

Web Exclusive

Rent in peace at China's cemeteries

By Zuo Likun (chinadaily.com.cn)
Updated: 2011-04-02 07:11

 [Comments\(0\)](#)  [Print](#)  [Mail](#)  [Large](#) [Medium](#) [Small](#)



A woman tidies chrysanthemums, commonly used for mourning in China, at a flower fair in Jinan, capital of East China's Shandong province, on Monday, March 28, 2011, about a week before Tomb-sweeping Day. [Photo/Xinhua]

*** No eternal rest; burial plots come with 20-year renewal fees**

*** Old habits die hard as China labors to promote eco-burial**

*** Greed lurks in the graveyard, coveting the death industry**

BEIJING - When the heavens send for the soul, the departure is for good. But as for the cinerary urns planted in China's urban cemeteries, the peace lasts no more than 20 years. For anything longer, relatives of the deceased will have to keep paying extra fees.

In accordance with government plans, China's urban cemeteries belong to the service industry and are run as operational businesses. Only those in rural areas are run by public welfare, offering free burial plots.

Debates over urban cemeteries' extra fees, which come on top of exorbitant original plot payments, emerged on the Internet after a few notices of overdue cemetery bills turned up in several Chinese cities.

Take A Poll



- Ever heard of the 20-yr usage cycle?
- Are the renewal fees proper?

In the eastern coastal resort Qingdao, the Centenarian Park cemetery put up a list of questions and answers on its website, in a matter-of-fact way explaining how to renew a lost plot license and when additional fee would be due. A cemetery in Southwest China's metropolitan Chengdu was even more business-like. According to media reports, the cemetery put up a public notice in a local newspaper and spread out the names of 127 souls sleeping in its graveyard whose "management expenses" had come overdue.

The title couldn't be blunter, "Defaulting Customer List."

The timing of such awkward notices has only invited more discomfort as the traditional Tomb-sweeping Day, falling on April 5 this year, was barely days away. The special occasion, set for Chinese to visit cemeteries and pray for their ancestors, was minted an official holiday by the Chinese government five years ago in a bid to revive the sagging heritage of traditional family values.

So, what if an august family rite turns into a sudden refusal at the graveyard?

Both cemeteries stopped short of detailing what the consequence would be if a payment was delayed. In fact, the Qingdao graveyard's Q&A was so sketchy that, when asked how much the additional fee would be, it simply said, "No directive from higher-ups yet."

Stunned relatives soon found another implausible truth. The policy of additional fee collection is hardly new. As a matter of fact, official rules have been around for so long that, at first blush, it is the public's lack of knowledge that seems to be out of place.

The first clue about the policy was hinted at nearly two decades ago, in 1992, in a provisional measure issued by China's Civil Affairs Ministry, which oversees the country's cemeteries and the funeral industry. According to the 1992 provisional measure and subsequent regulations, still effective today, burial plots have "a usage cycle of no longer than 20 years," and "cemetery fee collected once at a time shouldn't be longer than that duration."

Thus, in practice, buyers initially have to ante up the plot expense as well as the first 20 years' cemetery fees.

The rationality of such a cycle span presumes that "20 years generally covers one generation," said Yang Genlai, professor at Beijing Social Administration Vocational College, who wrote dozens of books on China's funeral industry.

It's supposed in the rules that outdated tombs will gradually make room for new ones, especially in a hugely populous country like China where urban land is limited and precious, Yang explained.

Actually, China is not alone in introducing such a practice. In Germany, where graveyard usage usually lasts 20 to 30 years, untended tombs left behind by deceased relatives will be gently moved out for new arrivals, and then mass transferred to a new place where a monument inscribes the special purpose.



LANDMARK REGULATIONS

On Cemeteries

- | | |
|------|--|
| 1992 | Provisional Measures for Administration of Cemeteries |
| 1998 | Circular of Opinions on Further Strengthening Administration of Cemeteries |

On Funerals

- | | |
|------|--|
| 1997 | Regulation for Administration of Funerals |
| 1998 | Explanation of Specific Problems in the Regulation for Administration of Funeral |

Sources: Civil Affairs Ministry Graphic: China Daily Website

But here is the problem: So far no Chinese rules have made clear how to enforce such a highly sensitive recycling measure. As a result, the original plan of "one usage cycle of 20 years" to limit land occupation has in practice soured into "one payment cycle of 20 years" to create income, Yang said.

