

Experience death in the Shanghai death simulator 4D experience game makes people think about death



A scene from the Xinglai game

For Xinglai, the operator of the first 4D “death experience” game in Shanghai, to be, or not to be, is no longer the question. Xinglai, which means “wake up” in Chinese, occupies an area of just under 260 square meters in Shanghai’s Huangpu district, and has been designed to make people think seriously about life and death. It does so via three and a half hours of psychological games in a darkened room, in which 12 people discuss, debate and vote. At the end of each round, the player that receives the most votes enters the “door of impermanence” and walks along the “way of death” to arrive at a simulated incinerator, before returning to zero and waking up reborn.

Visitors are asked to think of a life or death scenario. Then they are met with a moral dilemma, do they sacrifice themselves or someone else to save them? An explanation for their decision needs to be provided and whichever participant gives the least convincing explanation “dies”. Their version of death involves the participant to lay down on a conveyor belt, while they pass through a dark tunnel which will then simulate fire as cremation, which ends with being “reborn”, while they climb through a latex womb into a ball pit. “It gives you the chance to calm down, give in to some deeper thoughts and think about some of life’s problems,” said Lu Siwei, one of the first participants.

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THE ROSEATES NEWSLETTER

Your guide to human remains repatriation

The Roseates Newsletter aims to update our clients and contacts on various topics related to the death of foreigners in China and Chinese abroad. The target audience includes consulates, foreign funeral directors and insurance companies. We welcome our readers to provide questions, comments and insights.

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One of Xinglai game's founders, Huang Weiping, said the unprofitable project is closing in a year for two reasons. It is running out of money but also wants to make a statement about its own mortality.

The project opened in 2016 and was a hit in the first three months, welcoming 24 visitors a day, meaning it was operating at full capacity. It has since received about 4,500 visitors, but its co-founders have decided it is unsustainable despite positive feedback and its 444 yuan (60 euro) admission fee, deliberately chosen because it sounds like the word "death" in Chinese. In the past two years, the project has drained all the 4 million yuan (536,000 euro) invested by its three founders as well as 400,000 yuan (53,600 euro) raised from crowdfunding. But Huang, 48, and his partners still regard it as a success and say making the project available for another year will let more people try it. "Memorial ceremonies nowadays are formalistic and short," he said. "Xinglai wants to be a place for people to place their sorrow when they have nowhere else to put it."

The idea for the project came to Huang in 2012, four years after a life-changing experience in Sichuan province. He had been working as a volunteer offering psychological assistance to survivors of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, which killed more than 60,000 people, when he realized that although death is a topic most people try to avoid in daily life, it is one that everybody will have to face someday. "We did a free life-education session in a public space by placing a coffin on the ground and welcoming people to try it out," said Huang, who established China's first non-profit hospice care NGO in his hometown of Shanghai in 2008.

A third of the people tried to avoid the coffin and less than one-fifth opted to lie in it, mostly for laughs, he recalled. "Toward death, people usually have some romantic or heroic notion," Huang said. "The truth is that death exists. If people don't have the right attitude toward it, they will panic when it arrives." He said the experience at Xinglai is similar to performance art, with people immersing themselves in the topic and acting out death and rebirth. "Although the project will come to an end in a year, we're trying to bring it back to life by launching a stage play based on the experiences and stories of its 4,500 visitors," Huang told the China Daily.

A funeral home in Beijing is also using virtual reality (VR) technology to let people experience death. Putting on VR glasses, you watch yourself have a seizure at work. After medical treatment fails, you find yourself in heaven. "The VR technology can let people experience death through a first-person perspective. With visual and audio effects, people feel how their hearts gradually fail, they go to heaven, and see their own lives flash by before their very eyes," said Liao Hongning, an engineer at the Babaoshan Funeral Parlor. "The point of this is to make people have a more positive outlook on life and death."

Q&A

What is the leading cause of death of Chinese abroad?

Of the 700 mainland Chinese tourists who died overseas last year, more than a third perished during water-based activities. Learning how to swim is still not very popular in China.

How many sea burials have there been in Shanghai since 1991?

