Cost of Beijing burial plot equals annual income
Too expensive to die

Finding a peaceful resting place for your deceased loved one has become an expensive business in China. In Beijing’s All Buddha Cemetery on the outskirts of the city, a 3-square-meter plot might set you back as much as 1.2 million yuan (180,000 euro). Founded in 1994 on a mountain in Mentougou district, the cemetery offers two types of graveyards. The general one offers plots built and designed in simple rows, with prices ranging from 120,000 yuan (17,800 euro, 0.8 sq m) to 238,000 yuan (35,300 euro, 1 sq m). But in the “artistic” graveyard, where customers choose the exact location and design of the tombs themselves, prices start at 528,000 yuan (78,300 euro, 1.5 sq m). “Beijing has seen a surge in the prices of cemeteries in recent years. The average price of a 1 sq m plot in a general cemetery has increased to around 200,000 yuan (29,650 euro) compared with 60,000 yuan (8,900 euro) for the same kind of burial plot in 2000,” said one female worker surnamed Luo, who has worked at the All Buddha Cemetery for 18 years.

Across the country, the story is similar. The price of no-frills site in Fushou Yuan cemetery in Shanghai’s Qingpu district, for instance, ranges from 150,000 yuan (22,200 euro) to 250,000 yuan (37,000 euro) and a customized artistic plot there can cost up to 500,000 yuan (74,100 euro), according to a research report by China International Capital Corp. (continued on page 2)
According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, 92 percent of Beijing respondents consider cemetery prices are too high. A middle-class cemetery site in the city costs an average 70,000 yuan (10,400 euro), about equal the average annual income in 2013. The cemetery fee accounted for 87.5 percent of all expenses, including funeral home services and cremation. In Beijing, the price of renting a mourning hall can cost from 400 yuan (59 euro) to 3,220 yuan (477 euro), with urns costing anything from 1,000 yuan (148 euro) to more than 100,000 yuan (14,800 euro), the China Daily reports.

CICC estimated China’s funeral industry last year was worth 71.4 billion yuan (10.6 billion euro), and forecast the market will grow at roughly 17 percent until 2017. More than 10 million Chinese people died in 2014, but with an aging population, that is expected to double by 2025-30.

Foreigners who pass away in China usually have their remains repatriated. Wilfried Verbruggen, Director of Roseates, told the China Daily in an interview that the services of the company only amount to about 7,500 yuan (1,100 euro), but total costs of the repatriation can climb to an average of 80,000 yuan (11,900 euro) due to the costs imposed by the local funeral homes. Verbruggen said the job over the past eight years has not been easy, as the company can only operate as a mediator. “We depend on a certain number of licensed funeral homes, which are appointed by the China's National Funeral Association (CNFA), to take care of the main procedures,” such as embalming and storage of the remains. According to the CNFA, which set up a nationwide network for international body repatriation, about 1,800 sets of remains are shipped out of China every year. The country’s funerary industry is state-controlled and offers fixed prices for Chinese nationals. But when it comes to assisting foreigners, fees can increase significantly. For example, the official price for embalming in China is 300 yuan (44 euro). But foreigners pay an average of 8,000 yuan (1,190 euro). For body storage, the average Chinese tariff is around 3 to 4 yuan (0.5 euro) per hour, but for foreigners it can jump to 20 yuan (3 euro), he said.

Foreigners’ options for burial in China are limited. Burials in China are mostly prohibited, although some provinces allow ashes to be buried. But at Shanghai’s Wanguo Cemetery for example, only the remains of foreigners who have made “exceptional contributions” to Chinese society, certified by the municipal government, are accepted.

### Q&A

**When is this year's tomb sweeping period and how many people in Shanghai are expected to visit graveyards?**

The tomb-sweeping period will last from March 28 to April 6 with a peak expected on April 5. More than 8 million Shanghai residents are expected to visit cemeteries, causing huge traffic jams.

**What is the average cost of a funeral in Beijing?**

A recent report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the 101 Institute of the Ministry of Civil Affairs shows that the average cost of a funeral in Beijing has reached 42,837 yuan (6,420 euro), and many residents jokingly complain that they “cannot afford to die”.

