

The Production of Funeral Workers for Urbanizing China

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China's expanding urban funerary sector involves many types of business. There are state-run crematoriums where bodies are cremated and the ashes are placed into cinerary caskets (*guhuihe*, 骨灰盒) and given to family members. Often at the same location are state-run funeral homes where memorial meetings are held just before cremation. Cemeteries where the cinerary caskets are buried have become common around the outskirts of large cities. Small private "one stop dragon" (*yitiaolong*, 一条龙) businesses help families arrange funerals from start to finish, dealing with the larger businesses and state bureaucracies involved with death along the way. There are also factories which make cinerary caskets and other items used during funerals and small businesses which sell funerary products. Two types of people tend to staff these businesses. Most of the small private businesses are run by the rural-urban migrants who undertake most of the dirty, dangerous or despised occupations in contemporary urban China. The large corporations and state owned enterprises, however, tend to hire graduates of the technical school (*da zhuan*, 大专) or now university (*benke*, 本科) programs that specialize in training workers for this industry. Because work for any aspect the funerary industry tends to be stigmatized in China, these graduates also tend to be rural-urban migrants. Their migration, however, has taken the detour of a formal stint at university.

The establishment of tertiary courses for funerary workers began at the Changsha Social Work College (*Changsha Minzheng Zhiye Jishu Xueyuan*, 长沙民政职业技术学院) in 1995.¹ During the 1990s, a history and literature professor with interests in traditional

¹ Much of the information in the following paragraphs was derived from interviews. I conducted interviews in Changsha in October 2017, and did research on the funerary sector in Nanjing and Jinan from 2013-2016. For a written source on funerary studies at the Changsha Social Work College, see Lu (2015).

funerary rites, Wang Fuzi, noticed the increasing number of funeral homes and cemeteries in China's rapidly growing urban sector. He visited many funeral homes and cemeteries around the country and, in 1993, wrote a formal report on establishing a course in funerary studies. He received permission to do so at the secondary specialized level (*zhongzhuan*, 中专) and took in his first class of almost 100 students in September of 1995. The course added a few specialized classes in funerary ritual, presenting and cremating corpses and funerary business management to a large range of general education courses in Chinese, English, history, business management and politics. It also arranged for students to do internships at funerary industry businesses during the summer months. In 1999 the teachers of the course were able to organize themselves into a separate department and in 2000 they upgraded the course from a specialized secondary course to a specialized tertiary course (*zhongzhuan* to *dazhuan*). In the same year they divided the course into two majors—one in funerary ritual technology and management and one in cemetery design (including both landscape and tombstone design). In 2006 they split up the funerary ritual technology and management major into three separate majors—one in funerary service (*binyi fuwu*, 殡仪服务), one in funerary equipment (especially the operation and repair of crematory ovens) and one in embalming and preparing corpses for viewing—to arrive at the present arrangement of four majors in total. In the 20 years between 1995 and 2015, over 5,000 students graduated from its courses. The school currently admits close to 350 students per year. In 2012, the Department of Funerary Studies was upgraded to the School of Funerary Studies (*Binyi Xueyuan*, 殡仪学院) in recognition of the large number of students it was educating. The school is in the process of upgrading the degree from a three-year tertiary short course into a four-year university degree. As the first and by far the largest such program in the nation, the School of Funerary Studies has also been active in accrediting other courses around China, as well as providing teaching materials and textbooks for these courses.

The success of the program can also be seen in the networks of its graduates around the country. Located in Hunan province, the school gets about half of its students from Hunan and the rest from all over the country. Its graduates have set up formal alumni associations in 27 of China's 32 provinces, and act as the top leader or vice leader of more than 300 municipal funerary homes across China. Its students have the opportunity to serve as summer interns in more than 20 funeral homes around China. They work at graveyards, funeral homes, crematoriums, funeral equipment manufacturers and many have set up their own businesses. Often, alumni in charge of hiring new funerary workers call up the School to try lure students to leave for work opportunities before they even graduate. Those that offer internship opportunities for students from the school often hire their interns after they graduate.

The success of the program can be credited to the foresight of Professor Wang, or simply to being in the right place at the right time. The rate of urbanization in China directly correlates to the overall size of the funerary sector as rural people do not need professional funerary services. They have relatives who can serve as ritual specialists and land on which to bury the dead. The fact that China's urbanization has also been associated with rapid economic development has given the funeral services industry a second source of growth. The sector is growing both because the urban population is expanding and because the per capita income the population has to spend on funerals swells each year.