There have been 357 sea burials with 40,520 urns of ash scattered at sea, according to the Shanghai Funeral and Interment Service Center. Sea burial is slowly gaining acceptance among the public, accounting for 3 percent of the total number of burials. Sea burials can only be done in April, May and October because of the weather.

How many burial plots are being created each year in China?

China is adding about 3 million burial plots a year nationwide. It is estimated that all available spots will be occupied by mid-2022, roughly 18 months earlier than predicted in 2014. Last year, the country had about 64.7 million plots, and 42.2 million of those were occupied.

How many cremations are performed at the Babaoshan funeral parlor in Beijing?

The Babaoshan funeral parlor cremates 22,000 remains every year, about one-fourth of the total in Beijing.

POLICIES

Is brain death equal to legally dead?

A Chinese national political adviser has suggested that the country recognize brain death as legally dead, while lawyers called for cautious discussions. After repeatedly calling for the legal recognition of brain death in 2015 and 2016, Chen Jingyu, deputy head of the Wuxi People's Hospital in Jiangsu province, raised his proposal again during the annual meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in March 2018. "Brain death has been proved to be an irreversible condition. Any rescue measure has no meaning for the brain dead person, but a lot of medical resources will be consumed during the process which also adds financial burden to the family," said Chen.

Brain death is still not a legally recognized concept in China, although discussions began nearly 20 years ago. Keeping a brain dead patient alive is also a waste of medical

resources, as some patients cannot receive effective treatment in time when the ICU wards are occupied by brain dead patients, the Legal Daily reported. However, knowledge of brain death among the Chinese has spread slowly. An online survey by Sina in 2011 of 13,420 people found that 49 percent thought that there was no major difference between brain death and heart failure. "In a traffic accident, for example, the amount of compensation will be very different depending on whether the victim is confirmed dead or not. Disputes cannot take place between the responsible party and the family of the victim," Wang Wen, a Beijing based lawyer, told the Global Times. Wang said the proposal was raised in good faith, but considerations and discussions from multiple perspectives are necessary before making it legal. Some countries have recognized brain death as legally dead, including the U.S. and Japan.

The usefulness of writing wills increasingly recognized

An increasing number of seniors in China are recognizing the importance of writing wills while they are physically and mentally healthy in order to avoid disputes and simplify inheritance procedures, according to a white paper by the China Will Registration Center, commemorating its fifth anniversary. Launched in Beijing in 2013, the center is the country's only non-profit organization dedicated to providing free consultations, registration and custodial services to local citizens aged 60 and above. The center works with psychiatric organizations that perform mental health evaluations on seniors to determine if they are of sound mind when drafting a will. More than 82,000 seniors aged 60 and above have written and stored their wills at the center. The white paper revealed an increasing awareness and willingness among seniors to draft and store a will. This is partly reflected in the sharp decline in testators' average age over the past five years, from about 77.4 to 72.1, said Chen Kai, director of the center's management committee. While avoiding family disputes is the main reason wills are made, helping to simplify inheritance procedures is another important reason. For example, among all the

wills that have been made at the center, 47.7 percent are made by seniors with one child, whereas the proportion of those with two to three children is 43.1 percent. "It used to be common sense that wills would help prevent children from contending for property against one another," Chen said. "But now, more people with one child realize that a will can also be used to avoid family property losses if they die unexpectedly." According to Huang Haibo, director of the center's Shanghai branch, which opened in November, "one in every two wills submitted to courts in China is illegal because of various reasons like the lack of signatures or unclear signing dates." Through a strict and professional registration system, which includes facial recognition, ID card reading and fingerprint scanning, a will stored at the center can provide legal support to reduce the time required for property distribution after death, Chen said. Most seniors give their property only to their sons or daughters, though about 13.3 percent leave their property to non-statutory heirs, mainly grandchildren, due to a poor relationship with their children or remarriage, the China Daily reported.

