

Campaign to promote cremations turns against coffins Chinese county collects thousands of coffins to prevent burials



Coffins seized and destroyed to prevent burials and promote cremations

Thousands of coffins have been handed over to authorities in a county in eastern China as part of a campaign to promote cremation. In all, 5,871 coffins were handed in from 24 villages and townships in Gao'an county, Jiangxi province, over three days, "as a result of the solid work involving far-reaching policy communication and door-to-door home visits". There is a long tradition in rural China of elderly people buying their own coffin and keeping it at home for longevity and good fortune. China has been promoting cremation as a way to save land and discourage extravagant burials, but the coffin tradition continues in some rural areas. Fu Qiang, 94, was quick to hand over his coffin. "As a Communist Party member for 60 years, I should volunteer and take the lead in this campaign," a report quoted Fu as saying. The coffin dismantling campaign dissuades locals from traditional burials, which involve expensive coffins and waste of valuable land. The Gao'an government will offer a compensation of 2,000 yuan (252 euro) for every coffin surrendered, but most locals spent over 3,000 to 5,000 yuan (379~631 euro) to have one made. It is not reported whether the coffins were destroyed or will be used for power generation as has been done in other townships. In some places, coffins were used to make furniture.

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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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In April, Lingxi township in Shangrao, Jiangxi, held a meeting to promote eco-friendly funeral reform, during which many village officials vowed to push forward the reform and nearly 300 wooden coffins were destroyed, triggering online discussions on whether local governments overlooked traditions and people's feelings. Residents who keep their coffins may be fined, the Beijing News reported in April. Hundreds of elderly villagers who agreed that their coffins be burned to generate energy were paid compensation. Within five days, about 400 villagers in Shangrao county volunteered to use excavators to smash their own coffins under the watch of local officials.

Wu Zongxi, 80, the first to give up his coffin, said he wanted "to do something worthwhile for the community". "Cremation helps the environment and conservation of land," he was quoted as saying. "Us older generation have to set an example and educate the younger generation to change their customs." "My coffin was made 27 years ago," a woman surnamed Gong was quoted as saying in the Global Times. "I was reluctant at first. But my children convinced me that cremation is better."

Some, however, were said to have been forced to part with their burial caskets. There are even reports that some coffins have been exhumed to be destroyed and the human remains to be cremated. Videos and photos of officials in Jiangxi forcibly removing coffins from the homes of distraught residents, most of them elderly, have prompted condemnation from across the country. Villagers apparently tried to stop the officials by lying in the coffins. The Jiangxi department of civil affairs issued a notice saying a number of county-level officials had taken "simplistic and extreme" actions that had "hurt the feelings" of local residents. It called on officials to take a steadier, slower approach, and to "respect the dead, console the living and provide services to the public."

In some areas of China, senior citizens believe that putting a coffin in the house can prevent bad things from happening, and that they could get hints through the coffin days before their death. East China's Jiangxi Province has banned burials in four more cities and promoted cremation across the whole province. The four cities should accelerate the construction of cremation installations and prohibit funerals that put remains into coffins in the earth, reads a policy document. It was the first province-level adjustment in cremation policy since April 2015. The Jiangxi government's aim is to make cremation the sole approved method of disposing of people's remains. Authorities in many cities across the province have set a deadline of September 1 for becoming "cremation only".

Q&A

Which country is one of the largest donors of corneas in the world?

Sri Lanka, better known for its tea and gemstones. A new 40-episode TV series co-produced by China and Sri Lanka tells the story of cornea donations. Its title: "You Are Always With Me".

Is China lacking cornea donations?

Yes, incomplete data shows that the country has around 3 million sufferers of corneal blindness, but only a few thousand corneas are donated domestically every year. After cataracts, disease of the cornea is the second leading cause of blindness in China.

Has somebody already undergone the cryonics freeze procedure in China?

