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Hope in an ageing Japan: transience and transcendence

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Abstract: In Japan, today, longevity has not meant a reduction in years of dependence. As a result, anticipation of a long life also brings the troubling anticipation of problems like chronic illness and loneliness. How do older adults facing such a future create hope? The purpose of this paper is threefold: (i) to propose a conceptualization of hope as “lunar aesthetics,” that is, not as anticipation of achievement but as a process of loss and renewal; (ii) to link this process to aesthetic forms and ritual practices from my fieldwork with older adults in Kyoto; and (iii) to critically evaluate the ways current formal long-term care diverges from “lunar” hope. Drawing on Japanese associations between the moon, hope, and rituals memorializing the spirits of the dead, this paper argues that older adults engage with an alternative interpretation of hope based on transience and transcendence. Both of these offer hope to older adults by reorienting the temporal boundaries of personhood, to experience change (including decline and death) as an inherent aspect of becoming part of a larger narrative of linked generations or the natural state of life.

Keywords: ageing, death, hope, aesthetics, mourning

1 Hope after 80?

At the age of 82, Keiko Abukawa shuffled as she walked, her back bent at an uneasy forty-five degree angle. With one hand, she followed the familiar edges of furniture, until she found her seat across from me, taking out a plump, golden Japanese pear and peeling it over a folded sheet of newsprint. As she worked, we continued catching up on the six years since we had last seen each other.

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Abukawa-san peeled away a long, coiling strip of pear skin from the sweet white fruit. As it fell onto the plate, I asked if she had any hopes at this point in her life. Looking up she answered, “You have to think of something that you want to do, and then even if you can’t do it [*jitusgen dekinai*], at least you’re moving in that direction. You’re facing forward [*mae muki ni*].”¹ She pushed the plate of pear slices across the table. “Of course, when you get to be over 80, every year feels like you’ve aged five years. It is really hard to get through even one year without some incident [*buji ni*].”

For someone Abukawa-san’s age, a lot can transpire in just a few years; the curve of time itself can even change, as daily expectations and longer-term hopes are tempered by uncertainty. Abukawa sighed as she told me that she had finally given up her favourite pastime of social dancing (*shakō dansu*) a year earlier due to painful arthritis in her knees. She has also had to spend an increasing amount of time looking after her husband’s declining health, which has made it harder for her to get out of the house and see other people. Her two sons and their families lived hours away by train. She gave an embarrassed smile as she told me that their life was now only *rōrō kaigo* (i.e., the old caring for the old). Hope appeared to be a precious commodity, on the verge of slipping through the cracks of everyday life.

Abukawa-san’s narrative ranges across the complex temporal construction of hope in the face of old age. For her, hope was a matter of moving with purpose, even if the goal was elusive or unattainable and the path was slow and marked by hardship. How do older adults like the Abukawas find meaningful potential in longevity when such longevity is perceived as inevitably linked to the burden on the family or nation, to physical and mental decline, to social abandonment? How does one continue to look forward, as Abukawa-san put it, despite the experience of decline? How can one maintain hope after 80?

For a growing number of older adults, their future – and perhaps the future of Japan as a whole – is shadowed by a rapidly ageing (and dying) population. In a country where one in four are over the age of 65, and a third of those require assistance in daily tasks due to frailty, dementia, or other chronic health issues that accompany advanced age (Naikakuchō 2015), the consequences of an ageing society are increasingly evident. In cities, old vacant homes fall into disrepair, as their elderly occupants no longer have children willing to inherit them. In the countryside, villages that have existed for centuries have been reduced to a few dozen elderly residents, all conscious of the reality that they

¹ This interview was conducted in 2013. All interviews mentioned in this article were conducted between 2005 and 2014.

will be the last. Stories of abandonment, neglect, and abuse are widespread in the media (Allison 2013: 30–39).