Although it should be noted that, at a time when many of the tombs in China's cities either have already reached or are about to reach their 20-year limit, most cemeteries have chosen to keep doing maintenance, either out of legal concerns or in consideration of social responsibilities.

"They can't possibly dump the tombs," Yang said.

Rent in peace at China's cemeteries

By Zuo Likun (chinadaily.com.cn)
Updated: 2011-04-02 07:11

 [Comments\(0\)](#)  [Print](#)  [Mail](#)  [Large](#) [Medium](#) [Small](#)



Sacrificial model villas are pictured at a market in Nanjing, capital of East China's Jiangsu province, on Tuesday, March 29, 2011, just a week ahead of Tomb-sweeping Day . [Photo/Asianewsphoto]

Eco-Burial is the Future, But Old Habits Die Hard

Still, the urban cemeteries' lingering stigma of profiting from the dead is irrepressibly off-putting. What piques the public all the more is the fact that relatives of the deceased often have to ante up a large sum of money to buy a grave plot in the first place.

Grave plots priced at upwards of 60,000 yuan are not uncommon in Beijing, almost twice the annual disposable income of its urban residents. In Qingdao, cemetery costs have doubled in the past two years, and luxury mausoleums costing tens of thousands or even a million yuan are not unheard of, said a local paper. The whole

Take A Poll 

- Ever heard of the 20-yr usage cycle?
- Are the renewal fees proper?

send-off would cost much more when mortuary, cremation, transportation and other must-have sacrificial offerings are counted.

The spending style, painfully aggressive sometimes, has a lot to do with China's conservative filial piety doctrine and entrenched feng shui dogma. In the eyes of the older generation, the funeral must be befittingly grandeur to prove a family's love for the deceased, lest one's virtue be in doubt. The tomb must have the right orientation and grand structure, or the family fortune would be threatened. An urn is of no use, since the human body must be kept intact in a coffin for ground burial.

Most people know that those outdated practices don't even remotely fit into the official policy. In a bid to save land and advocate the civic spirit, the Chinese government has banned the popular casket inhumation, requiring instead mandatory cremation and advocating modest funeral ceremonies.

However, old habits die hard. What's more, China's crammed cemeteries, with an alienating veneer of industrialized pipeline, have only stirred people's nostalgia for an idyllic age gone by.



A sprawling graveyard is pictured in Qingdao city, East China's Shandong province on Wednesday, March 30, 2011. [Photo/Asianewsphoto]

In a traditional China, warmer air heralded not only early spring, but also the age-old Tomb-sweeping Day, which, unlike its solemn name, is sort of a field day for family reunions and outdoor hikes. Folks visit temples to pray for their ancestors, bowing amid stinging incense fumes. On the light green hills, people burn joss paper at tomb sites. Firecrackers can be heard as wisps of their white smoke slowly fades into the air.

But in most Chinese cities, firecrackers and joss paper are banned for fear of forest fires. And the hustle and bustle of swarming visitors barely make the graveyard an appropriate place for quiet solace. On Tomb-sweeping Day, roads to and from major cemeteries are jammed with cars, forcing many to reschedule the annual family rite, or simply drop the plan.



Firefighters douse a forest fire in Quxi county of Wenzhou city, East China's Zhejiang province, on Tuesday, March 29, 2011, just a week ahead of Tomb-sweeping Day. The municipal fire department has responded to multiple forest fires since the weekend. [Photo/Xinhua]

The honest-to-goodness truth is, Chinese cities are crowded and cemeteries can't be the terminal for all. That's why the Chinese government has spared no effort in promoting a variety of environment-friendly burials.

After more than a decade of preferential policies, government-subsidized sea burials are gaining more social acceptance in many coastal provinces, such as Liaoning, Shandong, Jiangsu, Fujian and Guangzhou. While in inland regions such as Henan, Hubei and Hunan, innovative funeral services such as burials under trees are another option. Although there is no lack of resistance in some areas, the general trend is more social tolerance across the country.