Funeral ashes, turned into “life crystals”, stored at Shanghai cemetery

“Life crystals” made of ashes of the dead can now be stored free of charge at the Huilongyuan Cemetery in the Pudong New Area of Shanghai, the Shanghai Funeral and Interment Service Center said. Since March 2016, residents are being encouraged to convert the ashes into “life crystal,” which is basically particulate matter that transforms ashes into “crystals” under high temperatures. The cemetery, the first in Shanghai to provide the service, will have a 55-square-meter area. In total, it can accommodate 8,000 “life crystals,” with each occupying 0.0075 square meters. The service will be available in the second half of this year. “Life crystals are eco-friendly and save land compared to traditional burials,” said Zhou Jingbo, an official with the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau. The size of a traditional tomb is about 1 to 1.5 square meters. Due to the difference of trace elements, particulate matter of different remains have different colors. The particulate matter can also be turned into jewelry accessories like rings and bracelets, or whatever the relatives or family members of the dead want. About 6,000 households in Shanghai have converted the ashes of the

deceased into “life crystals” so far, the center said. More than 90 percent keep the “crystal” at home, while the others turn them into jewelry. However, some families had expressed the desire to place the life crystals at cemeteries. “They are uncomfortable keeping the life crystals at home,” said Ding Guojun, general manager of the Huilongyuan Cemetery. The placement service has a 20-year period. An app designed by the cemetery will allow families to see real-time scenes from the cemetery. Memorial ceremonies will be held for families who choose to bury the life crystals at the cemetery. A single person’s ashes can be made into about 100 crystals, which vary in appearance and size from person to person. However, the total volume of crystals will be just 10 percent of the ashes, which means they can be housed in smaller urns than usual at home, or even carried by relatives. If buried, the urns save a great deal of land and prevent bodily deterioration or damage. While it costs more than 17,000 yuan (2,277 euro) to convert a whole person’s ashes into several crystals, it costs only around 1,000 yuan (134 euro) to make just one larger stone.

CULTURE

An unusual career: forensic medical examiner

Shanghai has two women forensic medical examiners who are often called out to crime scenes. One of them is Li Lu, who takes all the dark sides of the job in her stride. Women are commonly seen working in forensic medicine on TV, often beautifully made up and wearing glamorous clothes, but this is a far cry from real crime scenes, where women are few and far between. Li Lu can attest to that. She has been dealing with remains at crime scenes for 16 years as a forensic medical examiner. “We don’t have many female forensic examiners because it’s too tough a job for many women,” said Li, 40, deputy director of the Criminal Science Research Institute with Shanghai’s Jing’an District police. “You never know when crimes will take place, and in many cases, they occur in the dead of night,” she explained. “I am on call 24 hours. It’s all in a day’s work to be awakened for a call-out just after I have gone to bed at home.” Despite her fear of heights, Li has had

to climb steep fire engine ladders to reach crime scenes. She has confronted remains eaten by maggots. She has nearly fainted from carbon monoxide poisoning. But the rigors and risks of the job don’t daunt her. For Li, her work is a dream come true. At the age of 16, her father — a traffic policeman in Jing’an District — was killed while on duty. “My father influenced me,” said Li. “I wanted to wear a police uniform, but I was rejected by the police school. So I decided to become a doctor.” In 1996, she entered the former Shanghai No. 2 Medical University, now Shanghai Jiao Tong University School of Medicine. However, the dream of becoming a police officer never left her. After graduation, she took the civil service exam and was subsequently recruited by the Jing’an police. In April 2002, when the then forensic examiner retired, Li became Shanghai’s first female forensic officer to attend crime scenes, the Shanghai Daily reported.

Bio-degradable urns gaining popularity

A resident of Guiyang in southwestern Guizhou province, surnamed Lu, chose to bury his father's ashes in a bio-degradable urn earlier this year. The ashes will decompose within six months, together with the biodegradable urn. "It is a perfect way for a person who was born from nature to return to nature," said Lu, describing the funeral as simple, solemn, and serene. Burying ashes in biodegradable urns is part of new green burial customs, or environmentally-friendly burials, that are increasingly popular among Chinese. Green burial areas, such as under flower beds, trees or lawns inside traditional cemeteries, as well as scattering ashes at sea, now account for more than 20 percent of the total funeral services in the more affluent cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. As of the end of 2017, the ashes of more than 40,000 deceased in Shanghai had been scattered at sea, while the number of green burials in the less-developed Guangxi region in 2017 increased by 32 percent year-on-year.