The absence of older adults' perspectives on hope points to a striking gap in Japan in the new field of "hope studies" (Genda 2006). Older adults, especially those nearing the end of life, generally do not have the same aspirations or dreams that we expect younger people to have. While little has been written on the hopes of older adults, much has been written about ways they attend to a sense of purpose or meaning, or seek to enhance well-being (Kavedžija 2014; Mathews 1996, Mathews 2010; Suzuki 2010; Thang 1997; Traphagan 2000; Wilińska and Anbäcken 2013: 442). While finding satisfaction and enjoyment in life, often with the purpose of preparing for a long and uncertain road ahead, might be part of developing a hopeful narrative of longevity, I found it more difficult to apply the same model of well-being to those aged over eighty like the Abukawas,² who were no longer able to participate in many of the hobbies, social activities, and family life. Anthropologist Sarah Lamb (2014), who has worked with older people in India and the United States, has pointed to the weakness of models of hope based on assumptions of persons who are independent, autonomous, and able to avoid age-related decline. Taking into account both the realities of advanced age and other cultural models that acknowledge "meaningful decline," Lamb (2014: 49) and others provide an opening to explore alternative forms of hope in old age, such as those based on an acceptance of transience.

One alternative form of hope that has emerged from recent anthropological work in Japan is that of "closing and opening [temporal] horizons" (Miyazaki 2010: 247). Miyazaki's observations of Japanese arbitrageurs hanging onto hopes despite the evaporation of trust in economic recovery, and Allison's (2013: 115–117) panorama of precarity and vulnerability in post-3/11 Japan, both draw on the philosophy of Ernst Bloch (1986) to recast hope as a method for life. Allison (2013: 26), for example, muses, "Taking a leap of the imagination into a space, future, even subjectivity that does not yet exist, is what enables new possibilities – and also a practical means for survival." For Abukawa-san and others in advanced old age, new temporal horizons and possible future selves might arise when those that buoyed past hopes come to a close. The flow and cadence of time changes: the years go faster and the signs of ageing

² The population of those aged 75 and over is the fastest growing demographic in Japan, and will exceed the proportion of those aged 65 to 75 by 2017. This will continue to increase, contributing to the estimated 40 percent of the population aged 65 and over by 2060 (Naikaku-chō 2015: 2–3).

accelerate – one moves “forward” with hope, but towards what exactly, is unclear.

If ageing brings loss and uncertainty, then it is also within this loss, I argue, that old age and death might become creatively re-envisioned, or narratively linked to hopeful feelings, images, and cultural values. Loss, when understood as transience or evanescence (Inouye 2008), becomes part of the ebb and flow of a constantly changing world. Furthermore, rather than a deprivation of something once possessed, loss is a revelation that possession was never really possible. This revelation holds the possibility that one might hope, at least for the moment, that this transcendent aesthetic reality could liberate rather than alienate. Uncertainty about one’s fate in old age also holds the hope of “not-yet” (Bloch 1986, cited in Miyazaki 2010) or what Crapanzano (2004: 16) called “desire in waiting.” Hope of “not-yet” is not a disavowal of the lack, but an opening up to its possibility and to possible selves.

While the pervasive discourse on Japan’s “low-fertility, ageing society” is that of a crisis, it would be wrong to assume that Japanese older people themselves view it as hopeless. How then might we make sense of the ways older adults keep looking forward to life, despite its inevitable losses? The purpose of this paper is threefold: (i) to propose a conceptualization of hope as “lunar aesthetics,” not as anticipation of achievement but as a process of loss and renewal; (ii) to link this process to aesthetic forms and ritual practices from my fieldwork with older adults in Kyoto; and (iii) to critically evaluate the ways normative schemes of hope in current formal long-term care diverges from lunar hope. Drawing on Japanese associations between the moon, hope, and rituals memorializing the spirits of the dead, I argue that older adults engage with an alternative interpretation of hope based on transience and transcendence. For older adults I spoke with, the spirits, like the moon, follow a cultural aesthetic of transience and transcendence, of care and continuity that makes life mournful and meaningful (Stevenson 2014: 15). In the last section of this paper, I draw on Erikson’s (1997) notion of “re-ritualization” to once again interconnect Japanese aesthetics of transience, rituals of transcendence, and psychosocial experiences of ageing and the development of a more mature hope.

2 Lunar aesthetics of hope

Lisa Stevenson (2014) begins her ethnography of life and death in a remote arctic community by presenting an image. The image, shared by one of her Inuit friends, is a raven that remains in what she calls “a form of productive

and even hopeful uncertainty, something that stubbornly remains even as it refuses to be neatly resolved” (Stevenson 2014: 1). Images, like the ones Stevenson found animating Inuit life and death, teach us something about modes of attention in the realm of the ordinary, where elements of the natural world (e.g., landscape, weather, fauna) produce habits that often have ethical or aesthetic sensibilities that stand against other political representations (e.g., the population chart, the patient record). In the same spirit, I want to first consider the image of the moon in Japanese culture – a similarly uncertain, hopeful image, but one that is hopeful precisely because it does not remain.³

