

A tiny columbarium niche only hope for the deceased Hong Kong, like other cities, is running out of room for the dead



An overcrowded Hong Kong cemetery

As the people of Hong Kong find it harder to buy a few square meters in which to live, so the future of a space for the dead is under threat. Instead of tombs gazing out over the sea from the hilltops, the deceased today are more likely to rest in a 20-year niche – enough room for an urn and a photo – in one of Hong Kong's gigantic columbaria. Extra years come a decade at a time, for a fee. Accommodating the deceased is creating challenges that governments worldwide are secretly sweating over, but squeamishness about discussing the subject means the challenge does not get the urgent attention it needs. As Caitlin Doughty, the author of *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, about the global cremation industry, complains: "People are being robbed of the dignity of death by a culture of silence."

As other countries such as Britain or the U.S. feel challenged, land-short Hong Kong faces a challenge on steroids. With about 46,000 deaths a year, most Hong Kong families have for decades recognized the impossibility of burial for their lost ones. The scarcity has driven up prices. A ground burial plot can cost anywhere between HK\$3 million (340,000 euro) and HK\$5 million (570,000 euro), but in the city's congested cemeteries, vacancies rarely become available. Finding the space even to store ashes is becoming nigh impossible. The best you can expect is cremation at one of Hong Kong's six
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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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crematoria. A standard niche at a public columbarium costs HK\$2,800 (320 euro) – but the waiting time for a space is over four years. Those who are not prepared to wait must pay much more for a niche in a privately-owned columbarium – a space not bigger than a shoebox. In the best position, a niche can cost up to HK\$1.8 million (210,000 euro). Betsy Ma, sales director at Sage Funeral Services, estimates that around 200,000 sets of ashes in Hong Kong are waiting for a niche space, with many stored at funeral parlors for a fee of HK\$300-800 (34-92 euro) a month. In Hong Kong it now costs more to house the dead than the living. The government is working to increase the supply of public niches, with construction on three projects, providing a total of 208,000 spaces, due to be completed this year.

Chinese custom says the deceased should be buried intact, but in mainland China, since the 1949 revolution, the Communist Party has frowned on burial as superstitious, and invested huge efforts to persuade families to cremate their loved ones instead. Today, the cremation rate is about 48 percent, which means the majority is still buried. In 2014, the Ministry of Civil Affairs called for a near-100 percent cremation by 2020, but the target will almost certainly not be met.

Beijing's most famous cemetery, the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery for Communist heroes, has built a new columbarium wall, but the adjacent Babaoshan People's Cemetery, used by non-party commoners, has stopped selling graves since 2012. In the cities, burial has become an expensive privilege. In Beijing, the average expense of a burial was 70,000 yuan (9,093 euro) in 2014 – close to the residents' average annual income. More exotic "green" options are emerging to reduce the space needed for graves. A company called "The Other Shore" is offering for a loved one's remains to be launched into deep space, offering "a permanent celestial voyage". Another company offers to compress a person's remains into a colored diamond. In Hong Kong too, the administration is encouraging "green" burials. Out of the 93 percent that today are cremated, 13 percent now agree to have their ashes distributed in one of Hong Kong's Gardens of Remembrance, and a tiny 2.3 percent have their ashes scattered at sea. The dignity of "death space" should surely be seen as a fundamental human right, and for many – especially in Hong Kong – that dignity no longer exists, the South China Morning Post reported.

In Shanghai, the total land available for cemeteries was around 8 million square meters in 2013, according to the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, a fraction of the 30 million sq m available just a few years before. The cost of purchasing a cemetery plot has surged in recent years, with some plots in Shanghai selling for 300,000 yuan (39,000 euro). Ecological burial methods, including sea burial, tree burial, and flower pot burial, have since emerged as alternatives.

Q&A

How many people die in road accidents in China?

Statistics from the Ministry of Transport show over 63,000 people died in road accidents in 2016, ranking second in the world behind India, where 146,000 people were killed in road accidents in 2016.

How many people are waiting for an organ donation?

About 1.5 million people.

