

**Doctor takes patients' photos for the final journey**  
End-of-life snapshots

*Yao Shuai has taken about 10,000 photos from over 400 patients and their families*

One Chinese doctor is doing a bit more for his patients than just prescribing painkillers or drugs. As the day shift at his hospital ends at 6 pm, Yao Shuai goes to his office, which has been converted into a simple photo studio. He takes pictures of patients set to embark on their final journey, often with family members close at hand. But before he takes the photos, he asks a question that may seem at first insensitive but in actual fact is of immense benefit: "Are you afraid of death?" Yao, a resident doctor in the department of cardiology at Tongzhou district hospital of traditional Chinese medicine in Nantong, Jiangsu province, believes this direct approach is more humane and truthful. Since August 2016, Yao has taken portraits of his patients and their families in his spare time. So far, he has taken more than 10,000 photos of more than 400 people. He plans to hold a photo exhibition or publish an album to record their stories. His images depict his patients' wrinkles, their facial expressions, messy hair, or even their fleeting delicate smiles.

Before taking the photos, Yao talks with each of his patients, not about their fatal illness, but about a subject that is too often ignored: the end of their days. "Are you terrified of mortality?" he asks. "Sad, helpless, frank, happy, or indifferent, each patient has a unique state of mind to deal with it differently," says Yao. "Many people say they are not (continued on page 2)

**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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afraid of death, but when it's coming, they often are." Yao realizes mortality is part of life. He thinks Chinese people lack sufficient education or understanding of this and know little about how to face it. "Especially medical staff. We confront death often, but we haven't actually been taught how to deal with it. I still don't know how to prepare to face death, but I know it will come," Yao says. He also likes to hear about his patients' lives, such as their happiest memory, or their biggest regret, and how they managed to negotiate life's challenges. Yao has asked these questions to hundreds of his patients and their relatives whose authentic images are recorded in the photos, including the distraught daughter of a patient, a smiling old woman, and an elderly man with closed eyes. "People who are sick have complicated or different facial expressions even though they are all in pain or distress, for example, gentle, upset, proud or defensive," says the 30-year-old doctor.

One of the photographers Yao admires is Lyu Nan, who lived with patients suffering from mental distress. "Lyu inspired me to find art in real life, instead of going somewhere to take photos," says Yao. The first patient Yao took a photo of was a retired teacher who had lung cancer. The patient passed away before Yao had a chance to give it to him. He brought the photo to his funeral and presented it to his relatives. Yao's photos allow him to get closer to the patients and communicate better with them. "I realized that patients I used to differentiate and identify from their bed number or their disease are unique. Behind each face, there's a story," Yao says. "The patients in my wards are often aged, and have witnessed historic moments. I'm curious to know their stories." All the photos are taken in black and white, as he thinks this better captures the essence of a person. "Photography connects doctors and patients," Yao says. Yao's father had hepatitis B and Yao was offended by what he viewed as the medical profession's indifference. This pushed him to become a doctor and he vowed to treat his patients with respect and warmth.

But Yao also notes that sometimes there is nothing doctors can do to prolong life. Doctors are not magicians. As the final journey nears, patients and their families will have to deal with stress and grief. Doctors are not immune to this, Yao says. Yao rides his motorbike as a therapy to tackle any feelings of sadness, inadequacy or pressure related to the patients. "I ride along the seaside, sometimes, for hours," says Yao, as reported by the China Daily.

## Q&A

*How many people in China have registered to donate their organs?*

So far, some 1.25 million people have registered to donate their organs. From 2010 to October this year, over 26,000 people in China donated some 74,000 major organs. A total of 2,757 people donated 7,186 organs in the first half of this year, up by 9.5 percent and 3.6 percent, respectively, compared with the same period last year.

*How many people suffer from cardiac arrest every year in China?*

About 50,000 people in China suffer from sudden cardiac shock every year, of which only about 1 percent are saved. There are only about 2,000 Automatic External Defibrillators (AEDs) in the whole of China and less than 1 percent of adults know how to perform CPR.

*Has the Black Death returned to China?*

Four people in Inner Mongolia were recently diagnosed with bubonic or pneumonic plague. In Beijing, a major campaign to reduce the rat population was launched. In China, plague infections have been rare in recent years, with the few cases mostly concentrated in northwestern parts of the country.

## **POLICIES**

### **Protesters oppose building a new crematorium in Wenlou**

Riot police fired tear gas and beat protesters after hundreds took to the streets in southern China in late November over plans to build a crematorium in the area. Residents of Wenlou in Guangdong province – about 100 km north of Hong Kong – said several hundred people tried to march to the township government offices after they found out that a crematorium would be built on land they thought was set aside for a park. But police stopped the marchers before they reached the township offices and detained about 100 people. Residents also said police raided homes to arrest protesters. An official from the township government and an employee from a hospital in the city of Huazhou, which oversees Wenlou, confirmed that some wounded were being treated at the medical center, but declined to give details. Videos and images obtained by the South China Morning Post, as well as those circulating on Weibo, a microblogging platform, show police firing multiple rounds of tear gas into crowds and officers beating protesters with batons. A number of people appear to have head wounds. Police sealed off the township, which is home to about 60,000 people. According to the township government, a funeral home would be built inside the 75 million yuan (9.7

million euro) Huazhou Humanity and Ecology Park project, which covers about 10 hectares. A resident said the community felt “cheated” for having to give up their farmland for the project. “We only found out it is a crematorium recently and we are very upset. They should have had public consultation before,” she said. Protesters said they were concerned that a crematorium would lead to pollution that could taint the water supply.