For elderly Japanese and their caregivers, “hope” (*kibō*) and “loss” (*sōshitsu*) are, in the words of one woman I spoke with, “*omote*” and “*ura*” (‘front’ and ‘back’; i.e., two sides of the same coin). Thought of in this way, the connection between the two is not really causal or sequential at all. Hopes always bear the ballast of loss, just as mourning brings about new possible selves out of loss. The idea that persons, and perhaps reality in general, is composed of seemingly contradictory values, which one rarely experiences simultaneously, finds its poetic metaphor in the inconstant moon. This makes the moon the ideal symbol of hope, providing a fleeting light in the midst of the darkened sky.⁴

The Japanese word that I am glossing here as “hope” (*kibō*) is composed of two characters, the first meaning ‘rare’ (*mare*) and the second meaning ‘to look far ahead’ (*nozomu*).⁵ The moon and hope appear linked by the vast space of desire between the person who looks and the distant, transcendent moon, as in the English saying “there’s a light at the end of the tunnel!” *Nozomu* may be used to express hopes or desires when used by itself, but may also mean ‘viewing’, ‘hearing’, and, in a more poetic reading, ‘meeting’ the full moon, as in “meeting death.”⁶ To be suspended this way, gazing beyond the self at something alien yet engrossing, beautiful yet unapproachable, is a good way to understand hope as subjectivity of yearning for transcendence.

3 Inouye (2008: 214) argues that in “pictocentric” Japanese culture, “the importance placed upon visual or spatial, and comparatively weaker interest in textual (or otherwise symbolic) ties to the invisible transcendental orders or ideology, doctrine and unchanging universal principles.” The link, sometimes in tension, sometimes in balance, hangs between the poles of transcendence and image, presence and alterity, as well as “thereness” and “elsewhereness.”

4 Crapanzano (2003) provides a fuller explanation of the relationship between hope and temporality, both in theological eschatology as well as phenomenology.

5 希望.

6 While the phonetic component of the kanji is represented by the *bō* 亡, the component representing the moon 月 remains part of the composite since it was added in the bronze script version of the Chinese character. The addition of the “moon” has semiotic but no phonetic significance.

The moon is not merely a metaphor encountered in art, but one that becomes integrated into a personal narrative. One Japanese woman in her 30s, whom I became friends with during fieldwork, told me that, during years of struggling with alcohol addiction, she felt her life becoming more and more hopeless (*zetsubō*); so when she first began attending recovery group meetings at the hospital, she decided to use the nickname “*tsuki*” (‘moon’).⁷ She told me that she chose the name to reflect her desire for “hope” (*kibō*), a word that she frequently heard from others in recovery. To this woman, literally taking on the name “moon” signified a wish for something far in the distance, the promise of transformation that could bridge the gap between her sense of powerlessness and the power of a transcendent agent.

Poetry praising the moon dates back to the earliest periods of Japanese literature, with poets and people of refined tastes holding moon-viewing parties, sometimes building features in their villas and gardens specifically to heighten the experience of watching the moon. Even today, people of all ages seem to share an appreciation of moon-viewing, particularly in the late summer when the air is still warm but full of anticipation of autumn.⁸

At one such moon-viewing party I attended, a Japanese friend pointed out the way the clouds were passing over the moon, slightly obscuring it. “We [i.e., Japanese people] feel like it’s better if the moon is sort of coming out of just a few clouds like this, rather than popping out of the sky with no clouds at all,” he told me, taking another sip of his beer. As we watched the night sky, he continued: “Or like when it is behind the cloud so that you can just see the outline. It’s always better to have a few clouds when it is a full moon.”

For the next few hours we watched the moon together with the others at the riverside as it seemed to dip in and out of the clouds. The cyclical phases of waxing and waning are not the only way in which the moon transforms; it also transforms in the moment of viewing, as it becomes partially obscured (indeed, the brightness of the full moon is hard to bear for long if not obscured!). Hope is more beautiful and hoping is an even nobler pursuit when it mingles with the shadows, when its transience is revealed.

⁷ In Japan, 12-step recovery program members keep their own identities and others’ identities anonymous. While it is common to use given names only in the United States and Europe, Japanese members usually choose a nickname.

