

## GROWTH INDUSTRY AS ELDERLY DIE OFF

# Firm pioneers dealing with belongings of departed

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in Tokyo

With more than 4 million people over 65 living alone and many dying a solitary death, a niche business has emerged in dealing with the belongings of those who pass away.

Taichi Yoshida, 41, is one of the pioneers.

## EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

After he established a moving company in Aichi Prefecture in 1995, he soon realized there was a great deal of demand to remove unwanted goods.

Some of these customers were relatives of people who had died alone, and they wanted Yoshida's firm to clean up their loved one's belongings and house.

Yoshida saw a unique business opportunity and decided to specialize in it, establishing Keepers Co. in 2002.

"Death occurs suddenly," Yoshida said. "If your parent dies, and if you are the eldest son and the funeral host, you must immediately take leave from work and arrange a funeral, deciding yet detail, like who to contact, where to seat whom and what to give in return for the funeral offerings."

Coupled with the psychological shock of losing a loved one, most people are worn out just thinking that, he said.

"But when it's over, there is another job waiting — to clean up the belongings and home if the deceased lived alone."

"With a lifetime's worth of personal effects in front of you, you would desperately think, 'how many months would this take for me to clean if I came here every weekend?'"

Trying to dispose of items is even harder if you don't know the area and are unfamiliar with the local garbage collection routine, Yoshida said, adding that some people are in even bigger trouble if they live abroad and can spare only a few days in Japan to settle everything. Relatives generally either



A BUDDHIST monk holds a memorial service at a Keepers Co. facility in Ota Ward, Tokyo.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEEPERS CO.

clean up everything themselves or divvy up the work to other parties, like a cleaner and a recycling agent, which can be bothersome to arrange, he said.

Yoshida said proudly that many people who contact his company are relieved to find that one party can take care of everything in a single go.

According to the Health,

ables, it searches for such items as cash, bankbooks and seals, which it hands over to the family.

Then, separating all items into unwanted articles and those that are still usable, it sends usable items to the family or helps recycle them. Upon request, it can buy usable items at ¥1,000 per ton.

The company also can help

its launch. Keepers has handled more than 3,000 jobs, ringing up combined annual sales of close to ¥400 million in its four offices in Aichi Prefecture, Tokyo, Osaka and Fukuoka.

While it was difficult to get the cooperation of related industries in the beginning, Yoshida said, temples and funeral companies now introduce

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Labor and Welfare Ministry, there were 4.07 million people over the age of 65 living alone as of 2005. Another 5.3 million households consisted of people over 65, which could potentially become single elderly households.

Although there are no precise statistics on the number of elderly who die alone, the Tokyo Medical Examiner's Office alone dealt with 1,669 such cases in 2004.

Keepers starts off each job by agreeing on an estimate with the next of kin.

Armed with a list of valu-

es and dispose of motor vehicles. Turning to the spiritual side, a special Buddhist memorial service can be arranged for items the deceased was especially fond of, or items such as bedding the deceased died in.

When all the belongings are removed, Keepers thoroughly cleans the house. The cost ranges from ¥60,000 to ¥200,000, depending on the size of the abode, with ¥200,000 being a common figure, Yoshida said.

In less than four years since

many customers to his company.

The most important thing for his business, he said, is to try to understand the feelings of the clients, who are often distressed.

"The staff try to be thoughtful and attentive, doing things the family would like them to before they are asked," he said, adding that everything, even rubbish, is handled courteously because all items are personal mementos.

The nature of the business does have a certain grimness about it.

Since Keepers' launch, Yoshida has cleaned homes where people committed suicide or were murdered, and he has gotten used to cleaning up large amounts of blood.

Also, some 10 percent of all jobs the company handles involve homes where the body has been found days after death, he said.

"In such a house, both the smell and the conditions are quite grim, sometimes with parts of the body stuck to the floor on the bedding. Understandably, I have had some staff run away during cleaning," he said.

Because this sort of death came at a considerably lower value of an asset, landlords want the cleanup to be as fast as possible, and they often request Keepers on an urgent basis.

But amid all the work, a remark by a child made everything seem better, Yoshida said.

One day, when he was cleaning the house of an elderly man who had passed away, the man's grandson came to ask what he was doing.

When Yoshida replied that he was clearing his grandfather's belongings, the small boy said: "Wow! You are helping him move to heaven!" — an expression that Yoshida started to use on his company's Web site.

In the four years since he set up shop, at least 30 other companies have entered the market, Yoshida said.

He now plans to start another related business, one that he says will be difficult for others to copy. He did not elaborate.

In his Web log, Yoshida writes about the problems of solitary death and suicides, and how society can help decrease them.

He said that recently, many elderly people who have learned about his business have called, trying to book in advance or to consult how best to prepare themselves to minimize the burden on their relatives after their death.

"I want to work hard to provide the best service at the end of such people's lives," Yoshida said.