More innovative forms of burial are put forward around the world. A Swedish company has developed an ecological way to handle a corpse: freeze-dry it, use sound waves to shatter the brittle body into powder, then the compost. You can even plant it in your garden. Susanne Wiigh-Mäsak, founder of Promessa, said her company's method will leave a smaller carbon footprint as cremation burns a lot of fossil fuels.

Her business contracts have reached beyond Europe, into Africa and America. The company has signed agreements with South Korea to bring the practice to Asia for the first time. "The demand in the world is enormously big," she wrote in an email to China Daily.

Indeed, the funeral-related business is quite lively around the world. In Japan, the market had expanded to \$18 billion as of late 2009. In America, death is a \$15 billion a year industry.

Latecomer China is no exception. As of 2007, the country's 1,162 cemeteries had amassed 4.26 billion yuan (\$591 million) in gross annual income, according to the most recent statistics published by a Civil Affairs Ministry's report on China's funeral development in 2010.

Rent in peace at China's cemeteries

By Zuo Likun (chinadaily.com.cn)
Updated: 2011-04-02 07:11



[Comments\(0\)](#)



[Print](#)



[Mail](#)



[Large](#)

[Medium](#)

[Small](#)

Greed Meets Ignorance at Graveyard

But not everybody thinks such a rosy balance sheet is good news. After all, the cemetery is no conventional market.

"It is a place for solace and memory," said Yang, the Beijing professor, who is also a main contributor to the China funeral report.

He pointed out that since funeral ceremonies are connected to personal feeling and can't be tagged with a fixed price, the government should take actions to make sure that bereaved relatives won't be milked for their humanity.

The warning is not unwarranted. In December 2009, the Civil Affairs Ministry, in response to spreading market speculation and scams involving cemetery plots, issued a lengthy tough-worded directive to local bureaus, urging stringent measures to crack down on such shady activities.

A ready example is the notorious Sanhe cemetery in North China's Hebei province.

According to Beijing News' muckraking report in 2006, in the four years up to 2001, over 11,000 people laid out their life savings and even pension money for cemetery plots in Sanhe city, snapping up 45,000 urn pagodas that were said to be certain to rise in value. The Sanhe cemetery, named Spiritual Spring & Spiritual Pagoda, promised investors up to 30 percent annual yields after reselling those pagodas at a premium. Otherwise, the cemetery would buy back the appreciated plots in a year.

Neither came true. The investors, most of whom were retired seniors, quickly found that cemetery plots are by law non-transferrable. But the money had already been sunk. By the end of September 2001, the buying binge in Sanhe city had swelled up to about 210 million yuan (\$17 million at the time).

Thousands of victims in various Chinese cities, from capital Beijing to coastal Qingdao, eastern Tangshan to northeastern Yanbian, set out on a decade-long trek of seeking refunds. During interviews with China Daily reporter, duped investors retold stories of handwringing frustrations after endless lies and salesmen's stunningly innovative tricks that verged on absurdity.

A 68-year-old woman in Beijing, eager to get back her initial 60,000-yuan investment in the Sanhe graveyard, was swindled out of another 90,000 yuan in the eight years after. Once a salesman promised a quick refund after she paid a handling charge, only to tell her later that the plan fizzled because a company van was denied entry into Beijing during the 2008 Olympics. The cemetery even used the promised refund as leverage to sell her an expensive collection of old coins as well as a costly tour of South China that she didn't even use.

The cemetery's audacity caused widespread anger among the victims. After years of sit-ins in front of the Civil Affairs Ministry and the Hebei provincial office in Beijing, many investors, including the Beijing woman, have been able to get back most of their lost money by mid-January, just before China's all-important Spring Festival.

The irony was, the refunds didn't include the 20-year maintenance fee. "What on earth did they

maintain?" the Beijing woman almost laughed on the phone. "There is NOTHING in the grave."

Another victim, 55-year-old Beijing worker Sun Qiulin, was still furious when talking about the Sanhe cemetery, occasionally spilling over his anger to the local government. He used borrowed money to invest 12 years ago. When he got back his money early this year, it was "both hate and joy," a bitter moment of being relieved at last, he said.

However, for a few seniors, the belated news of refunds could only be brought to their tombstones at the graveyard, a place that haunted them all too much in life's twilight.



People visit an urn hall in Beijing, on Friday, April 1, 2011, shortly before the traditional Tomb-sweeping Day.
[Photo/Asianewsphoto]