⁸ Viewing the autumn (September) moon usually coincides with the “weeklong observance of the autumnal equinox” (*o-higan*), when families perform special memorials for their deceased members at graves and altars. This is a particularly auspicious time to meet with the dead because of the ideal balance between day and night.

Reflecting on this, I was reminded of the poem recounted by the ageing protagonist in Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Diary of a Mad Old Man* (1991 [1965]). It is a poem that the old man imagines having sung at his funeral:

Half-hidden by the pines along the shore
 The moon sinks toward the sea –
 Have you awakened from this world of dreams
 To dwell in the pure radiance of Paradise?
 (quoted in Tanizaki 1991 [1965]: 15)

Transience, and the “pathos of things” (*mono no aware*), is an appropriate aesthetic of hope for those reflecting on ageing and death. But as this poem indicates, the experience of this aesthetic opens up the possibility of transcendence as one faces the end of life. Accepting that attachments to the “world of dreams” including the past, are illusion, allows one to mourn losses and to imagine other possible futures. Transience provides hope for transcendence.

In cultivating sensitivity to this aesthetic of hope, Tanizaki's protagonists find a new relationship to time. In another work by Tanizaki, *Ashikari* (‘The Reed Cutter’), the narrator reflects on his older interlocutor's different perspective on time: “As a person ages, there is a kind of resignation [...] a feeling that lets us recognize that our own decline is in accord with nature and thus lets us simply enjoy it” (Tanizaki 1995: 23). This resignation, or yielding (*yuzuri*), recognizes the hope in transience as natural and therefore aesthetically superior. The narrator and the old man he describes are, incidentally, enjoying a moonlit evening on the Yodo River.

These meditations on the lunar aesthetics of hope illustrate the ways cultural images can enter narratives and expose our assumptions about temporality and aspiration. Hope here is not merely positive, uplifting and future-oriented, nor is it tethered to the dream of progressive betterment. It moves ahead as the cycles of the moon count the months, according to an order that is both evident in all life and comprehensible only by recognizing something beyond our comprehension (e.g., dharma, fate, providence). What does it mean to hope in such a state of constant change? For older adults in particular, hope shines most vividly within feelings of loss, mourning, and transformation. While the poetic notion of the moon as an image of hope is not unique to older people, I found it helpful for situating older adults' experiences within a broader temporal aesthetic sensibility.

There are countless examples of the moon in Japanese art, religion, and folklore. It is almost a kind of stock character in the artistic repertoire, but making a claim that such aesthetic conventions actually shape the feelings and motivations for older people is another matter that requires more empirical

observations, which I will turn to later in this paper. First, however, I want to turn from the image of transience to the images of biopolitics – images that I argue are similarly partial and indeterminate, but that nonetheless possess a powerful hold over the way ageing is being perceived in Japan today.

3 Temporal biopolitics and images of waiting

The image of hope in old age as something transient, resigned to nature, perpetually waxing and waning, stands in contrast to institutionally driven models of the Japanese welfare society. While Japan has had a system of universal national health care since 1958, it was only in the late twentieth century with the introduction and implementation of major policy restructuring (most notably the three Gold Plans between 1990 and 2000) that long-term eldercare came to be seen by the public as the explicit domain of the state – separate from other forms of health or social welfare provisions (Coulmas 2007: 67; Knight and Traphagan 2003: 14–18; Long 2008). While the plan expanded access to services by integrating medical, nursing care, and welfare into a system meant to relieve burden on both families and hospitals, it also created a massive demand for services that exceeded its capacity. In response, the state would retain its political claim over the welfare of citizens by incorporating private and non-profit businesses into a new insurance scheme, and by organizing community and volunteer groups through local self-governing associations. If one motivation for the promise of eldercare in the Gold Plan was to ease burdens on families, the new ideology was meant to encourage another shift away from residential care institutions to a network of care accessible while remaining in one's own home. This solution could only work, however, if the number of dependent elderly people demanding services decreased. One solution to caring for an ageing society, therefore, would be preventative care (*kaigo yobō*), a central pillar in the ideology of the 1997 Long-Term Care Insurance (LTCI) Law, which formalized the relationship between the insured and the services they were able to access.

