

## Of Strangers and Kin

### *Moral Family and Ghastly Strangers in Urban Sociality*

In a famous essay on the religious landscape of Taiwan during the 1960s, Arthur Wolf (1974) argued that the types of supernatural entities worshipped there (gods, ghosts, and ancestors) mirrored the categories of people salient in people's lives: government officials, strangers, and kin. Gods were like officials in that they possessed the power to greatly alter the life circumstances of families and communities, for both better and worse. Ghosts resembled malevolent strangers who wreaked havoc in the lives of anyone that they came across. Like aggressive and potentially violent beggars, they needed to be appeased just to prevent them from causing harm. Ancestors resembled familial elders who worked for the benefit of their descendants, though they could become angry if neglected. Wolf's discussion of the distinction between ancestors/kin and ghosts/strangers provide an excellent lens for considering the relationship of funerary ritual to the categories of strangers and kin.

Wolf's essay has been discussed by a number of scholars. Three of those discussions relate directly to the category of ghosts and resonate with the topics of this chapter. First, Stephan Feuchtwang (2010) argues that ghosts can be kin as well as strangers. In his analysis, ghosts are dead people who have not been given proper funerary rites and thus do not become ancestors. Feuchtwang suggests that the entire purpose of a properly conducted funeral and burial is to transform the dead into ancestors rather than allowing them to become ghosts. Second, Robert Weller (1987; 1999) points out that in rural Taiwan, in addition to wreaking havoc, ghosts can bring benefits to individuals if worshipped properly. However, transactions with ghosts must be done on a contract basis, benefit an individual rather than a family or community, and are often immoral. Finally, in a book about Chinese urbanization as a transformation from a society of kin to a society of strangers (and, hence, about the importance of the forms of morality that apply to strangers for

modern China), Haiyan Lee (2014, 59–70) notes that urban interactions with ghosts (and strangers) can be spiritual, erotic, and energizing as well as dangerous, and that urbanization itself is often accompanied by a transformation of ghost stories from a depiction of the dangers of the world to a type of entertainment.

This chapter uses death ritual and memorialization as a lens to examine how relationships within families and with strangers have transformed during the process of urbanization. It focuses on the social roles strangers and various types of kin play in life, on the construction of “strangers” and “kin” as categories for thought and social action, and on the role of imagining ghosts in contemporary societies. It sees urbanization not as the simple replacement of a society of kin by a society of strangers, but as a transformation in the places of kin and strangers in our lives, as well as a transformation in our imagination of ghosts. Like Wolf, I argue that there is a strong overlap between the imagination of ghosts and strangers, but I see this overlap as increasing in strength in the process of urbanization rather than as a vestige of a traditional, rural society. Feuchtwang’s arguments about the relationships among ghosts, ancestors, and funerary ritual may accurately reflect traditional rural Chinese society. But I see urbanization as involving a shift in imagining ghosts away from the way that Feuchtwang depicts them. In urbanized China, ghosts seem more like strangers than like kin who have not been treated properly. From Weller, I borrow the insight that urbanization is often accompanied by increasing commercialization and a deepening division of labor, both of which increase the importance of strangers and contractual economic relations in our lives, but I do not see these relationships as necessarily amoral. From Lee, I build on the insight that ideas about ghosts also transform in the process of urbanization and that this transformation resonates with the roles that strangers come to play in our lives.

#### TRANSFORMING KINSHIP AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN URBAN CHINA

Much has been written about how family life in China is changing as it urbanizes.<sup>1</sup> Household size is decreasing, birth rates have fallen, age of marriage is rising, and patriarchal, patrilineal family structures are losing their importance. While these broad trends are accepted by most scholars, the causes of these changes, as well as their implications for social relations, childcare, and gender relations, and the way these changes differentially affect families of different class and social backgrounds, remain issues for debate. For example, while some scholars emphasize the importance of conjugal relationships, love marriages, and a culture of dating and individualism, others point out that the extremely high cost of housing in China’s large urban areas gives parents an important role to play in the lives of their adult children. Since they must be relied upon for the financial resources to purchase

housing, parents often have a voice in decisions about who to marry. Moreover, if the family is not wealthy, and cannot afford separate apartments for grandparents and parents, three-generation households are not uncommon. Finally, grandparents often provide childcare for their grandchildren, so that both husband and wife can work to pay off the mortgage. Class and social variation is important here. Families that have migrated to cities from the countryside differ from families that have a multigenerational history of residing in the same urban area, and wealthy families have different familial strategies than impoverished ones.