Yes, the frozen remains of a woman who died in Shandong province on June 17 has become the first in China to undergo a full cryonics freeze procedure — also known as extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO). The procedure was performed in Tai'an and the remains transferred to the Shandong Yinfeng Life Science Research Institute, the cryonics institution affiliated with the Yinfeng Biological Group.

How many hospitals in China can perform organ transplants?

China has 178 hospitals that can do transplants. In the first five months this year, 7,559 transplant procedures were completed, up 20.7 percent over the same period last year.

POLICIES

Funeral-related fraud target of three-month campaign

China will crack down on cemetery speculators and funeral-related fraud in a three-month campaign, which started in July, to address the most acute problems in the sector, the Ministry of Civil Affairs said. The crackdown covers all funeral parlors, cemeteries, morgues, rural nonprofit burial sites and ash storage facilities affiliated with religious sites. It will also address issues the public is most concerned about that have received a lot of media attention. The move came after nine departments, including the Ministry of Civil Affairs, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and the Ministry of Public Security, released an action plan for punishing misconduct in the sector. In China, burying human remains has been banned in the most populous areas. The only exceptions are for 10 ethnic minorities. Most urban residents are cremated after death, with their ashes interred in spaces purchased in cemeteries.

Despite the government's effort to encourage ecological burials, demand for cemetery space still runs high. There has been a surge in cemetery prices over the past few years, with

some spaces in Shanghai reaching 300,000 yuan (38,000 euro). The planned crackdown will focus on the rectification of 10 violations, including eight related to the construction and operation of cemeteries and two related to funeral services and the sale of funeral items. The authorities will target unauthorized cemeteries and those with incomplete legal documents, cemetery managers who expand construction beyond what was approved, people who sell graves without asking for proof of death, grave relocation and the building of oversized graves.

National standards require that graves for cremated remains be less than 1 square meter. Graves must not exceed 4 sq m for single graves and 6 sq m for joint burials. Overcharging for graves will also be targeted, as well as profiting from rural nonprofit cemeteries or charging fees for keeping cremated remains at unauthorized religious sites. Misconduct in funeral-related services, including lack of transparency in pricing, coercive sales or monopolies will also be targeted, the China Daily reported.

Urn burials promoted outside peak periods

In big Chinese cities, the deceased are usually cremated soon after they pass away and the urn containing the ashes is interred later at an auspicious time. The peak periods for burials are during the 15 days around Qingming festival, or tomb-sweeping day, and around Dongzhi, the winter solstice. With heavy demand placed on Shanghai's funeral services during peak periods, authorities have decided to offer a price reduction to those who opt to bury their deceased loved ones at other times of the year. People who bury the urns of family members with a Shanghai hukou (permanent residence permit) outside this peak period will be entitled to a 1,000 yuan (126 euro) subsidy for either traditional tomb burials or some kinds of eco-friendly burials, according to Shanghai Funeral and Interment Service Center.

Qingming and Dongzhi are both key times to pay respects to the deceased by visiting their tombs. They are important occasions for

tidying up grave sites and observing old traditions. During these periods cemeteries are often crowded with people. "Urns buried during these periods comprise over 70 percent of the total for the year," said Wei Chao, deputy director of the center. "It is the first time we have used priced leverage as an incentive to encourage people to avoid peaks," Wei said. More than 2.35 million people visited Shanghai's 54 cemeteries for Qingming Festival on April 5 this year, bringing an extra 293,000 vehicles onto the streets, according to the city civil affairs bureau. Close to 7,500 urns were buried on that day. The combination of tomb sweepers and people simply enjoying a day out for the holiday caused severe congestion. Five cemeteries in the city, Binhai Guyuan, Dianshan Lake Guiyuan, Weijiajiao Xiyuan, Xujing Xiyuan and Zhuanqiao Qinyuan, are the first to offer the subsidy. More will join the scheme if it proves a success, the Shanghai Daily reported.