The Japanese LTCI system redesigned the landscape of old age by shaping the moral discourses and embodiment of age-related decline and care. This is comparable to what Brett Neilson (2006) argues in relation to the logic of global biopolitics, where ageing is conceived of as something to be prevented, foreclosed, or perpetually placed in abeyance. In Neilson's analysis, the biopolitical logic of prevention is “a strike against a future fate that can only be avoided, or so the fantasy would portend, by an action that can never occur too soon”

(Neilson 2006: 157). In aiming to “protect the future from the present” (Neilson 2006: 161), the narrative of prevention is also a narrative of non-ageing. The spatiotemporal lunar aesthetic logic of supporting a natural process of ageing, where the acceptance of mortality links the past to a future possible self, comes into sharper relief when placed next to this biopolitical temporality that forecloses not only on death, but also on any ageing future at all. And without the future, where is there a space to mourn or to hope?

Of course, people age. And at least in the case of Japan, preventative care has not succeeded in compression of morbidity, or a shortened period of age-related decline leading to death. Many of those who have taken advantage of care prevention activities and rehabilitation services eventually get to a point where they are dependent on some kind of care, often for several years. The guideposts of independence and prevention mean that care recipients often receive fewer services than needed. Yūki (2012), for example, relates the case of a woman struggling to understand the preposterous assumption that she will be rehabilitated to a future of independence at the age of 90:

To say that I am getting “preventative care” at over 90 is ridiculous! Even though I am over 90, I still try to move my body a little and can manage most things OK by myself, but with a helper to come and clean and do the laundry I don’t have to push myself too hard and I can take things at my own pace. “Preventative care” is inappropriate for someone like me at this age! (Yūki 2012: 90, translated by author)

As in this woman’s case, the rehabilitative ideology of LTCI may produce greater risk for harm than hope. While this woman’s experience and opinions cannot be generalized to everyone receiving services through the LTCI system (indeed, others complained of unneeded services being pushed on them, bringing different kinds of costs and damaged hopes), neither should they be surprising to those who have had much interaction with older adults in Japan. Carers, both formal and informal, as well as older adult care recipients themselves, often relayed stories about the “gaps” between the policies and the “actual sites” of practice (*genba*) that continually produce zones of waiting (see Biehl 2005; Han 2012), namely: (a) waiting for a spot to open up in a long-term care home (there are currently over 520,000 on the waiting lists); (b) waiting for health to decline or change to fit the regulations for accessing services; and (c) waiting on negotiations between family, doctors, and social workers. However, waiting does not need to mean resignation. Instead it may be closer to Long’s (1999: 11–25) interpretation of the phrase *shikata ga nai* (‘it cannot be helped’) as a means of redirecting remaining life. Similar to the dying patients observed by Long, older people I spoke with managed to infuse the space of waiting with the image of

hope. Waiting was not a passive process, but an active space of envisioning the self in time.

This active re-visioning of the self in time that fills up the uncertain moments of waiting lends itself to narratives of transience and transcendence. Older people develop narratives as they evaluate and reflect on past experiences and feelings, and place them within an already structured and storied cultural environment. Recalling the notion of hope as method referred to earlier, we might say that hope is less a product of the narrative than a mode of emplotment that inaugurates the imagination of alternatives to the present. Hoping, in other words, is not a matter of lining up cause/effect relationships, but of assembling possible pasts and futures (see Mattingly 2014: 148–149). The following example from my fieldwork, a short narrative excerpt from a woman at a local senior group meeting held at an old elementary school in Japan, also reveals this:

[When] we get to be over 70, and we are given this opportunity to come back here [i.e., for the community meetings], then I think, “I myself was once young!” and we remember all those old things [...] There’s no way of avoiding getting old [*pointing to her cane*] Getting old is harsh [...] But there is the other world! Every day you look in the mirror and your appearance changes little by little, and you think about going to the next world [...] You don’t think about it when you’re young, but as you get older, you start thinking about it.

Loss and hope, past and future, reflection and waiting. In this brief, casual remark, this woman laid out a coherent narrative of old age that captures what I have come to see as a common pattern among many other older adults: transience from youth to age and to the other world, and transcendence from a life focused on the current world to an imagined other world just out of reach, a world worth waiting for. Though only hinted at in this short excerpt, both of these narrative relationships to time are anchored in social relationships, including those with the departed. In this way, transience and transcendence, or the incorporation of loss and vulnerability into one’s narrative, are contingent upon the continuity of bonds, in the sense of what Cheryl Mattingly (2010: 3) calls the “paradox of hope.”⁹ In the remainder of this paper, I will describe some ways in which this aesthetic of hope is materialized in practices. Finally,

⁹ Mattingly (2010: 3) writes that hope’s “direction is toward what may come to pass. It cannot be predicted – it is a future of ‘what if’. Paradoxically, hope is on intimate terms with despair [...] To hope is to be reminded of what is not and what might never be.” Similarly, the liberation of mourning (Pollock 1989) is on intimate terms with the sadness of grief, ageing, and loss.