While some scholars debate the extent to which the birth control policy or “modernization factors” are the primary cause of China’s rapid reduction in birth rates (Whyte, Wang, and Cai 2015), it is clear that family life in urban China has been shaped by government policy. From 1980 to 2016, urban China was under a one-child policy. As a consequence, the one-child family has become a social norm. Rather than simply an overall low fertility rate, in which the average is about one child per couple, but some couples have no children, some have one, some have two, and a small minority have three or more, in urban China almost every couple has exactly one child. Moreover, in urban China retirement ages are relatively young, usually under sixty, so that grandparents have much time to devote to their families. In addition, expectations for marriage are high. Through the institution of “fake” marriages, even the majority of gay and lesbian urbanites are able to present themselves as belonging to a “normal” family. The 4:2:1 family structure, in which four grandparents and two parents dote on one grandchild, is “normal” both in the statistical sense and in the expectations of urban dwellers. As was the case for Mr. Wang, many of the people in their late seventies and eighties during the second decade of the twenty-first century have several siblings and children, but one grandchild per child.

For anthropologists, kinship is an expansive social category. It includes a broad range of social relationships beyond those based in birth and marriage. Some anthropologists thus prefer the word “relatedness” rather than “kinship.” The analysis of relatedness includes both those who count as “family members” and those, who, technically, do not. In China, such a conception of kinship is bolstered by the fact that many people use kin terms like auntie, uncle, sister, and brother to address people who are not literally their kin. Fei Xiaotong (1992), perhaps the most famous Chinese anthropologist of all, conceptualized Chinese social relations as a series of concentric circles; starting with the self and close relatives, one’s social network branched out in rings to include ever more distant friends and acquaintances. In constructing these networks, sharp lines were never drawn between kin and non-kin. But in some contexts, the distinctions between kin and non-kin matter, and both the shape of the networks of urban Chinese and the importance of the distinction between kin and non-kin have evolved as China has urbanized.

Two shifts in the way China is governed have had a heavy influence on general patterns of relatedness in urban China since 1978. First has been the reduction

in importance of the work unit. During the Maoist era, work units structured all aspects of their employees' lives, including housing. As people lived in housing blocks alongside those who worked in the same work unit, and as school districts were often aligned with housing arrangements (some schools were even directly controlled by the work units themselves), the categories of colleague, neighbor, and classmate often overlapped and community relationships could be as close and complicated as kinship relationships. Now that work units have become less important and housing has become a matter of private ownership, relationships within apartment blocks have become less important. Neighbors often do not know each other. Though wide-ranging social networks can be important for finding jobs, the distinction between kin and other forms of social relationships has increased in importance because the stability of communities has declined and few other than kin maintain lifelong relationships. Moreover, the demise of the work unit as a provider of so many goods and services has led urbanites to rely on commercial businesses, leading to an increased role for strangers and acquaintances in everyday life.

Yet the legacies of the work-unit era have not completely disappeared. There are still a few large employers that act in ways similar to traditional work units, including universities and some other government sector employers. Moreover, for urbanites of Mr. Wang's age, employment during the work-unit era resulted in a wide array of privileges, including generous pensions and apartment ownership, that influence their relationships with their children and raise issues of inheritance.

The second factor shaping social relations in urban China today has been a loosening of the household registration policy and the resulting high rate of rural-urban migration. Chinese cities are increasingly populated by people who were neither born nor raised there. In many cases the relationship of these people to the cities where they live is tenuous. They do not hold local household registrations. They do not belong to networks of classmates who graduated from the same local schools, though some might form networks of people who migrated from the same place. Generally speaking, if such people die in the city, their funeral will not be held there. Overall, both the demise of the work unit and rise of migration have dis-embedded Chinese urbanites from previously existing communities. Especially for those unable to form new communities in urban areas, the absence of non-kin-based networks or communities makes the distinction between family members and non-family members more important.

#### RELATEDNESS IN DEATH RITUAL

The study of how funerary ritual constructs family contributes nuance to our understanding of relatedness. Urban funerals are increasingly family affairs rather events for a community. In some western Chinese cities, as well as places where

work units remain important, urban funerals can become community events. Work units or well-organized communities set up entertainment tents outside of apartment blocks during the period between a death and the funeral; work units may also organize transportation for large groups of colleagues to go to the funeral home. But in cities like Jinan and Nanjing, several one-stop dragon entrepreneurs told me that funerals increasingly only involve small groups of relatives. Without a work unit organizing the event, the only people who attend are those invited by the children of the deceased, and these are usually only close relatives. Moreover, as Chinese urbanites live longer lives, they become more socially isolated. Their friends, siblings, and spouses might be too old and frail to leave the home and attend a funeral. In this way, Mr. Wang's funeral was typical.