CULTURE

Where graves for the living is dead serious business

One county in central China is home to tens of thousands of empty, elaborate graves built for people still alive, including many children under the age of 10. More than 80,000 of the graves are scattered across Tongcheng county in Hubei province, ready to eventually house the remains of their still-living owners, according to state broadcaster CCTV. Over 95 percent of the county's 78,000 residents aged 60 and above – as well as many younger people – have already put the finishing touches to their final resting place in a country short of arable land. It is a tradition in the rural region to have a grave ready well

before death, usually by the time a person reaches 30 years of age. The graves cover fields and roadsides and some already have headstones inscribed with the name and birth date of their future occupant. Some online commenters criticized the tradition as outdated and a waste of land, but others said it was understandable. "It should be banned! Land is a public resource," Weibo user Chenxi said. "If they use their own money it is perfectly justifiable," another user, ShadowUnderTheSun, said, as reported by the South China Morning Post.

Final homecoming

Liu Dewen, the chief of a Taiwanese village, helps fulfill the last dream of the local elderly people: to bring their ashes across the Taiwan Strait to a peaceful resting place in their hometowns. As a neighborhood chief in Hsianghe village, he found that many elderly soldiers who fled the mainland in 1949 wanted to be buried in their mainland hometowns. The Hsianghe neighborhood at its peak had more than 4,000 residents and more than 3,000 of them were single. When Liu first became chief of Hsianghe, there were about 1,000 soldiers living in solitude. Now there are fewer than 60 left. Moved by the stories told by these soldiers, he started helping them transport their ashes to the

mainland, one trip at a time. Every time he carries their remains home, he buys an individual seat for the urn, a gesture to show his respect for the deceased. He also set up a mourning hall at his own home. In the past 15 years, he has helped transport about 100 soldiers' remains to different provinces in the mainland, funded by donations, and he has been to 80 percent of China's provinces. His deeds haven't only earned him praise, but also criticism. Some people question Liu's motives. But Liu said that no matter what other people say about him, he will continue his mission without hesitation, the Global Times reported.

Human remains banned from taking the lift

A family had to carry their mother's remains down 17 flights of stairs in a residential block in eastern China after a notice from neighbors said remains of the deceased could not take the lift. Relatives of Gu Latai, who died aged 95, had to carry the coffin to the ground floor to get to her funeral procession. Neighbors had posted a notice banning human remains from the lift the day before. Her daughter, Xu Apo, from Wuxi in Jiangsu province, was quoted as saying that although the family thought the demand unreasonable, they did not want people to gossip about her mother and so opted to accept it. "When I got home and thought about it I was really angry," she said. "There is a large freight lift in the building. Why can't someone who has passed

away use it?" A spokesperson said: "This lift cannot be used by people who have passed away – it was the residents who agreed on this. Some of the residents of the 15 houses here care, and so posted such a notice." The incident drew the attention of internet users, with many people criticizing the notice. "Anyone could have died that day. Lots of our buildings have elderly people in them – is every one of them going to have to take the stairs? This is so disrespectful to the dead," one said. "Do they represent everyone? Have they consulted the majority of residents in the building in advance?" said another. Others thought the feelings of neighbors should be taken into consideration, the South China Morning Post reported.

BUSINESS

Post-90s generation preparing for their digital afterlife

Lily Tong has repeatedly thought about what will happen to her "virtual son" – a free-roaming frog she raised in a fashionable game app – after she dies, the Global Times reported. The 25-year-old finally decided to arrange a will to ensure her digital frog will be taken care of. Influenced by Lily, her friend Zhouzhou, 28 and unmarried, said half-jokingly that she would like her younger sister to take over her role as "wife of Baiqi," her virtual boyfriend on a popular dating app. The issue of digital inheritance has become a newborn industry targeting post-1990s generation adults. During the recent Qingming Festival, a video of "post-1995s committing their wills to the Notary Public Office of Wuxi in Jiangsu province" went viral online. The youngest was only 21 years old. "Who wants to inherit my emoji?" "Who's the best to leave my Alipay balance to?" "Wish someone can feed my chicken in the MiniWorld, and don't forget to report to me on every memorial day through scanning the QR code below my tombstone" are among the jokes being made.