Environmentally-friendly burials not only bring down the costs for families of the deceased but also save land and energy, compared with traditional practices of burying remains in coffins or storing ashes in urns at cemeteries.

"Apart from social progress, conceptual change, and increasing mobility in cities, government advocacy has also played an important part in the gradual transition of burial customs," said Chen Bing from the Guangzhou division of funeral and burial management. Due to an aging society and urbanization, the tradition of burying the dead has put a strain on China's land resources. The Chinese government aims to raise the ratio of green burials to more than 50 percent nationwide by 2020, when funeral parlors with crematoriums are expected to be available in every county, and public green burial areas will be available in cemeteries in all villages and towns. So far, 24 provincial governments have introduced measures to promote green burials. While most provincial areas provide free burial services or subsidies to families of the deceased, the local government in Wenling, in east China's Zhejiang province, now provides cash bonuses to elderly residents who register to have green burials. Starting from January, residents aged 70 and above in the city were eligible to receive between 100 yuan (13 euro) to 400 yuan (53 euro) per month if they voluntarily agree to a green burial. Twenty-four senior citizens have signed the agreement so far, the Shanghai Daily reported.

BUSINESS

More people are organizing their own funerals

A growing number of people are organizing their own funerals, despite the Chinese tradition that topics related to death are taboo. Shanghai resident Zhu Shanchang, 82, has already arranged his funeral service and cemetery allocation. "I've ordered multiple services, including burial caskets, urns, flowers and other cremation receptacles and memorial items, by signing a pre-need funeral and burial contract with a funeral service company last year," he said. Zhu made the decision after he caught a bad cold a few years ago, and coughed heavily and constantly for a long time. It took more than two weeks for him to recover properly, despite taking medication regularly. "After that, I started to wonder where my body would lie after death," he said. "I would not go back to my hometown in Shaoxing, Zhejiang province, because no family members are there. Equally, I don't want to trouble my son and

daughter-in-law in Shanghai when my time comes." Knowing their father's concern, last year, Zhu's son and daughter-in-law found the pre-need funeral and burial service, which is provided by Fu Shou Yuan, a well-known funeral company. "I feel at ease after ordering all the personalized services by myself, I deliberately chose a cemetery near my children's home to make it convenient if they want to visit." For Zhu, it is not taboo to manage his funeral and burial service ahead of time, "but a part of one's life-planning for the future". According to Fu Shou Yuan, more than 1,600 people in China have signed similar contracts with the company since it introduced the service in 2015, which is now available in 16 locations. Customers can choose different packages at the price of 6,800, 12,800 or 21,800 yuan (912, 1,716 or 2,923 euro), the China Daily reported.

THE LAST WORD

- A Chinese man suffering from late-stage cancer spent his final hours in a funeral home morgue after his wife thought he had died and no one bothered to check. The man, surnamed Huang, from the city of Shiyan in central China's Hubei province, had recently been released from hospital so that he could die at home, after doctors said they could do no more for him. After his wife could not wake him up one morning, she assumed he had died in his sleep and called the morgue to take him away. As the employees were dressing him and applying make-up, they noticed his mouth and fingers twitching slightly, but by the time a medical team arrived, Huang had breathed his last and the death was formally pronounced.
- A villager was buried in his car instead of a coffin in Baoding city in Hebei province, as requested in his will. In a video, a silver Hyundai Sonata is shown hanging by ropes from an excavator as it is slowly lowered into an oversized grave. Many comments flooded the Twitter-like service Weibo. "I like planes, what shall I do?," read one of the comments.

FIXED GUIDELINES IN CASE OF DEATH

- Provide the complete name, date of birth and nationality of the deceased.
- Provide the name and telephone number of the person in China who first reported the death (hospital, public security bureau, embassy, travel agent, friend,...)
- Provide the place of death: district, city, prefecture and/or county and province.
- Indicate, if known, whether the deceased was covered by an insurance policy.

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PARTNER OF THE CHINA NATIONAL FUNERAL ASSOCIATION

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