The dynamics of funeral attendance in urban areas reverse those of rural China, both past and present. In rural China, the older a deceased person, the more likely that a large number of people would attend the funeral. In rural China only those who were younger in a genealogical sense (belonging to a younger generational cohort according to lineage systems of generation names) would attend funerals. But because the manner of calculating genealogical relatedness could be quite expansive, and because members of extended families often live in the general vicinity of the deceased, rural funerals for elder people could be quite well-attended events. In some rural communities, the number of people attending a funeral reflects the prestige and importance of the family of the deceased. Invitations are not required to attend a funeral, or at least to pay respects to the family of the deceased before the funeral, and some families arrange activities to attract acquaintances and even strangers to the funeral. There could be stages with opera performances. Even more surprisingly, in some rural Taiwanese burial processions, "electric flower cars" (motorized stages like those used in parades) with strippers on them follow the line of cars to a cemetery where the deceased will be buried. Attracting a crowd as well as entertaining the ghosts are the stated functions of the performances.<sup>2</sup>

While I did not come across any funerals with strippers in the course of my research, I did hear about several well-attended funerals in villages on the outskirts of Nanjing. In one case a rural family kept the body of their deceased father at home in a refrigerated casket for five days while friends, relatives, and well-wishers dropped by to pay their respects. Everyone who came gave a cash gift (which was recorded in the gift register) and was treated to a banquet. A stage for opera performances was set up in the courtyard of one of the father's five children's houses, while banquet tables were set up in the other homes. The one-stop dragon entrepreneur who organized the event told me that there were more than a hundred banquet tables, each seating up to ten people, and that over the five-day period several thousand people consumed more than five thousand meals. The five children and their spouses had all set up successful businesses and had widespread social networks as a result. Though this funeral may have been an

extreme case, three one-stop dragon entrepreneurs who worked in both rural and urban Nanjing told me that rural funerals were generally larger than urban ones. At the least, most people who lived in a given village would attend the funerals of all elderly people who passed away there.

In urban China too, exceptionally privileged or famous people might hold well-attended funerals. All of the urban funeral parlors I visited had at least one or two large rooms designed for such funerals. In 2014, a one-stop dragon entrepreneur told me:

Three types of people have large funerals. First are important government officials who have appointed many underlings. Then all of the people this person appointed and their family members are likely to come to the funeral. The second is someone who currently holds considerable power in either government or a large business, whose father or mother passes away. Then all of the people who wish to network with the person in power, no matter how weak their relationship is with that person, will try to come to the funeral and give a cash gift or at least present a flower wreath. The third type are academics who had many students and trained many successful people. Then all of the students of the academic will come to the funeral.

In the case of famous professors, universities often will often work with the family of the deceased to help organize the funeral. Through its union (工会), it will pay for most of the expense of the funeral, publicize the funeral to all staff at the same university, invite staff members to attend, and even arrange transportation from the university to the funeral. As I was affiliated with various universities during the course of my research, I also attended several funerals in this way. Once the funeral is publicized by the university, former students who work outside of the university will learn of it and publicize it to their networks on social media. At one of the university-organized funerals I attended, I counted over 130 people.

For high-level cadres who work in government work units, funerary committees are in charge of determining the level of grandeur and relative size of the funeral. For powerful Party members whose parents pass away, funerary committees would not be involved if the parents themselves were not officials. But, often enough, powerful cadres are also the children of powerful officials. Under Xi Jinping, there has been an emphasis on restricting the size of such funerals to prevent corruption. In Nanjing, funeral home workers told me that spending on funerals for mid- to high-ranking cadres dropped from about 200,000 yuan in 2012, to about 50,000 yuan in 2014 (Xi came to power in 2013; an average funeral cost in the range of 10,000–20,000 yuan during that period). Demand for the largest rooms at the funeral parlor also dropped. In 2016, the government further tightened the regulations surrounding the family rituals of Party members. In the city of Harbin, for example, funerals for the parents of Party cadres were supposed to be limited to one hundred people, all of whom had to be relatives (Piao 2016; Zhao 2016).

The overall trend towards smaller funerals in urban areas reflects the declining importance of broader forms of community in urbanizing China, but it also reveals

several nuances and inverted patterns within this overall trend. Particular forms of community can still be important and funerals can be platforms for building these communities. These include the communities related to “lineages” of professionals as defined by students taught by a particular professor, the communities formed by still intact work units, and the communities formed by villages-in-the-city and villages on the outskirts of urban areas. These villages are often empowered during processes of urbanization; villages-in-the-city can receive forms of compensation which transform them into corporate entities (see Kipnis 2016, 52–62, 174–180), while villages on the fringes of cities may experience increasing chances to develop real estate and other business opportunities. Finally, many people would like to construct relationships with powerful people in business or government. The anti-corruption policies of Xi Jinping have the effect of limiting these networks for the families of Party cadres, but the incentives for constructing these relationships remain. Ironically, the policies of Xi may have the effect of making social relationships for high-ranking cadres resemble those of more ordinary people. For both groups, the demise of various forms of community mean that very few social relationships occupy the space between kinship and the relationships among acquaintances and strangers. In this sense, the stranger/kin dichotomy is reinforced. For such people, as was the case for Mr. Wang, all those who attend funerals are family.