Gao Yang, director of the Notary Public Office of Wuxi, told the Global Times that more people now see digital assets as a part of their "inheritance," an intangible but valuable aspect of estates to include in their wills, though "the legislation has not caught up with the pace of demand." Concerning the fate of her online presences, once she is no longer able to manage them, Lily Tong is planning to put the passwords of her social media accounts, including family photos and diaries, in her will that her best friend could access after Lily dies. "My close friends are all agreeing it would be a great way to visit my

Memory," said Lily, an airline stewardess, adding that due to her occupation, she never knows what will come first, "tomorrow or an accident?" "Asking me to write a will, I would say the first thing that comes to mind would be photos in my QQ account or my WeChat moments. Then there are my essays, dissertations, research plans and other intellectual heritage stored in the iCloud," a 19-year-old student at Beihang University told the Global Times. But the relevant policy in China seems to lag behind some Western countries that have developed a relatively mature system to deal with such account management upon one's death. For a long time, China's relevant industries have not established referable legal terms due to the complexity of the inheritance of virtual products. However, the General Provisions of the Civil Law officially implemented in October 2017 contain a rule to protect digital assets and private information. Filling a gap in the market, third-party services are helping transfer such digital assets and memories. Calling himself an "online mortician," Lin Dongping opened a microblog on Sina Weibo in 2011 for the bereaved by collecting and sorting out social records of the deceased, and also wrote obituaries following their social media footprints for each deceased. Posting more than 1,802 posts over the past eight years, the account has now gathered more than 320,000 followers. In October 2016, a project called "Telling the Family" became the first service in China providing solutions to protect inheritance of digital assets, through storing account password clues. It targets digital users with concerns about unexpected death.

Internet revolutionizes funeral industry

Chinese internet startups are pouring money into the funeral industry, changing the "taboo" industry with open discussions and transparent pricing. The website mudi.yiko.org offers one-package funeral and interment services for customers. It allows customers to browse cemeteries online by location, comparing prices and showing pictures. The site also allows people to compare traditional burials, cremations, and more ecologically friendly options.

Environmentally-friendly burials not only bring down the costs for families of the deceased but also use less land in crowded cities. Most people who buy online funeral services are in their 30s and 40s, helping their older relatives deal with the loss of family members, Ma Lei, founder and CEO of mudi.yiko.org, told the Global Times. People this age keep an open mind toward internet services and can accept new ways of doing things, according to Ma.

THE LAST WORD

- Centennial Casket Corp President Douglas Chen said his Texas-based company relies exclusively on Chinese-made caskets and proposed U.S. import tariffs would cause "great loss" and raise costs for "grieving families purchasing caskets for their loved ones at one of the worst times of their lives."
- Five men have been given prison sentences for stealing and selling human remains to villagers in Juye county, East China's Shandong province, to replace their deceased relatives so that they would not have to be cremated. One set of remains was sold for 13,000 yuan (1,643 euro). The practice occurs mostly in places where cremation is strictly enforced.
- The Longhui County government in Shaoyang, Hunan province, said it is investigating a report that a businessman surnamed Xiang has spent 70 million yuan (8.85 million euro) building a grandiose tomb for himself. Construction on the project began in 2013, covering an area of 20 hectares, destroying a large area of mountain forest.
- Crowdfunding platform Easy Raising, known in Chinese as Qing Song Chou, closed down a project involving a driver who sought to raise money for the burials of four victims he ran over. The driver, Yang Long, set a fundraising target of 200,000 yuan (25,275 euro) for his crowdfunding project with the title: "I killed four and cannot afford the burial fees. Please help me!". Easy Raising deleted the project, saying it didn't meet application requirements.
- An elderly man has dug his own grave – in the middle of a Chongqing community – and residents are not happy about living next to it. The owner, a 64-year-old surnamed Wang, sees it as the perfect burial plot, but residents of the Hengshan county development said the tombstone – which indicates Wang is still alive – is an eyesore.

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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THE ROSEATES NEWSLETTER

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