**What is the root cause of the high cost of funerals?**

The abnormally high prices for funerals have much to do with the government monopoly of the industry. The companies that provide funeral services are both state agencies and profit-seekers in the market. The monopoly must be broken to make funerals more affordable for ordinary people, according to the Xinhua Daily Telegraph.

**How many World War II Jewish refugees are buried in Shanghai?**

Shanghai has about 3,700 graves in four cemeteries for Jewish refugees but there are no immediate plans to move graves to a new memorial park. In the 1930s and 1940s, about 25,000 Jews took refuge in Shanghai to escape the Nazis.
Policies

Tibet to strengthen protection of sky burials

Legislators in the Tibet autonomous region will draft a regulation to further protect and regulate a traditional Tibetan practice known as sky burial, in which the body of a deceased person is left in the open, exposed to birds of prey that, according to Tibetan belief, carry the remains to heaven. The decision by the Standing Committee of the People's Congress of Tibet aims to strengthen legal protections for the ritual, which is practiced widely on the Tibetan plateau and occupies an important place in regional culture. The move arises from incidents involving tourists in recent years. Aggressive visitors have created problems, particularly for grieving families and burial masters, by taking pictures. “Out of curiosity, many tourists want to witness a sky burial in Tibet. Local people consider this to be disrespectful to their tradition and to the bereaved,” said Tenpa, a guide. To reduce such conflicts and to preserve the traditional rite, the regional government first issued a regulatory notice in 1985, but the need to strengthen it became apparent over the next two decades. A second rule was issued in 2005 prohibiting onlookers from taking photos, filming, recording or reporting for print or broadcast media, or publishing via the internet. A further regulation was passed in 2013. The proposed new regulation, which has yet to be drafted, will set detailed rules on ritual procedures, environmental protection and the registration of funeral masters. The Tibet Civil Affairs Department paid nearly 1 million yuan (150,000 euro) for infrastructure improvements at some large sky burial grounds. Tibet has 1,638 operational sky burial grounds and more than 1,093 sky burial executives, or masters, and managers at the sites, the China Daily reports.

Cremation push brings backlash

 Authorities should not take radical measures to increase the number of cremations as the country prepares to unveil a new regulation on funeral affairs by the end of the year. Li Bosen, head of the 101 Institute of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, a government think tank that specializes in research of funeral affairs, said radical efforts by local authorities to increase the cremation rate has resulted in incidents such as body snatching and elders committing suicide before the funeral reform is carried out. The institute recently released its Report on Funeral Development of China (2014-15). The Ministry of Civil Affairs is targeting a cremation rate of close to 100 percent by the end of 2020. The regulation on funeral affairs, which was last revised 11 years ago, will be difficult to implement, Li said. Zhang Shifeng, head of the department of social affairs at the Ministry of Civil Affairs, said that “the issue of funeral affairs is very controversial in society due to the country's deep-rooted funeral traditions” but that cremation is the inevitable option. The country's cremation rate declined to 49.5 percent in 2012 from 53 percent in 2005 due to resistance from the public, Zhang said. In one of the most high-profile cases, authorities in Henan province launched a project in 2012 to relocate 3.5 million ancestral tombs to make space for farmland, which was met by strong resistance from residents. Zhang said the authorities would continue to push ecological burials that take up as little land as possible. China had 1,784 funeral homes and 4,372 funeral service institutions as of 2013, with a total of 1,506 cemeteries nationwide, according to the Report on Funeral Development of China, the China Daily reports.

China to extinguish funeral pollution

While pollution in China is typically associated with coal-fired power plants or the country’s ever-expanding number of cars, state media attributes at least some of the smog to another source: the burning of human remains. In a country short on land for burial plots, many families have their deceased loved ones cremated, in addition to burning stacks of fake money for them to spend in the afterlife. While particulate matter from funeral pyres may sound like a minor problem when compared with the smoke emanating from the China’s factories, local governments are nevertheless spending millions of yuan to
encourage cleaner disposals of the remains. More than 10 million people died in China in 2014, but with China’s population aging rapidly, the number is expected to double between 2025 and 2030. There are 5,743 crematoriums in China, with each one processing an average of 816 sets of remains per year. Many of the facilities are old and inefficient, resulting in excessive production of dioxins and other pollutants. In addition to spending money to upgrade crematoriums, some local governments are also encouraging environmentally-friendly practices such as tree burials, Xinhua news agency said. In Fujian province authorities last year spent 62.5 million yuan (9.4 million euro) in the cremation cleanup campaign, while Shaanxi and Hebei provinces spent 20 million yuan (3 million euro) and 14.5 million yuan (2.2 million euro), respectively.