I reflect on the future of hope for older adults in Japan in the broader context of social change.

4 Hope, loss, and transformation

Hope, as narrative emplotment, depends upon storytelling conventions, images, rhythms, and juxtapositions that developed through particular social and historical contexts. As I described above, the moon, and its mournful presence, condenses the qualities of transcendence and transience into an image of hope. The lunar aesthetic is sublime, ever reminding one of the untouchable presence of the beyond, always changing, partial, and occluded. If lunar aesthetics provides an image of hope based not on the achievement of goals thought to be attainable in this life, but on the imagination of alternatives, then it also provides older adults a metaphor for reconciling loss and generativity.¹⁰ I argue that the same aesthetics that make the moon a natural metaphor of hope are also found in practices of mourning and everyday rituals of memorial (see Danely 2014). Since these practices, performed most vigilantly by older adults, reinforce the continuity of generations past, present (living), and future, and depend upon a continual, cyclical transformation of life through these generational links, they are, for those nearing the end of life, intensely hopeful.

Often it was difficult to have conversations with those over 80 without some mention of the *hotoke* ('buddhas' or 'spirits of the departed', including ancestors or the long-departed). Their memories storied the house and the objects within it and their images appeared, usually consolingly, in dreams or visions (Danely 2014: 168–173; Traphagan 2003). One 88-year-old informant described the *hotoke* as simply "the closest people to [her] [*jibun no ichiban tejikana hito*]." Another called them the thing that gave her "roots" and the "heart of the household." The responsiveness and ease of mutual recognition between older people and the *hotoke* was not something older people always found among the living. How comforting, then, that one could summon the face of one's ancestors at the ring of a bell, and find peace and a desire to go on.

While it is difficult to confidently report rates of memorial practices like these in any statistically meaningful sense, most Japanese people agree that

¹⁰ While I did not measure "gerotranscendence" among my Japanese interlocutors, the sense of hope and transcendence I describe as lunar aesthetics echoes many of the same features of this concept. Gerotranscendence has been examined in the context of Japan by Tomizawa (2009) and Yamamoto (2014).

caring for the spirits of the dead is typically handled by a senior woman of the household (if present), someone with a strong connection both to the symbolic function of providing for domestic harmony and to the ritual functioning of the house, such as preparing and serving meals, a portion of which would be given as offerings (Plath 1964; Smith 1974: 117–120). Men, while typically less involved in the everyday domestic rituals for the spirits of the family dead, play various prominent roles in funerals, the care of the grave, the annual memorial occasions, and the periodic memorials for individuals (rituals linked to the household as a unit of community politics). This gendered division of labour held, by and large, for people in later life in those households I observed in both urban and rural areas of Japan. Nevertheless, the sense of increasing intimacy and identification with the *hotoke* and ancestors was voiced by both men and women alike. No one found this curious and it was taken to be the natural course of development, no more remarkable than a grey hair. One older woman I spoke with simply told me “old people understand a lot. They don’t always say much, but they understand.”

The feeling of closeness to the *hotoke* indicates a hope in the promise of a continued life that stretches beyond old age (Danely 2014; Inoue 2004; Traphagan 2004). If mourning is a matter of accepting that loss has produced a change in oneself (Butler 2004: 20), then the cultural tradition of memorial places this change in the context of a lunar aesthetic of transience and transcendence. Even for those who rejected other aspects of religious participation, or who choose alternate forms of post-mortem care, the link between death and the hope of transformation remained a common theme (Boret 2014; Kawano 2010; Rowe 2011). A widowed 71-year-old man, Mr. Satō, who made regular visits to his wife at her grave, for example, expressed it as follows.

Satō: Why do we visit the dead? My personal belief is that when people die, they return to the earth. That’s what I believe. Rich or not, it doesn’t matter. All of us return to the earth. Funerals used to cost so much money, but lately spreading ash over the earth or in the sky is becoming more popular.

Q: Is that what you want?

Satō: I think that’s fine. Returning to nature. Then I could reappear again in front of you as nature!

Q: Do you mean rebirth?

Satō: Yes, that’s right.