Funerary ritual also tends to present familial relationships in patriarchal ways. It reinforces age and gender hierarchies. Such hierarchies may not be so important in many aspects of urban life, but funerary ritual is a time for respecting elders, and, hence, certain patriarchal arrangements that are imagined as tradition. Most one-stop dragon entrepreneurs are men from the countryside, and they will usually try to arrange those attending a funeral to stand and bow to the deceased in age-ordered groupings, with the eldest children going first. For roles involving carrying items to the gravesite, or performing particular ritual actions at the grave or with the cinerary casket, sons and their sons are usually chosen over daughters, granddaughters, and the sons of daughters. However, many urban families confound typical patriarchal arrangements. There may be daughters and no sons, sons who produced no grandsons, or assertive elder daughters who insist on age-order groupings that place them above their younger brothers. Some one-stop dragon entrepreneurs also give advice on gendered forms of taboo and ritual preference. For example, at one burial ceremony I witnessed, the family, following the instructions of a one-stop dragon entrepreneur, had brought bananas, dumplings, and a tofu dish to be used as sacrificial offerings on the grave. After the interment, the entrepreneur told the daughters of the deceased to take the bananas home and eat them, and the son to consume the dumplings. These foodstuffs, now blessed with the ancestor’s energy, would be respectively most beneficial for female and male reproductive health.

Social media (Wechat) feeds from funeral homes likewise provide gendered advice. One described how to properly visit graves over Qing Ming. It instructed

families visiting graves to bow in the following order: eldest son, eldest daughter, second son, second daughter, and so on. It also urged women not to wear brightly colored clothes when visiting cemeteries and stated that pregnant women should never visit graves. Finally, when registering the names of the families who give “white envelopes” at funerals, or writing the names of those who give flower wreaths at funerals on couplets that are attached to the wreaths, it is often the name of the ritually designated “head of household” that is used, and usually that is the eldest man in the family.

Weeping also constructs kin relations in a gendered way. In some parts of rural China, families paid professional mourners to attend funerals and sob loudly. In most parts of rural China, weeping at funerals was considered to be a female responsibility. In urban China, however, loud or excessive crying is considered uncivilized. Buddhist priests say that excessive sobbing is likely to make the soul of the deceased too attached to this world, and unable to make the transition to Western Paradise. In the urban funerals and interment rituals I witnessed, daughters would often visibly cry at their mother’s or father’s funeral, but not very loudly. I did not see any urban men cry at funerals.

#### KINSHIP ON TOMBSTONES

Another way of understanding how kinship is changing in China and how kinship is affected by urbanization is by examining tombstones and wall burial plaques in cemeteries. These forms of memorialization display whose ashes are buried together in the same place, and usually list the names of the descendants of those whose ashes are buried. Tombstones can also pay homage to the deceased for being loving or caring fathers, mothers, grandparents, aunts, or uncles.

Contemporary tombstones reveal a few general patterns, which were exemplified in the case of Mr. Wang. Most people are buried with their spouses, on tombs that give the names of all of their children, their children’s spouses, and their grandchildren. Names are carved vertically, with the man’s name on the right of tombstone or plaque as you face it and the woman’s on the left. As was the case with Mr. Wang, in some regions and cemeteries, the surnames of the deceased are painted in red rather than black, to indicate that the family lives on even though the individual has passed away. These patterns indicate a general shift away from traditional patterns of patrilineal Chinese kinship to a more bilateral method of reckoning who belongs to one’s family. On the tombstone, sons, daughters, sons-in-law, and daughters-in-law all have equivalent positions. Paternal grandsons, maternal grandsons, and granddaughters through either sons or daughters likewise have equivalent positions. The names of deceased women use their natal surnames, and these surnames are often painted in red, which makes the tombstone as much a homage to the family indicated by the wife’s surname as to the family indicated by the husband’s.





FIGURE 14. Tombstone with names painted in red and black. Photo: Andrew B. Kipnis.

But despite a shift towards bilateral kinship, a close reading of tombstones suggests that traditional Chinese patriarchy still leaves a legacy. First, placing the man's name on the right gives him the hierarchically upper position. Much rarer, but more interesting, are those cases where a threesome of a man with two wives are buried together. On such tombstones the names of all of the children and grandchildren by both of the wives are typically displayed. Such families exist either because the man had two wives before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when polygyny was legal, or because a man's first wife died at a relatively early age and he remarried and also had children by a second wife. As might be expected, such tombstones are more prevalent in historically older sections of graveyards (because of the end of legal polygyny in 1949), and more prevalent in rural cemeteries than urban ones. But in my examination of close to ten thousand tombstones in many cemeteries, I have never seen a tombstone over a grave shared by a wife and both of her husbands. While the Han-dominated regions of China never practiced polyandry, there both were and are many cases in which a woman's first husband dies and she remarries a second man. Indeed, widowed women remarrying are probably almost as common as widowed men doing so, and I even know of several cases in which women had children with both their first and second husbands. But to memorialize a woman as having had two husbands, or to list the children she had by her first husband and second husband as all belonging to the same family, define "family" in ways that are too scandalous to permanently carve into memory on a tombstone. Such a form of memorialization would violate basic principles of patrilineal familial formation.