China's organ donation rate is one of the lowest in the world. One legislator suggested to record the willingness to donate organs in case of death on the driving license of new drivers. As of March 2019, more than 1.16 million people in China had registered as organ donation volunteers. The supply-to-demand ratio is only 1:30.

How many people die in the world each year?

About 56.9 million people died worldwide in 2016, including about 10 million in China.

How much spirit money is burned in China to honor the deceased?

According to the China Consumers Association, in recent years, Chinese have burned about 1,000 metric tons of spirit money annually at a cost of 10 billion yuan (1.3 billion euro), aggravating air pollution.

How many sets of ashes have been discarded in sea burials in Shanghai?

According to the Shanghai Funeral Service Center, the ashes of 44,652 deceased residents in the city have been scattered since the city started sea burials in 1991.

POLICIES

Illegal funeral vans will be blacklisted

Authorities in Beijing will blacklist illegal funeral vans and give the drivers' names to medical institutions in the capital this year in a move to crack down on unscrupulous cheaters who charge exorbitant fees for the transportation of human remains. Other irregular funeral services, such as selling extremely large tombs and illegal cemeteries, will also be punished under an action plan released by the Beijing Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau. Inspections will be carried out until the end of October. Between 80,000 to 90,000 people die in Beijing each year, according to the Beijing Municipal Commission of Health and Family Planning's information center.

Transportation of remains should be undertaken by a licensed mortuary business, and other departments and individuals are barred, the capital's mortuary management regulation says. However, some people have sought business opportunities based on a lack of knowledge by family members of a deceased or critically ill person, said Li Hongbing, deputy director of the Beijing Bureau of Civil Affairs. Li said that some van owners pay particular attention to critically ill patients at hospitals, and sometimes social workers and nurses connect family members with funeral van owners. "Unlicensed funeral

vans often provide a package of services to family members of the deceased when they are emotionally unstable," Li said, adding that the owners usually charge much more than the regulated market price. Last year, the capital inspected and punished 13 unlicensed funeral van operators and made 187 legitimate vans available to the public, according to Wang Yeyong, leader of the law enforcement supervision team of the city's civil affairs bureau. A joint inspection, coordinated with the capital's medical and market regulation authorities, has also been conducted at hospital mortuaries, Wang said. Last year, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued a notice calling for punishment of anyone who provides funeral services or sells related products without authorization. Nine government agencies, including the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Public Security, took part in the crackdown, which ran from late June to the end of September last year. Beijing also carried out more than 1,500 inspections in 2018 to conduct a thorough examination of cemeteries and mortuaries. But Li said that the legal foundation is not sufficient in the funeral industry and suggested that laws should be formulated to regulate the business, the China Daily reported.

Authorities order demolition of illegal tombs

Authorities in Fuzhou, Fujian province, have ordered the demolition of hundreds of illegally built tombs as President Xi Jinping's campaign to combat illicit and environmentally harmful construction projects continues to gather momentum. The municipal committee of the Communist Party ordered governments at all levels to remove all such graves built in the city and return the sites to their natural state. Xinhua News Agency reported that a huge number of illegal burial sites had been developed in mountainous areas and that many of them had damaged the environment and posed a threat to local drinking water sources. At a development on Nanyang Mountain in Fuzhou, more than 100 luxury tombs were under construction. In the worst cases, as much as 100 square meters of forest had been felled to make room for them, while in other areas whole reservoirs had

been surrounded by unapproved grave sites. After President Xi Jinping issued a directive to demolish illegal constructions, including luxury villas and tombs, officials across the country have been racing to comply. Many of those who failed to act have been sacked or even jailed. The Tianjin civil affairs bureau also issued a regulation requiring families to remove all tombs by April 30 to return the land for farming. Grave mounds and gravestones should also be destroyed. Authorities in Jiangsu, East China's Jiangsu Province, started to pull down local tombs with excavators ahead of the April 5 Qingming Festival. Each family will receive 200 yuan (26 euro) as compensation per destroyed tomb. Burials are prohibited in forests, on farmland or at scenic spots. But at the Laoshan scenic area in Qingdao, there are more than 65,000 illegal tombs.