This man often voiced doubts that his sons would care for him in old age or after he had become a *hotoke*, but the notion that he could become reintegrated

with a natural pattern of transience that allowed him to transcend his old body gave him hope. Even in more traditional Buddhist traditions, formal ritual memorials on the death anniversary day of each month or “moon” (*tsuki-meinichi*) as well as popular memorial occasions at solstices (*o-bon* and New Year) and equinoxes (*o-higan*) link the movement of the *hotoke* in and out of this world to a pattern of changing seasons, to the sequence of flowers that bloom each month, to the agricultural cycles of planting and harvest, and so on.

Not only did older people hope to be remembered, or to return like the moon as sublime presences of nature, they also hoped to become reunited with family and loved ones in the other world. Older people often spoke of having little left to do in this world, but hoped that their children and grandchildren would be well and that they would meet those they lost in the other world. They not only waited for the others, but also actively ritualized this waiting through patient memorialization.

5 Hope and re-ritualization of longevity

Feelings of closeness between the *hotoke* and ancestors inscribed a hopeful sense of a meaningful past that linked the self to a line of ancestors, as well as to a meaningful future, where one could imagine rejoining those who died. In this narrative, the ageing self was merely in transition towards the next life, waiting and yielding, as if in preparation. Those who die too young, one woman told me, had too many “lingering attachments” (*miren*) to the world, and could not pass on peacefully. “When you are 80 or 90,” she continued, “it is easy to go ahead and die.” Another man I spoke with shortly before he died explained to me that those who cling to life do so not because they enjoy life, but because they feel unhappy. “Happy people want to die!” he told me with a wink. Old age was a time to yield, and giving up attachments was a key to achieving transience and transcendence.¹¹

Healthy longevity is still appreciated among older Japanese people, as a sign of both one’s accomplishments (living through difficult times) and that one will soon pass on to the other world without attachments. Even when I sat together with four or five nonagenarians, they were quite aware of and interest-

¹¹ Lamb (2000: 124–143) describes a similar re-visioning of hope as detachment and self-transcendence in West Bengal. Strikingly, her description of this detachment as “a means of dealing with the world and the intensity of affections and attachments that extended living in the world entails” (Lamb 2000: 141) echoes Long’s (1999) interpretations of “*shikata ga nai*” and my observations of memorialization (Danely 2014).

ed in the exact age (down to the month and day) of everyone present, everyone heaping praise on the eldest regardless of relative degree of physical decline. Extreme longevity was linked to habits and rituals, ordinary things that in their repetition seemed to perpetuate life. Making daily offerings to the ancestors was one ritual sometimes discussed as a secret to long life. For others, the ritualization of everyday longevity meant caring for a spouse or other family member, tending to a garden or singing in a choir.¹² Writing in a diary and even eating were all examples of meaningful ritualizations that I noted in my fieldnotes.

Erik Erikson (1997), writing of the last stages of the life course, realized that the kind of longevity commonly experienced in Japan today would add another layer to human development beyond what he had first outlined. Hope in old age, he postulated, required re-ritualizations and re-encounters with past sources of comfort and identity:

If, then, at the end, the life cycle turns back on the beginnings, there has remained something in the anatomy even of mature hope, and in a variety of faiths [...] which confirms hopefulness as the most childlike of all human qualities [...]. Thus, a historical change like the lengthening of the average life span calls for viable re-ritualizations [...] as well as some finite sense of summary and, possibly, a more active anticipation of dying. (Erikson 1997: 62–63)

At the heart of Erikson's theorization of "ritualization" was what he called the "recognition of the hoped-for" (Erikson 1966: 337). From infancy to old age, the face of the hoped-for, Erikson hypothesized, transforms from the face of the mother to the face of God. In other words, the mutuality originating in the earliest face-to-face encounters with nurturance repeats and recurs throughout life in different forms, ultimately leading to an "active anticipation of dying" as a hopeful act in itself. In a context like Japan, where the faces of the *hotoke*, like the many "faces" of the moon, drift into the consciousness through cycles of memorialization, the hoped-for has an even more expansive horizon of imaginative possibility.