Though most people are buried with a spouse, a substantial minority are not. This is because either they were not married at the time of death or because the

living spouse chooses to leave open the option of being buried separately. Many surviving spouses who plan on being buried with their partners—women more often than men—will have their names carved on the tombstone but left in red. In a section of a working-class cemetery in which people who passed away during the 1990s had their ashes buried, I counted eighty-one tombstones with a dead husband and the name of a still-living wife, but only twenty-two with a dead wife and a still-living husband. In a section of the same cemetery with people who passed away roughly a decade later, I counted 153 tombstones with a dead husband and a still-living wife, but only seventy-five with a dead wife and a still-living husband. Each of the two graveyard sections had approximately eight hundred tombstones in total. As might be expected, there are more tombstones with surviving spouses in the newer section, but the changing ratios of husbands to wives can be interpreted in several ways. First, men die before their wives more often than women die before their husbands. According to World Bank data available online, in China as a whole during 2016, 88 percent of women survived to the age of sixty-five, but only 84 percent of men.<sup>3</sup> I suspect that this fact accounts for some but not all of the disparity. Second, the cemetery workers I asked about this phenomenon suggested that men whose wives have passed away are considering remarriage more often than women whose husbands have passed away. I find this suggestion quite reasonable. To be buried with one's spouse suggests a form of permanent union that potential new partners might find objectionable. We should note, however, that even if men consider remarriage more often than women, men do not necessarily remarry at greater rates than women. Remarriage takes a man and a woman, and, in most cases I know of, remarriage involves couples in which both members were married once before.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the decline in the ratio of the number of tombstones with a surviving wife to those with a surviving husband (81:22, or nearly 4:1, from the 1990s, reducing to 153:75 or just over 2:1 during the 2000s) could indicate that preferences for remarriage are becoming more gender-balanced.

During the imperial period before 1911, widows in China were actively encouraged not to remarry. Women who lived many years as a widow and then died without ever having remarried could be memorialized as “chaste widows.” While the government no longer encourages this practice, and while contemporary women remarry almost as often as contemporary men, idealizations of proper behavior for women seem to have had a lasting, but perhaps diminishing influence on practices of memorialization. Complementing the data from tombstones with couples' names on them are data from tombstones with just one person buried. In the two cemetery sections discussed above, I found fifty graves for a single woman, but only twenty-nine for solitary men. Many of these tombstones listed the names of the children of the deceased individual, but not his or her spouse. In a wall burial section of the Garden of Merit, I counted ninety-five plaques with the name of a solitary woman, but only sixty-eight for a solitary man. In short, women are more likely to be buried without a partner than men, and only men can be buried with two partners.

In addition to hints about gender relations and patterns of remarriage, cemeteries reveal the central place of children in contemporary Chinese families. During the imperial period, children were almost never memorialized. Classical ritual texts suggest that children who died before the age of eight should receive no funerals, while older children were to receive limited funerals. In practice, most poorer people simply abandoned the corpses of young children and babies in open fields to be eaten by animals. Though Confucian scholars sometimes criticized the practice, many rural people felt that dead babies or children harbored fearful spirits that would return to the family if the children were given a proper burial. At the end of the Qing dynasty, some officials constructed “baby towers” where people could place the bodies of deceased infants. These towers could accommodate thousands of small corpses in deep pits with a tower constructed on top. Though they offered no place to memorialize the names of the deceased and were not the site of any ritual, they kept animals away from the corpses (for more on baby towers and the late-imperial treatment of dead infants see Snyder-Reinke 2019).

In an extremely poor country where the majority of children died before reaching maturity, it is perhaps not that shocking that dead children were treated this way.<sup>5</sup> But over the twentieth century, China has undergone a demographic transition. Many fewer children are born, almost all of them survive, and the death of a child has become the most severe form of tragedy that a family can face. Yunxiang Yan (2016) calls the central place of children in contemporary Chinese households “descending familism.” The 4:2:1 family structure makes these sentiments especially important for urban households. Now some of the most elaborate tombstones in Chinese cemeteries are reserved for children. They can contain carvings of toys and etchings of children’s characters from popular culture, as well as epitaphs declaring the everlasting love of the parents and other relatives who cared for them. In cemeteries like the Fu Shou Yuan, graves for children are given a separate section of the cemetery (see figure 11 in chapter 3). What is so striking in the Chinese case is the way that these forms of memorialization completely reverse the customs of a pre-urbanized, pre-demographic transition China. They vividly illustrate both the continuing importance of family in urban China, and the shift of the symbolic center of contemporary families from the ancestor to the child. Such a reorientation also speaks to the simplification of familial structures that has occurred during the post-Mao era. Many people could be descended from a single ancestor. Consequently, conducting funerary rites for an extremely elderly person could involve a large extended family or even an entire community. Families centered around a single child are much smaller.