Legalization of euthanasia on the table

Legislators in China have suggested legalizing euthanasia during a review of a draft amendment to the civil law by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC). It would give people nearing the end of their life more choices. Deputy Li Jie said many cancer patients in the terminal stages feel acute pain and would choose euthanasia if available, so it should be legalized to protect human dignity. "Many senior acquaintances contact me during festivals hoping I can privately give them some anesthetics to relieve their pain, but I can't. Only doctors are authorized to give them such drugs," said Li, who is also chairman of pharmaceutical company Humanwell Healthcare. But even doctors can only provide such drugs in narrow circumstances, Li said. Narcotics such as anesthetics are tightly controlled in China, resulting in many patients in need of pain-relieving drugs receiving only a limited amount of such drugs from hospitals, Fan Li, former vice-president of the Chinese PLA General Hospital said.

Ma Yide, another NPC deputy, said the law should allow some people the right to euthanasia. "Patients who are determined by

doctors as having incurable diseases and whose pain cannot be relieved should have the right to make their own decisions to receive euthanasia," he said. Strict procedures should be followed to protect their rights, including written consent submitted to authorities for approval before euthanasia should be performed at certified medical institutions, he said, adding that consent should be able to be withdrawn at any time. Meanwhile, regulations should forbid any organization or individual from cheating, luring or forcing patients to receive euthanasia, he said. Euthanasia has been debated among medical and ethical circles for many years in China, but it has still not been enshrined in the law. Supporting euthanasia may cause doctors to give up their resolve to try their best to fight diseases, including some that seem beyond treatment for the present but are potentially curable in the future as medicine develops, opponents of euthanasia say. But Ma, who is also a legal researcher at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, said that after many years of debate the timing for legalizing euthanasia in China is becoming ripe, the China Daily reported.

CULTURE

Dignity in death is a master mortician's vow

For 42-year-old Wang Gang, maintaining the dignity of people after death is a solemn pledge. Wang, a mortician at Longhua Parlor in Shanghai's Xuhui District, is a real-life version of the main character in the 2008 Japanese movie "Departures," the story of a man who prepares the dead for their final resting place. Wang has followed his calling for 22 years and is considered a master in his field. He has been honored as a worker whose expertise, professionalism and spirit are a credit to the city. "It is my wish to make people leave the world with utmost dignity and make them look as alive as possible," said Wang. "I want to soothe the sorrow of their families when they bid farewell to their beloved ones." Wang began working at a funeral parlor, which takes in nearly 30,000 remains every year, when he was 20 because his mother worked there. He was the youngest mortician. "I visited the parlor with my mother many times when I was a child,

but I still felt some kind of discomfort," said Wang. Some of the remains he prepares arrive in a poor condition after traffic accidents, falls from high buildings, fires and drownings. "Many people think it is a simple job, but it is not true," said Wang. "We need to grasp a lot of knowledge such as a person's body and organ structure, the use of materials, and we need to observe photos and keep communicating with the deceased's relatives to learn about their life experiences, which helps us restore the broken bodies." Wang has been asked to restore the appearance of victims in a number of accidents, where the faces of many of the victims were unrecognizable, posing great challenges. Wang and two colleagues went to Tianjin after the 2015 explosion in which 165 people died. "I was deeply sorrowful when seeing the bodies because most victims were teenagers," he recalled. "Cries filled the scene, and the parking lot was full of unrecognizable

remains. "The emotions of families and firefighters created a lot of pressure on me and I wanted to try my best to fulfill their expectations — restoring the utmost dignity of the dead." Time was of the essence and Wang worked 16 hours a day for more than 20 days. In the case of one 19-year-old victim, a firefighter, it took more than 10 hours to reconstruct the remains. A woman, in tears, told him: "Thank you for returning my son to me and making me see his last face." Wang said that when he first entered the industry,

he had been disappointed to find technology lagging behind. "The early restoration process was just skin sewing and infilling to ensure the completeness of remains, which should be done in a better way." He began to explore the various technologies and skills that would restore skin, muscle, hair and blood vessels. "I don't get tired because helping others and accompanying the last part of life of the deceased is meaningful," he said, as reported by the Shanghai Daily.