Following two days of clashes, Huazhou authorities suspended plans to build the crematorium in the town of Wenlou pending consultation with the public as people held “different views” about it. But despite the announcement, hundreds of people continued to protest outside the township government’s offices. One protester said the public had no confidence in the government as it had agreed only to suspend the crematorium project rather than cancel it. The Huazhou government has not released any information about the number of people injured or detained, but said that anyone caught damaging public property or looting would be punished, the South China Morning Post reported.

### **Hongkongers to be allowed to choose treatment they want to receive if they become terminally ill**

Rapidly greying Hong Kong is taking steps to let people decide what kind of treatment to receive when they become terminally ill, and to choose where they prefer to die. Proposed changes to the law would allow people to draw up an advance medical directive – commonly referred to as a “living will” – to specify they do not want treatment that will prolong their life when they are dying. This includes stating they do not wish to be resuscitated or kept alive by artificial respiration. These proposals were welcomed by those concerned with care of the elderly and end-of-life issues, but they said much more needs to be done to raise awareness of advance directives, including having more doctors capable to explain the issue to patients and family members. The proposal is to let Hongkongers aged 18 or above and of sound mind to make an advance directive in

writing in the presence of two witnesses, one of whom must be a registered doctor, and neither of whom is a beneficiary of the patient’s inheritance.

The directive will be applicable if a person with a specified illness becomes terminally ill, enters a persistent vegetative state, goes into an irreversible coma, or has other end-of-life illnesses. “This new law will add more certainty and protection to uphold the patient’s right to self-determination and enhance the quality of life for the terminally ill,” said Albert Lam, a Food and Health Bureau consultant who was involved in the law reform. But those with advance directives cannot be denied basic care or palliative treatment and cannot request illegal procedures such as euthanasia, experts emphasized. The advance directive will

exempt medical professionals from civil and criminal liabilities when they fulfill the patient's wishes, even where family members dispute the patient's preferences. The proposals will be up for public consultation until December 16. The proposed changes come at a time when Hong Kong's population of 7.4 million is ageing rapidly and official data indicates there will be an estimated 98,000 deaths a year by 2066, up from 46,700 in 2016. If Hong Kong's terminally ill live out their days in hospital, the current severe shortage of beds in public hospitals can be expected to worsen in future. Last year, public hospitals dealt with only 1,557 advance directives.

Lam cited a 2017 Chinese University survey

which showed that one in four elderly people preferred receiving end-of-life care at care homes, instead of in hospital. Currently, however, all deaths in a care home must be reported to a coroner, whereas a death at home need not be reported if the person was seen by a doctor within 14 days prior to death. To simplify matters for those who prefer to spend their final days in a care home, the government wants to remove the requirement to report the death to a coroner if the deceased was seen by a doctor in the fortnight before death. But this change will require coordination between hospitals and care homes, as well as resources to enable the homes to cater to the terminally ill and their family members.

## Time to deliver donated organs shortened

The average time to transport donated organs in China has been shortened by up to one and a half hours since the country established green channels for this purpose three years ago. The improved transportation efficiency has contributed to an increase in organ sharing by 8 percent and in the utilization rate by 6.7 percent, Guo Yanhong, an official with the Medical Administration Bureau of the National Health Commission said. In the first half of this year, 7,186 organs were donated, up 3.5 percent compared with the same period last year. One major challenge in organ transplants is the time required for transport, since donated organs need to be transplanted as quickly as possible to optimize functionality. For example, a liver must be transplanted within 12 hours, while for a heart it should be within eight hours. To shorten transport time and reduce the impact on the quality of the organ, China announced in 2016 that it would establish green channels for the transportation of human donor organs. The Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC)

has since opened 1,932 green channels for the transportation of human donor organs. According to the National Health Commission, 1,984 donated organs were transported last year, and 16 airlines have joined the initiative. China Eastern Airlines was ranked first in this aspect, transporting 891 organs last year. Together with China Southern Airlines, Air China and Shanghai Airlines, the four carriers completed 87 percent of air transportation of donated organs. The top three transported organs are liver, kidney and heart. Other frequently transported organs include lungs and corneas. China has been ranked first in Asia and second worldwide for the number of organ donations and transplants every year. While the country has about 1.5 million patients who suffer from organ failures every year, with 300,000 of them being suitable for transplants, only over 10,000 people can receive transplants, according to the National Health Commission, as reported by the China Daily.

