

Helping an aging Japan deal with death

H



International New York
Times(ニューヨーク)

INTERNATIONAL NEW YORK TIMES,
NEW YORK

2017.8.20

“Fewer and fewer people talk to their neighbors, so they don’t have to show off or think about how they are viewed by them.”

Itai hoteru first appeared about five years ago in Japan’s largest cities, and there are only a few across the country. Some have angered residents who do not want to live in such proximity to death and mourning.

Near the Sousou hotel in Kawasaki City, signs on fences protest, “Corpse storage: absolutely opposed!”

Hisao Takegishi, the hotel’s owner, said he understood why neighbors were uncomfortable. But he said his staff tried to be as discreet as possible when bringing in bodies.

Inside, Mr. Takegishi painted the walls in pastel colors and equipped the rooms with green sofas and stools. They

look more like start-up break areas than a setting for wakes or funerals. The entryway, with shelves of plants and a few books, evokes a spa.

“I did not want it to look too sad or lonely,” he said. Sousou has relationships with funeral directors and monks, and can help clients plan modest services.

Yuki Matsumoto, the executive director of the All Japan Funeral Directors Cooperation, which represents about 1,340 long-established funeral homes, said some owners of the new businesses paid little regard to standards or the dignity of the dead.

Japan does not require a license to open a funeral business, and there are few regulations for how they operate. “So in this situation, it is possible that bad-intentioned businesses can enter the industry,” Mr. Matsumoto said.

But Mr. Kurisu at the Hotel Relation said traditional funeral homes just resented the new competition. “I am hated by people in the business because I am driving down the prices of funeral services,” he said.

At Mr. Iguchi’s tiny funeral ceremony last fall, a monk chanted last rites as his body rested in a coffin lined with white satin. Five guests, all relatives, sat in folding chairs nearby.

After the chanting, they rose to lay flowers and origami cranes on Mr. Iguchi’s body, making a bright garland around his head and on his chest.

His sister, Mrs. Abe, leaned close to her brother’s ear. “So long,” she whispered.