A final trend observable in a minority of cemeteries is a rise in individualism. While some analysts describe rising individualism as a China-wide phenomenon (see, for example, Yan 2010), in the cemeteries I visited, individualism on tombstones existed only in a few cases in the most elite graveyards, though it did seem to be a rising trend there. In non-elite graveyards, almost everyone was buried

with someone else. Single people were often buried with another single person from the same family—an aunt with a niece, for example. Sometimes two men could be buried with a woman, but they would not be her two husbands. Rather it would be a husband, a wife, and a single brother of the husband. When an individual was buried alone, the tombstones would always list the relatives who grieved the deceased and had paid for the burial and tombstone. Finally, as described above, many tombstones of individual people would still leave the surname of the deceased person in red, implying that their family lived on and framing the life of the deceased as one of sacrifice and devotion to the family cause. But in elite graveyards, I not only noticed more single burials, but also counted that the number of single burials increased from about 3 percent to 10 percent when comparing graveyard sections from the 1990s and the 2000s. Moreover, among those buried after 2015 in the Garden of Merit, I even noticed a few wall burial plates that had nothing inscribed but the name of the person buried there. The plate gave no indication that the person had ever belonged to any family. In short, memorialization is overwhelmingly a family affair, especially for lower- and middle-class people. Individualized memorialization, however, has become a small but growing trend among the elite.

#### STIGMATIZED STRANGERS IN THE FUNERARY INDUSTRY

As urbanization proceeds, as commercialism becomes the predominant form of economic exchange, and as family structures evolve and reduce in size, strangers come to play a larger role in the average person's life. Such is particularly the case in the funerary industry. Rather than being directed and enacted by family members, the ritual is entrusted to the strangers who work in funeral homes, crematoriums, cemeteries and one-stop dragon businesses. Not only has urbanization in China allowed for the rise of this entirely new industry, it also has given birth to the business of training and certifying workers for this sector.

Most of the small private businesses in the funerary sector are run by the rural-urban migrants who undertake the majority of the dirty, dangerous, or despised occupations in urban China. The large cemeteries and state-owned funeral homes, however, tend to hire graduates of the technical school (大专) or, now, university (本科) programs that specialize in training workers for this sector. Because work for any aspect of the funerary industry tends to be stigmatized, these graduates also tend to be rural-urban migrants. Their migration, however, takes a detour through a formal stint at a university.

The establishment of tertiary courses for funerary workers began at the Changsha Social Work College (长沙民政职业技术学院) in 1995.<sup>6</sup> During the 1990s, a history and literature professor with interests in traditional funerary rites, Wang Fuzi, noticed the increasing number of funeral homes and cemeteries in China's

rapidly growing urban areas. 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 (中专) and took in his first class of almost one hundred 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. 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 (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 twenty years between 1995 and 2015, over five thousand students graduated from its courses. As of 2017, the school was admitting close to 350 students per year. In 2012, the Department of Funerary Studies was upgraded to the School of Funerary Studies (殡仪学院), in recognition of the large number of students it was educating. In 2017, the school was also in the process of upgrading the degree from a three-year tertiary short course to a four-year university degree. As the first and by far the largest such program in the country, 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 strength of the program can 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 twenty-seven of China's thirty-two provinces, and act as the top leader or vice leader of more than three hundred municipal funeral homes across China. Its students have the opportunity to serve as summer interns in more than twenty funeral homes around China. They work at graveyards, funeral homes, crematoriums, and 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 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. The fact that China's urbanization has also been associated with rapid economic development has given the funerary 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 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 in the sector, 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 eleven 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 (消化) each other." She and her husband both managed to find jobs in her home city, and her husband had just passed a test to become a permanent worker there, so now they are both permanent residents of 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 their workplaces highly valued their services. While not all rural-to-urban migrants working in the funeral industry can secure urban citizenship rights, success in this regard is more common for funerary sector workers than for migrants working in other sectors. Second, both had internalized an awareness of the stigmatization of funerary workers. A study of funerary sector workers in Anhui province concluded that this stigma leads to widespread psychological problems for those working in the sector (Ren 2017).