The careers of the following two students are typical. Mr Zhang (a pseudonym) came from a village in Hunan province. His family was poor, so he was attracted to the major for the economic benefits it could provide. He graduated in 1997, when the program offered a specialized secondary degree. He completed a summer internship in a municipal funeral home in Nanjing (a large, relatively wealthy Eastern Chinese city) after his second year and secured a job there after graduation. The job gave him Nanjing citizenship rights, an

indication that his employer was willing to spend a considerable sum of money to sponsor his application for urban citizenship. He worked a series of different positions within the funeral home before rising to management in 2013. When I asked him about discrimination against funerary workers, he emphasized that though some people do discriminate against those working sector, that by behaving in a dignified manner, you could demonstrate that you were a “Quality” person and gain people’s trust most of the time.

Ms Bao (also a pseudonym) came from the Western Chinese city of Wulumuqi (Urumqi). She graduated from the school in 2004, when it was a tertiary program, and was attracted to the major because it offered excellent chances of securing a permanent, high paying urban job. She married a classmate and said that she was one of 11 couples from her class who married. She joked that “people say that in this profession men can’t find wives and women can’t find husbands, so the best solution is to devour (*xiaohua* 消化) each other.” She and her husband both managed to find jobs in her home city, and her husband just passed a test to become a permanent worker there, so now they are both permanent residents in Wulumuqi. In 2012, they had twins.

Two aspects of these brief life histories deserve emphasis. First, in both cases, men from the countryside (Mr Zhang and Ms Bao’s husband) were able to secure permanent citizenship rights in major urban centers. The men secured local citizenship rights through the sponsorship of their employers, indicating that the workplaces that employed them highly valued their services. Second in both cases, an awareness of the stigmatization of funerary workers was internalized.

The stigmatization of funerary workers was, in fact, part of the reason that Professor Wang founded the program during the 1990s. This stigmatization affects the program in two contradictory ways. On the one hand, many professors in the program suggested that by making funerary work into an occupation that requires a university degree, the program raises

the “Quality” (*suzhi* 素质) of the people involved in funerary work. Suzhi is a key concept in contemporary Chinese society. It refers to a sort of overall physical, mental, social, and moral type of quality that I translate as Quality with a capital Q. The government has dedicated itself to “raising the suzhi” of the population and uses the term in many of its policy documents and propaganda campaigns, especially those related to educational programs. People often use the term to discriminate against those whom they feel are below themselves, mocking with the term “low Quality.” Most people also accept that education raises the Quality of those who attain it (Kipnis, 2006, 2007, 2011). So by providing degrees, the program raises the perceived “Quality” of its graduates, thereby reducing stigma. On the other hand, despite its desire to reduce stigma, the program owes its existence to and feeds off of the economic implications of this prejudice. Work in the funerary industry is easy to find not only because the sector is expanding, but also because many urban residents fear the stigma associated with the work. For the same reason, salaries and money making opportunities are relatively high. Students who come to the program are often those with very low test scores on the university entrance exam who could not have gained admittance to any other tertiary program. They are also often from relatively impoverished rural families and find the promise of easy employment after graduation (or in many cases even before graduation) alluring. After graduation, many funerary workers marry other funerary workers so that they will not be subject to stigmatization during familial negotiations over marriage. They also often meet their spouses either at the School of Funerary Studies or through its alumni networks. The school’s alumni associations thus become both socially and professionally important to the school’s graduates, and the school benefits greatly from the contributions of its alumni.

Speculatively, I would argue that the stigma attaching to funerary workers relates to the dynamics of urbanization itself. When I did research in rural north China during the

1980s, I never found those involved in running or organizing funerals to be stigmatized in any way. They were neighbours and relatives who were lending a hand in a time of need. In that part of China, cinerary caskets were buried on agricultural land, with nothing marking the grave except a temporary mound which would be ploughed under when the next crop was planted. At the appropriate occasions, people would burn some spirit money or make a sacrifice to their ancestors in the middle of their fields. No one worried much about ghosts in the fields (Kipnis, 1997). But in the village, both the people doing the funerary work and those being buried were family. In urban settings, not only is the city a society of strangers, but the cemeteries are also full of unknown others. Those working in the funerary industry not only work with the dead of one's own family, but also the dead of complete strangers. In traditional Chinese cosmology, dead spirits who are not treated properly, in either life or death, become malevolent ghosts rather than benevolent ancestors. In urban settings, cemeteries thus become places that are potentially full of ghosts and those that work with dead people are stained with the pollution of ghostly others. James Watson has argued that paid and stigmatised funerary workers were a standardized part of traditional Chinese funerals. But he did his research in a town in peri-urban Hong Kong that was already subject to the pressures of urbanization and modernization (Watson, 1982, 1988a). Susan Naquin suggests that in rural North China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, assistance at funerals for the great majority of non-wealthy farming was provided by unpaid relatives and neighbours rather than paid specialists, while Zhou Shaoming says the same about Eastern Shandong in both the pre- and post-revolutionary periods (Naquin, 1988:, p. 54; Zhou, 2009:, pp.118, 130, 210). The extent to which urbanization mitigates or exacerbates the stigmatization of funerary workers in urban Chinese settings would be an interesting question for future research.