Erikson's theory threads the recognition of the hoped-for through the everyday rituals that increasingly come to define the pulse and pace of old age, following it to its last beat. While the hope for a re-encounter with the other world was evident in the rituals of memorialization, the more immediate concern expressed by older adults was often a hoped-for death, or a death in which

¹² See also Moore (2014) for a good example of how the ritualized training of Noh reshapes older women's subjectivities, and Rohlen (1978) on the spiritual values that strongly support the pursuit of arts and self-actualizing practices in later adulthood.

one could realize a mutual recognition or imaginary similar to what one experienced at the beginning of life. Hope is not “childlike” in the sense that it is naive, but childlike in the sense that it allows the possibility of merging into a relationship with the hoped-for unmediated by ritual, in the world beyond death.

Death, then, was both an individual as well as a household transformation in ritual responsibility. To some older adults, the purchase of a new grave, or a new domestic Buddhist altar (*butsudan*), not only signalled the older person’s hopes to younger family members, but also pre-emptively marked a future shift in the responsibility of ritualization (see Danely 2012). It is not surprising, then, that several of the older adults I spoke with also remarked that they felt more interest in the *hotoke* after their parents died, and that this feeling gradually grew over years of memorial practice.

A discussion of a hopeful old age in Japan cannot end without a few words about their thoughts on death. While the concept of the “good death” has a long history in Japan (Hattori et al. 2006; Long 2001, Long 2005; Valentine 2009), the increase in bed-ridden and cognitively impaired older adults has led many to doubt whether it is even reasonable to hope for a good death anymore, one where they can be with those they love and be watched over as they make their transition to the other world. It was not only the impersonal and technologically mediated death of the hospital that concerned older adults, but they worried about the ways the institutional organization of space and time created uncertainty about the attention of others in the last moments of life. In one instance, I visited a care home that promised to watch over their residents until death (rather than transferring them to a special hospital as most institutions do), but when I asked the older man accompanying me if this made him more at ease, he just replied: “They say that they do [i.e., watch over them], but how can they? Places like that don’t have enough staff and they are always changing. I don’t really think it is possible.”

I asked a nonagenarian a similar question about his thoughts on dying old in Japan. He replied: “Listen Jason-sensei, this is the most important thing I want to tell you today. I want to die on my tatami!” He went on to describe the plight that many doctors and health staff face when an older person is nearing the end of life. “The older person, those grannies and grandpas, they want to go home. Everyone wants to let them go home so that they could be in the house they are used to living in, see the ceiling they are used to seeing, lay on the tatami they are used to stepping on – that is the hope of the old people.” In reality, however, most older adults in Japan will spend their last moments in the hospital or care home (see Long 2005) – a result, again, that can be

traced to a biopolitical apparatus that needs to count breathing bodies, but keeps no similar accounting of hopes.

Though nostalgic and overly romantic, the narrative of a good death offers hope that what was possible before might be possible again. Traditionally, seeing off one's family members in their final moments, literally watching the face become placid like that of the Buddha, was considered a critical way of assuring the spirit would be able to transition to the next world. The expression to "meet the eyes of death" (*shi ni me ni au*) expresses the importance of not only being present with the dying person, but to give them the "recognition of the hoped-for," a final ritual of life and an "active anticipation of dying" that will sustain the spirit in the other world.

6 Conclusion: futures of hope

What does it mean to hope in an age of super-longevity? Can we imagine a hope without an object of attainment, but rather as a process of developing a new understanding of the self in time? I have argued that thinking about hope from the perspective of older adults, and especially the oldest old, forces us to consider alternate imaginative horizons (see Crapanzano 2004) and aesthetic rituals. As Mattingly (2010: 4) writes, "hope is not merely cherished or passively received but actively cultivated, practiced" – especially in times where hope is fleeting. Rituals of memorialization cultivate a certain kind of hope where transcendence and transience open up worlds of recognition beyond the here and now of old age. The world beyond, populated with familiar faces, is just across the threshold; and yet, as lifespans continue to grow longer, the future horizon recedes even further and waiting brings time for re-ritualizations.

The moon seems to have followed me in my research, and continues to bedazzle me today, but other people will continue to find their own bridging metaphors, images that speak of the hoped-for. They must also contend with the highly secularized spaces such as Japanese hospitals, where scientific paradigms exert powerful authority, and where spiritual ideas rarely flow in. As Japanese lives remain long and elders face the possibility of extended periods of dependence, it is important to acknowledge the limits of an ideology based on a biopolitics of prevention and rehabilitation alone. Metaphors like the moon and practices like memorial conjure imaginative worlds and aesthetic images, ways to be responsible, recognized, and to be hopeful about our own future in an ageing world.

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