aged 65 or above.

The latest government report shows that 27.3 percent of a population of 127 million—one in four people—are aged 65 or older and the figure is expected to jump to 37.7 percent in 2050.

Drive-through funerals are the latest in a series of Japanese innovations attempting to win a slice of the competitive 1.76-trillion-yen (\$16-billion) funeral business.

One trend that has sparked controversy is a so-called "rent-a-monk" system, where at the click of a mouse, a mourning family can order a monk delivered to perform the funeral rites.

Another company went even further by replacing a real Buddhist monk with a chatty human-shaped "Pepper" robot for a funeral.

How about a mail-order funeral? For those who cannot afford to pay expensive [funeral](#) fees, a temple near Tokyo accepts the ashes of the deceased via mail and places it in its burial facility.

If visiting a grave in a remote area is too much trouble, one firm has pioneered an app allowing relatives to pay a virtual visit to the gravesite.

And in urban areas where space is tight, several buildings have been constructed to house the ashes of hundreds of dead people.

Mourners are given a card which they place on an electronic sensor, whizzing the right ashes automatically to an altar for prayer.

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