A third example, this time of a one-stop dragon entrepreneur who never received any formal training, likewise reveals the dynamics of stigmatization and upward mobility. Mr. Cao came from a village on the outskirts of Yancheng, a



mid-sized city in Jiangsu province about 250 kilometers from Nanjing. His father had been a lineage elder who arranged funerals for family members in the same village for free. During the 1980s, the father started helping distant relatives who lived in Yancheng with their funerals, often receiving gift payments in return. The work developed into a small business and the son was brought in to help during the mid-1990s. In 2002, the younger Mr. Cao decided to try to his luck in Nanjing. At first the Nanjing municipal government considered his business to be technically illegal; the state-run funeral home and work units were supposed to be in charge of arranging funerals. Nevertheless, Mr. Cao got some business by passing out business cards to nurses in hospitals, but he was not willing to risk renting a shopfront or advertising to the general public. As more and more work units went out of business, however, a larger percentage of people had no one to help arrange their funeral, and Mr. Cao's business boomed. By 2006 he was arranging close to six hundred funerals a year. He hired relatives from his hometown to help him with the business, bought two apartments in Nanjing, and, as the owner of urban apartments, was able to formally transfer his household registration to Nanjing. In 2012, the municipal authorities acknowledged the legitimacy of his line of work, and he began renting a shopfront for his business so he could display the cinerary caskets, longevity clothes, and other funerary paraphernalia he was selling. In 2016, he rented a more expensive shopfront, completely remodeled the interior, and moved into the upgraded facilities. Despite his successes, Mr. Cao has also felt the stigma associated with his occupation. He said that soon after he moved to Nanjing, he learned not to attempt to shake hands with any of his customers, as many of them shrunk away. He has never become friends with any of his former customers. He added that he never told his neighbors at his apartment building in Nanjing what he did for a living, and told his daughters that if anyone asked about their father's occupation, they should say that he was in the restaurant business. Despite moving his household registration to Nanjing, he kept his daughters in school in Yancheng to insulate them from the stigma of the family business. After they graduated from high school, he brought them to Nanjing and helped them get jobs in the real estate sector. Finally, Mr. Cao said that since he did not personally handle dead bodies, people did not discriminate against him as much as they did against people who worked in the funeral homes and crematoria.

The stigmatization of funerary workers was part of the reason that Professor Wang founded the program in Changsha during the 1990s. By making funerary work into an occupation that required a university degree, he hoped to raise the "quality" of the people involved in funerary work, thereby diminishing their stigma. As described in the last chapter, quality is a key concept in contemporary Chinese society. The government has dedicated itself to "raising the quality" 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

them with the term “low quality.” Most people also accept that education raises the quality of those who attain it. So Professor Wang’s strategy was not illogical.

However, 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.

#### STRANGERS, STIGMA, GHOSTS, AND THE IDEALIZATION OF FAMILY

Why are workers in the funerary industry stigmatized? A common anthropological answer would be that funerary workers are contaminated by the pollution of death (Bloch and Parry 1982). As a generalization, such an answer may be correct, but it does not explain how this pollution was managed differently when funerals were conducted by relatives. My speculations in this area return to the relationships among ghosts and strangers, as well as ideas about family and strangers in a rapidly urbanizing society.

In the last chapter, I suggested that the segregation of the living from the dead increases the fear of death, dead bodies, and ghosts in urban settings. But in addition to sheltering us from experiencing death and dead bodies, the segregation of the dead into the spaces of cemeteries also makes visits to the graves of one’s own dead relatives into occasions when one must pass near the graves of complete strangers. When I did research in rural China during the 1980s, in a village where people buried their ancestors in the fields where they worked, I never heard stories about ghosts in the field (Kipnis 1997). But then and there, all of the people buried in the fields were considered to be ancestors. In urban settings, not only is the city a society of strangers, but the cemeteries are also full of dead strangers. The presence of unknown dead people makes cemeteries spookier than agricultural fields, even if people are also buried in the fields. References to the spookiness of cemeteries come in many forms in urban China. During the funeral of Mr. Wang, Mr. Chen formally introduced Mr. Wang to his new “neighbors” in the cemetery.



He also directed all of the participants in the funeral to step over fire at the end of the funeral, to counter the “Yin energy” of the cemetery they were leaving. The spookiness also stigmatizes workers in the funerary sector, who handle both the dead people of one’s own family and those of strangers. A comparison with sexuality resonates: women who have sex with their husbands are looked upon as normal, moral, upright citizens, while women who have sex with strangers for money are looked upon as degenerate prostitutes.

James Watson (1982; 1988a) has argued that paid and stigmatized 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. Susan Naquin (1988, 54) 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 households was provided by unpaid relatives and neighbours rather than paid specialists, while Zhou Shaoming (2009, 118, 130, 210) says the same about Eastern Shandong in both the pre- and post-revolutionary periods. I suspect that urbanization exacerbates the stigmatization of funerary workers, though there may also have been some regional diversity in the ways in which funerary rites were conducted in China.

In the categorization of Arthur Wolf, we could surmise that working with ancestors (that is, dead people in one’s own family) contaminates the body less than working with ghosts (dead strangers). But, with reference to Feuchtwang, we would also need to acknowledge that the very meaning of being a ghost evolves. In traditional rural China, fearsome ghosts and spirits might be one’s own kin who were not treated fairly in life or not given proper funerals. The babies who were thrown into baby towers or left for the animals in the fields were one type of fearsome spirit. In contemporary urban China, dead children receive top-grade funerals; it is only strangers who become ghosts. Moreover, the dead of urban cemeteries might be haunting ghosts even though they have had funerals. Strangers cannot be relied upon to either treat family members well in life or conduct their rituals properly.

