

DOING WELL, DYING WELL

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IN JUNE 2017, a Foshan 佛山 court handed Chen Hongping 陈弘平, former mayor of Jieyang 揭阳, a coastal city in northern Guangdong province, a suspended death sentence for accepting bribes of RMB125 million during his time in office between 2004 and 2011.³ This in itself would hardly be cause for comment in the context of Xi Jinping's widespread anti-corruption campaign. However, the charges included embezzling RMB3.5 million to build himself an extravagant mausoleum using traditional feng shui principles.⁴ Publicly known as the Jieyang Tower, the construction included a curved colonnade of nine carved ten-metre stone columns enclosing a megalith from the spiritually significant Mount Tai in Shandong, 1,700

kilometres away. The construction also included a ten-metre-high ritual tripod in the square in front of the edifice.

Apart from the shocking optics of a senior Party official embezzling huge sums of money to build himself a vast tomb, Chen's crime flagrantly transgressed the Party-state's regularly repeated warnings concerning extravagant commemorations of the dead. In 2013, for example, the Party introduced new regulations instructing members to hold 'simple, civilised funerals' for family members and to refuse any 'condolence money' as this was being used as a form of bribery. An 'anonymous official in charge of issuing the guidelines' insisted that those who violate funeral rules will be corrected and punished, including — apparently —



A cemetery in Shanghai
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

deceased Party members.⁵ This year, in Dengzhou 邓州, Henan province, city officials similarly exhorted its citizens to frugality in funeral arrangements, suggesting that no liquor or cigarettes be provided and recordings should replace live music. In Taiqian county 台前县, also in Henan, new rules were both more liberal and more specific: bands should have no more than five members and liquor should cost no more than fifteen yuan per bottle. In addition, they suggested that funerals take no longer than three days.⁶

Injunctions against extravagant funerals and other ceremonies are nothing new. At least as far back as the ancient philosopher Mozi 墨子 (fifth century–fourth century BCE), officials have been encouraged to be frugal in death rituals. All through the imperial period and beyond, there existed a

tension between properly observing the ritual codes and demonstrating extreme filial piety on the one hand, and decrying excess and waste on the other. Nonetheless, the proper observance of rituals associated with death remains important in China. The Qingming festival celebrated in early April each year is a public holiday when families throng to the tombs of their ancestors, sweeping them and making offerings of food, tea, liquor, and incense.

In recent times, problems associated with the pressures of population among the living have become, inevitably, problems with the dead as well. The traditional preference for burials over cremation has meant that the demand for grave plots has grown, with two major consequences. The first is that local governments have become increasingly concerned about the

3-D custom-made ash containers
Source: nanjixiong.com



‘waste’ of valuable arable land for cemeteries. The second is that the price of grave plots has risen steeply.

The Chinese Communist Party has long been concerned about the use of land for burials. It has advocated cremation since the 1950s ‘in order to protect farmland and public hygiene as well as an effort to fight against superstition’, as the *People’s Daily* put it several years ago.⁷ At one point during the first half of the 1970s, the bodies of revolutionary heroes buried at the official cemetery at Babaoshan to the west of Beijing were dug up so that they could be cremated, interring their ashes behind bricks in halls for veneration. Unfortunately, cremation goes directly against traditional beliefs that the body should remain whole after death. In 2014, the government of Anqing City 安庆市 in Anhui province declared that

after 1 June in that year no more burials would be allowed and all bodies had to be cremated. In the weeks before this regulation took effect, at least six elderly people committed suicide to avoid cremation.⁸ To make cremation more attractive, some coastal cities and provinces now provide free day trips to scatter ashes at sea, with food, drink, and flowers thrown in.⁹ For a price, you can also have your loved one’s ashes buried beneath a tree, interred in a small statue of the departed, made into a diamond, or blasted into space on a ‘permanent celestial journey’.¹⁰ One company, embracing the possibilities of 3-D printing, is offering custom-made ash containers in the shape of a small house on a cloud with a bespoke inscription within twelve hours of cremation. The containers are guaranteed to last 1,000 years and cost RMB11,000.¹¹



Big business in China: Fu Shou Yuan
Source: sh.fsygroup.com

This may seem expensive, but it is an insignificant amount compared to the price of a burial plot in or near one of China's large cities. In 2015, burial plots in a private cemetery outside Beijing ranged in price from RMB120,000 for the most basic 0.8 square metre plot to RMB1.2 million for a generous three-square-metre plot.¹² The *China Daily* reported that one-metre plots in public cemeteries in Beijing have risen from RMB60,000 to RMB200,000 since 2000. Beijing is the most expensive city in which to be buried, but the same kind of inflation has occurred across China. Just as people are moving further out of town for affordable housing, so too must they search further away to find an affordable piece of land for burial, in the case of Beijing, in rural Hebei province.¹³ With demand so obviously outstripping supply, there are complaints of sly practices by some private

cemetery operators, and of speculators buying plots for investment.¹⁴

Death has become big business in China. The undoubted star of the 'death care' industry is Fu Shou Yuan 福寿园 (literally, The Garden of Prosperous Longevity), which operates in sixteen cities across China. Incorporated in 2012 and launched on the Hong Kong stock market in 2013, it specialises in selling burial plots and maintaining cemeteries; funeral organisation and arrangements; as well as landscaping and 'the production, sales and maintenance of cremation machines'. The initial public offer was oversubscribed by 700 per cent, and between 2012 and 2016 Fu Shou Yuan's revenues rose from under HK\$500 million to HK\$1.27 billion.¹⁵ The consensus of investment analysts polled by the UK *Financial Times* in August 2017 was that its share price would rise in the next year by more than six per cent, and its dividends by more than sixteen per cent.¹⁶ In April, Fu Shou Yuan launched a trial of pre-pay funeral services in Shanghai (under the English name 'Pre-need') with packages priced between RMB6,000, and RMB12,000. Their slogan for this service: 'One choice today will free you from tomorrow's cares'. With China's

ageing population, the business of death in China looks ever more promising for investors.

With the price of some funerals reaching astronomical heights, dealing with the death of a loved one — or planning for one's own death — can become a gaudy show of wealth. While the Party exhorts the Chinese people to be frugal, discouraging burial and promoting cremation, the prosperity it celebrates has perversely allowed this textbook example of conspicuous consumption to flourish along with the reinvigoration of 'feudal' and 'superstitious' practices surrounding death.

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