CULTURE
New system leads to more organ donations

The creation of a transparent and fair organ donation system in China has led to an increase in donations as attitudes slowly change toward an issue once considered taboo. When the parents and brother of a French student who died while traveling in Hangzhou flew all the way to China and agreed on donating his organs, all the medical staff and volunteers at the hospital in Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang province, were moved to tears. The donated liver, kidneys and lungs finally saved four Chinese lives in February. The donation was conducted based on the 22-year-old’s will. The Frenchman’s parents came to Hangzhou and agreed after learning China had stopped transplanting organs harvested from executed prisoners on January 1, according to Huang Jiefu, director of the China Organ Donation Committee and former vice minister of health. The case of the French students could lead to a surge in voluntary organ donations from Chinese people, who have mostly hesitated to donate organs as they fear the system favors those with power and money, not the needy. According to the China Organ Donation Committee, about 1,200 organs were donated by 381 people in the first two months of the year, double the number during the same period in 2014. The committee expects the total to top 10,000 by the end of the year, up from about 1,700 in 2014. “Organ donation has been operating in a gray area for many years. People didn’t know how to make a donation and there was no national donation system,” says Huang. “But recent data shows people are willing to donate organs if the system is transparent.” According to a China Youth Daily survey of 43,000 people last year, 45 percent of respondents said yes to organ donation, 45 percent said no and the other 10 percent were non-committal. Of those that said no, 64 percent said they refused as they were concerned about having their organs “pooled” with the ones from executed prisoners in a non-transparent system. A regulated organ donation and distribution system organized by the Ministry of Health and the Red Cross Society of China (RCSC) entered trial operations in selected areas in 2010 and expanded to the whole country last year. Seventeen hospitals in Shanghai were authorized for organ collection and transplants in late 2012. More than 190 people have benefited from 70 organ donors in Shanghai since the system was launched. Today, anyone in China can register to donate their organs upon death. Donors have the right to change their mind at any time. Families of donors receive priority in receiving organs.

Dying old woman left for days in field

The fate of an old woman who died after she was left in a field for several days in China has sparked comments online over who should care for the elderly and vulnerable. The dying woman was found lying on the ground wrapped in dirty quilts in a field in Jiangsu province. Photographs were quickly shared on the internet, with many saddened that nobody was caring for her. “Even if her family abandoned her, what about the local government?” one wrote. The local authorities in Pizhou county said in a statement that the woman had died after she was taken to hospital. Police went to the scene after they were told the woman was dying in the field. The woman has not been identified, but it is hoped she may be named after blood samples are checked against a national database.
Eco-friendly burials versus rising costs of burial plots

Shanghai residents are favoring low-cost eco-friendly burials amid a surge in prices with a 1.5-square-meter tomb costing well above 100,000 yuan (15,000 euro) in some cemeteries. The Shanghai Funeral and Interment Service Center said that no new cemeteries were being built and space was running out. With land being gobbled up for commercial and residential development, sites for graves are even harder to come by. This year, more than 1,000 households in Shanghai have paid for an 880 yuan (132 euro) burial, including a cinerary urn that degrades in six months and therefore saves land. Although the urn itself degrades, the names of the deceased are craved on stone tablets, thus allowing families to honor their loved ones. More and more people are going for the ‘green’ burials as their attitude toward burials is changing gradually. The number of people choosing sea burials has also seen an upswing, but there are very few boats available for the purpose. Nearly 110,000 people pass away in Shanghai annually. The families of about 90,000 buy traditional tombs, while others are on waiting lists to have the urn of their loved ones buried, the Shanghai Daily reports.