## CULTURE

### Eco-friendly burials gaining popularity in Shanghai

Eco-friendly burials accounted for more than a quarter of burials in Shanghai last year as authorities strive to ease the shortage of land at cemeteries. Eco-friendly burials, including tree, flower, lawn and wall burials, and biodegradable urns, accounted for 26 percent of last year's burials, compared with 24

percent the previous year, according to the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau. In addition, sea burials are also gaining public acceptance, with 2.9 percent choosing this option last year, a rise from the 0.3 percent in 1990 when Shanghai started promoting them, the bureau said. A total of 416 sea burials had been held

since 1990, with 47,269 urns of ash scattered at sea. In total, about 100 mu of land and 20,000 cubic meters of stone materials have been saved because of sea burials. City authorities offer subsidies – 4,600 yuan (590 euro) – to families who favor sea burials, with 1,600 yuan (206 euro) used to pay the ship fare, insurance and service fees.

In 2016, a multi-burial trial encouraging families to help save space in increasingly crowded cemeteries by interring their deceased relatives together in tombs that can house up to about eight urns was conducted in the city, and about 1,000 such tombs were renovated last year based on demand. "Most cemeteries in the city were built in the 1980s and 90s and are running out of space after years," said Huang Yifei, director of the funeral and interment department of the bureau. "Residents are gradually going in for

land-saving burials instead of deeply rooted beliefs in tomb earth burials." The bureau also launched Shanghai's first official funeral and interment website in early September to regulate the market. Between June and August, eight fake websites pretending to be authorized funeral and interment providers were closed, the city's civil affairs authorities said. In addition, 222 web pages were removed for releasing fake funeral and interment information. A fake Longhua Parlor being promoted online was charging more than twice the prices of the real parlor. The official website lists 69 authorized funeral and interment service providers in the city with maps, making it convenient for residents to search for information. Policies and guidelines in the field are also released on the website, and residents can also report irregularities, the Shanghai Daily reported.

## Officials determined to curb extravagant funerals

Many grassroots officials and governments vowed to convince residents across China not to hold extravagant funerals – or weddings – as China begins curbing outdated customs in rural areas. Officials have called for policies to take into account local conditions and to avoid a "one size fits all" policy. Eleven ministries and departments, including China's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, jointly released a guideline on pushing for changes of outdated conventions and deeds in rural areas within three to five years. Many villagers in China's rural areas have long been burdened by various cumbersome and costly customs, such as holding funerary rites with hired strippers and preparing luxury banquets. Villagers struggle, but participate to maintain their social standing, or risk losing *mianzi* –

loosely translated as "face" in English – analysts said. Sometimes residents in rural areas are competing in extravagance. Hiring strippers when holding funerary rites is widely regarded as bad behavior. Many villagers are not willing to follow such practices, but they find it difficult to make a change due to pressure from others. Some outdated customs are against the traditional virtues of Chinese society, Zhu Wei, professor at the China University of Political Science and Law, told the Global Times. "These costly customs have become huge burdens for many rural residents and they also have a bad social influence," Han Jun, vice-minister of agriculture and rural affair, said at a press conference.

## Hong Kong's vertical cemeteries also running out of space

Singapore-based photographer Finbarr Fallon spent five years photographing Hong Kong's vertical cemeteries for his photo series "Dead Space", showing how complicated and expensive dying can be in a crowded city such as Hong Kong. Many of the city's cemeteries are located on hillsides and house thousands of remains. After Fallon stumbled upon a hilltop cemetery during a hike in Chai Wan district, he decided to visit all Hong Kong cemeteries. "The scale was unlike anything I

had seen before," he commented. The dead are laid to rest on steep mountainsides next to the city's ubiquitous skyscrapers. "I found it fascinating that extreme density and verticality are a defining characteristic of Hong Kong's dwellings for both the living and the dead," Fallon said. He also wanted to emphasize "the sheer proximity of residential towers to many of these graveyards." In such a crowded city, the living and the dead find themselves existing side by side. Now even

the hillsides are running out of space and  
Hong Kong might start building real

skyscrapers to house its human remains.

## THE LAST WORD

- A suspect in a 22-year-old burglary and murder case was finally caught by Shanghai police. The man, surnamed Song, committed the crime with two others, who were caught earlier. A woman named Zhao was killed in the burglary, while a policeman who was her neighbor got injured when he intervened. He had vowed all this time to bring the final suspect to justice. Police discovered that the suspect was back in his home town under a different name.
- Not related to China, but the book *"Will My Cat Eat My Eyeballs? Big Questions from Tiny Mortals About Death"* by Caitlin Doughty is well worth reading. The U.S. mortician, author, blogger and YouTube celebrity presents factual, hilarious and candid answers to questions about death, funerals and cremation frequently posed by children. Other books by the author include *"From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death"* and *"Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory"*. She also hosts the YouTube channel *"Ask a Mortician"*.

## 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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