BUSINESS

China's biggest funeral services provider plans to launch virtual graves

More and more Chinese are embracing value-added funeral services, such as virtual graves, according to Fu Shou Yuan International, the country's largest funeral services provider. The company is creating demand for innovative methods for consumers to commemorate their loved ones, such as virtual graves where people can store large amounts of information about the deceased. "There is increasing demand for spiritual services like anniversaries, so in the future we will also help customers make mini films about their loved ones' lives, or digital photo albums," said Yi Hua, the company's chief branding officer. "Our business is going to transition into something like a memory factory," said Yi. The company unveiled its plans as it announced a 17 percent increase in net profit to 488.4 million yuan (63.44 million euro) for 2018. Its revenue was up 11.8 percent to 1.6 billion yuan (210 million euro). Its sales of "pre-need" funeral services – sold to people preparing for their own deaths – increased by 111.7 percent since their launch in 2017. The package includes cremation, disposal of ashes and logistical work. "China's middle-class' spending ability is undeniable, and it is bringing spring to the funeral industry," said Bai Xiaojiang, the company's chairman. While it seemed like unit prices of cemetery services were increasing yearly, Bai

said the higher prices were actually due to new "post funeral" services. More than 9 million people died in China last year, according to the country's National Bureau of Statistics, and its ageing population has fueled a boom in the funeral services industry. Grave prices have soared higher than property prices over the past three years, leading Beijing to step in with new regulations, mainly limiting the sizes of columbarium niches where ashes of the dead are stored. Fu Shou Yuan is, however, not worried about running out of space as it plans to introduce virtual graves, where people can scan a QR code to access information. "Graves in the future will take up less physical space, but will be able to store so much more memory in the virtual space," said director Wang Jisheng. The company currently operates in 30 cities in 15 provinces, the South China Morning Post reported.

The China Daily added that the Nanjing Yuhua Cemetery, in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, has launched a virtual bank for paying tribute to the deceased called the "Bank of Heaven". Instead of burning spirit money, visitors scan a QR code and enter the names of the deceased and the amount of spirit money they want to virtually burn. They can also leave a message to the deceased.

Exporting coffins big business for China

Wooden coffins engraved with dragons and phoenixes, cloth coffins covered with embroidered flowers and grass, handcrafted memorial tablets – people are dying to get their hands on coffins made in China. In

Zhuangzhai Township of Heze, East China's Shandong Province, companies make coffins mainly for exports to Japan. Coffins exported from the township account for more than 60 percent of all coffins sold in Japan. Other

related products such as cinerary caskets, memorial tablets and sacrificial alters are also popular. Heze has abundant cheap wood of high quality, as well as seasoned craftsmen, laying a solid foundation for the coffin businesses. "There are three main companies making wood and cloth coffins in the township," said local official Guo Fengmin. "Annual production volume is about 740,000, with prices ranging from 500 yuan (65 euro) to more than 2,000 yuan (260 euro)" Tian Liang, manager of Dehong Wood Product Co

in Zhuangzhai, said: "Japanese clients are strict with every detail, from raw materials, to sizes, to decorations, or even smells. Some clients even use rulers to measure the coffins to see if the sizes are precise." Another company, the Yunlong Carvings located in Caoxian county, began making coffins in 2000. It currently exports more than 200,000 coffins and about 240,000 memorial tablets to Japan. Annual revenue has exceeded 100 million yuan (13 million euro).

THE LAST WORD

- Gu Jin, a doctor at Beijing cancer hospital, launched a proposal for students to learn about death starting in primary school, in order to help older people die with respect and dignity. Gu said he had encountered too many late-stage cancer patients in great pain whose children refused to let them die. "Good death should also be a right," he told the Global Times. Euthanasia is still illegal in China.
- A woman in Central China's Hubei Province has been told she cannot leave her property to her dogs when she dies, as there is no legal precedent for it in Chinese law. Being single, she has no siblings and her parents have long since passed away. After retiring, she spent most of her time with her two dogs. The director of the Three Gorges Notary Office said that the heirs are required to be individuals.

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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THE ROSEATES NEWSLETTER

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