Rest in peace for less with caskets “Made in China”

Greek Canadian Jim Malamas, 58, who owns a company called ACE Funeral Products, is trying to make a difference in the U.S. funeral casket business, dominated by a few big firms. The three major casket manufacturers that dominate the market sell the U.S.-made Primrose casket for as much as 1,500 dollar (1,400 euro). But Malamas had an almost identical model built in China, advertised it online, and charged 408 dollar (380 euro). It was, after all, only a casket; it just had to look good for one day. By importing from China, Malamas has followed a well-worn outsourcing playbook that has upended markets for American-made goods from electronics to bedroom furniture. Working with four factories outside Shanghai, he imports 40-foot containers holding 64 caskets apiece and sells them to funeral homes and regional distributors for a fraction of the price. There is plenty of potential: in the U.S., caskets are a 1.6 billion dollar (1.5 billion euro) business. Still, ACE’s revenue has been slinking. Where almost every other American industry has failed to keep Chinese exports at bay, the casket sector has succeeded. Through aggressive litigation against importers, xenophobic admonitions to consumers, and good old-fashioned palm-greasing of funeral directors, the big casket manufacturers have made sure that 9 out of 10 Americans go into the ground in boxes made in the U.S. The Big Three companies – Hillenbrand, Matthews International, and Aurora Casket – in 2005 controlled 70 percent of the market. Death is expensive: the average funeral costs 6,460 dollar (6,012 euro), according to the National Funeral Directors Association. A full quarter of that price is the casket.

ACE’s business started well in 2005. Revenue in its first quarter of operations, in 2005, was 60,000 dollar (55,840 euro); it shot to 750,000 dollar (698,000 euro) the next fiscal year and 3 million dollar (2.8 million euro) in 2008. But the casket business has railed against imports since the earliest days of internet sales, claiming imported caskets are inferior. Initially, Chinese casket imports were of low quality. Colors and fabric textures wore off. Poorly packaged caskets were damaged on the two-week journey across the Pacific. But now, however, differences are negligible, Bloomberg Businessweek reports. Today, the U.S. casket industry looks much the same way it did in 2005. Chinese imports are stuck at around 5 percent of the U.S. market. But it may be only a matter of time before the Big Three look to China or other cheap locales for their own production needs. If that happens, ACE and other importers will be fighting over the same suppliers.
THE LAST WORD
● The Shenzhen Evening News in Guangzhou apologized for taking photos of a deceased singer as she lay in a mortuary. The newspaper admitted its reporters took photos of Yao Beina’s cornea-donation surgery after her death. Yao died from breast cancer at a hospital in Beijing aged 33.
● A woman surnamed Sun, from Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang province, suffered a heart attack after a taxi driver slipped a worthless “ghost bank note” in her change. She paid the driver with a 100-yuan (15 euro) bill late at night. The driver gave her 85 yuan in change, including a 50-yuan bill. Later at home, she discovered the 50-yuan bill was ghost money used as offerings to the dead. Upset about by the deception, Sun suffered a heart attack later that night and was admitted to hospital.
● Two men in Mianyang who stole an urn from a public cemetery tried to blackmail the manager, threatening to report the ashes as missing to the deceased man’s family, the Chengdu Business News reports. After stealing the ashes, they asked the cemetery manager for 200,000 yuan (30,000 euro). The manager called police to arrest them.
● A ceremony was held recently at a “martyrs’ park” in Shenyang, Liaoning province, to lay to rest the remains of 68 Chinese soldiers who were killed more than 60 years ago during the Korean War (1950-53). The remains were discovered in South Korea last year and returned to China. The repatriation was the second of its kind after the remains of 437 soldiers were returned last year.
● Beijingers spend an average of 80,000 yuan (12,000 euro) on memorial and burial services for relatives, China Radio International reports. 92 percent of residents thought buying a tomb in a cemetery now cost too much. People were not choosing eco-burials because they believed only traditional burial rituals ensured the deceased rested in peace.

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

Coordination and management of the entire repatriation process of human remains from/to mainland China:

Hospital – Public Security – Consulate – China Funeral Home – Crematory – Airline – Funeral Director at Destination – Insurer – Next of Kin


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