Note also the construction of the categories of family and strangers in these conceptions of ghosts. In traditional Chinese society, one’s extended family constituted most of one’s social universe. But in such a society, or in a society that is imagined in this fashion, both good and evil would have to be located within the social universe of the extended family. Family members could become either harmful ghosts or benevolent ancestors. Familial relations themselves could be both good and bad. In contrast, in contemporary urban China, familial elders always become ancestors. While children who die before their time might not be considered ancestors, they at least become spirits who represent only the familial love that was devoted to them and the joy that they brought to the lives of family members. Evil and conflictual, exploitative relationships are imagined as

occurring only with strangers (and those strangers who have become ghosts). As Robert Weller suggests, ghosts can help you gain fortune by successfully exploiting strangers, but not to enjoy harmonious relationships within your own family. Between 2017 and 2019, I often asked groups of Chinese students about ghost stories. While the students had many stories they could tell, none of the students I asked either told or had even heard of a ghost story in which the ghost was one of their own dead relatives. To depict a deceased relative as a ghost would imply that one's own family was a site of evil, a blasphemy against the sacred value of family.<sup>8</sup> The idealization of family and demonization of ghosts is a second way in which the process of urbanization dichotomizes the categories of family and strangers. Not only does the shrinking of forms of community beyond close family members make the distinction between kin and non-kin more clear, but the distinction between benevolent and exploitative relationships is also imagined as corresponding to the distinction between kin and strangers. In the social imaginary of funerary ritual, cemeteries, and memorialization at least, family is moral, while strangers are ghostly.

In urban settings, ghost stories narrate ghosts who harm strangers. Sometimes they are taken seriously. In the last chapter, we saw how the location and visibility of funeral homes affected real estate values in Hong Kong. But funeral homes are not the only macabre influence on real estate there. In addition, apartments, homes, or sometimes even entire apartment buildings where murders, suicides or unexplained accidental deaths have occurred rent and sell for discounted prices. There are numerous online databases that help real estate shoppers keep track of these places, known as “haunted dwellings” (凶宅). Like the spirits of deceased children who were thrown into baby towers, the ghosts who reside in haunted dwellings are a source of recurring forms of bad fortune. They speak to or possess the strangers who come to live in the haunted place in order to convince the new occupants to commit the same actions that led to their own downfall. But instead of harming members of the family into which they were born, these ghosts harm strangers. The prices for haunted houses are often 20 percent lower than for other houses; in some extreme cases they can be 50 percent lower.<sup>9</sup> In addition to haunted dwellings, there are also haunted places in Hong Kong that are associated with sites of mass death, where natural disasters or wartime executions occurred (see, for example, B. Chan 2016).

Of course the ghost stories themselves were often told in a playful manner, and most people I spoke to would not admit to believing in ghosts. Even the smartphone applications for locating haunted dwellings in Hong Kong use a symbol for haunted dwellings that looks more like the American cartoon character Casper the Friendly Ghost than any truly fearsome entity. In addition to a playful side, Chinese ghosts can have an erotic dimension. Stories in which beautiful female ghosts assume a human form to seduce unsuspecting men are common, and form the basis for the most popular Chinese movie about ghosts ever produced,

*A Chinese Ghost Story*.<sup>10</sup> As Haiyan Lee (2014) suggests, however, the playful, erotic sides of ghosts do not negate the imaginative association of ghosts with strangers, but rather give us a more nuanced appreciation of the role of strangers in urban life. Positive relations with strangers require an open mind, a playful attitude that welcomes the other to enter one's social universe. Non-arranged marriage, or forming new sexual relationships of any sort, necessitates leaving the confines of one's family and reaching out to strangers. Eroticism itself thrives on the unfamiliar and the erotics of urban living can include the erotics of mixing with strangers in public space (Pile 2005). Despite the possibilities of eroticism, the majority of the most downloaded ghost stories on popular story telling websites in Hong Kong (such as <https://www.discuss.com.hk>) feature two narrative elements. First, those who become ghosts are those who have been neglected by their families in both life and funerary ritual. They become "wandering ghosts" (游魂野鬼), precisely because of this neglect. They are metaphorically "homeless" in both life and death. Quite often they haunt public housing estates, where the elderly are sometimes given shelter for their last years. Second, even though the cause of their homelessness was familial, the people they end up harming are strangers. Such narratives speak to fears engendered in the process of urbanization, both about transformations in familial relations and the growing role of strangers in daily life. That is to say, they tell us both that the demise of extended families and communities increases the chances that we will die alone, and that as we depend more and more upon strangers in all aspects of our life, we become more vulnerable to harm.