

Of Souls and Spirits

Secularization and its Limits

Practices of memorialization raise basic issues about life and its meaning. When a tombstone is carved, or offerings are placed on a grave, exactly who or what is being addressed? When a person dies, when their body ceases to be “animated,” exactly what has left it? Where does this thing go? Why do people all over the world, including Mr. Wang and his family, hold funerals and establish graves even when they claim to be secular, non-religious, and non-superstitious? In a materialist, communist, and anti-superstitious country, why hold funerals at all?

The secularization thesis suggests that as a country or part of a country becomes more modern, as its people become more educated, live in cities, gain exposure to science, and become more dependent upon scientific technologies in all aspects of their life, they will become less religious. Most anthropologists around the world today take a sceptical view of this thesis. Religions pervade today’s world, though some scholars also argue that they thrive in truncated forms, with their influence on daily life shrinking. In China, it is both the case that many temples, churches, and mosques are thriving and that many people, if asked, would claim not to be religious. Marxism, the official ideology of the Chinese Communist Party, describes secularization as both a process that will naturally occur as a country modernizes and a desirable state of affairs.

In this chapter, I do not wish to argue either for or against the secularization thesis per se, but I do want to engage with the idea that there may be more or less secular ways of imagining the soul. I seek to understand the significance of funerary practice for Chinese people like Mr. Wang and his family, who do not see themselves as religious, as well as to describe how “religious,” “superstitious,” and “secular” ways of understanding the soul can be blended together. In China, precisely because the state wishes to promote secular ideologies, this blending often

occurs without explicit discussion. It becomes a silent acknowledgment of realities that are too sensitive to address aloud.

SECULAR SPIRITS AND RELIGIOUS SOULS

Consider the words that are used to designate that which gives a body life. Individuals can be seen as having a particular spirit, a personality, a way of interacting with others, of facing life and living. In English, we could call this animating entity, energy, dynamic, or force a soul, or spirit, or perhaps a character. Anthropologists, from the earliest days of the discipline, have noted how different cultures have imagined it in different ways (Tylor 1871). In some cultures, it could be seen as multiple, or could be seen as animating just about anything—animals, plants, rocks, stars, and so on. But most cultures have some way of naming and imagining it.

Secular visions of science declare that all of the universe is subject to universal laws of nature. While there may be phenomena that science does not yet understand, these phenomena are still governed by the universal laws of nature. But while nature is singular in this sense, rarely do secular people apply such a scientific point of view to the forms of subjectivity, imagination, spirit, soul, or culture that animate human bodies. These animating forces are seen as multiple rather than singular. Different people, or people from different cultures, can experience the world differently, see it differently, understand it differently and, thus, can be said to have differing souls, spirits, or personalities.¹

A secular take on death views the human body physically. Since it is part of nature, it is subject to the universal biological processes of decay and rot. All bodies must die; death is irreversible and dead bodies must, eventually, decompose. But souls and spirits are multiple and not subject to physical laws. While the subjectivity of a particular dead person can no longer exist within its original body, can no longer physically affect the world through that body, its “spirit” can be inscribed in writing or in art, carved onto a tombstone, and perhaps embodied by other individuals who are still alive. We may learn from the spirits of those dead people whom we admire. If we do, their spirits can be said to persist after death.

In societies that are not scientific, or in the religious domains of scientific societies, there is no singular “law of nature.” In heaven or hell, physical realms undetectable by science, souls can be seen as enduring or enjoying a permanent physical existence. Even on the earth known by science, gods, ghosts, and other sorts of beings can operate in ways that are not limited by the “law of nature.” Different sorts of beings are subject to different sorts of physical limitations. Pre-modern Chinese society imagined a huge variety of beings who had powers that went well beyond anything that could be considered “natural” by today’s scientific standards. The gods, ghosts, and ancestors discussed in chapter 4 all had powers, ways of physically affecting the world, that cannot be explained by science. From

a secular, scientific perspective, we would say that their powers are “supernatural.” In addition to having supernatural powers, these beings also exist in realms that are separate from the earthly world that humans inhabit. These realms are likewise undetectable by science. In a traditional Chinese way of thinking, when a person dies, their soul becomes a god, ghost, or ancestor of some type, or perhaps all of the above in differing mixtures and at different moments. Their soul both exists in another realm and has the power to physically affect the earthly world in which humans exist. Burning spirit money, or other forms of ancestral sacrifice, allows the transfer of gifts from our earthly realm of existence to a non-earthly one. Sometimes these sacrifices are undertaken to encourage a god, ghost, or ancestor to do something in the earthly realm of humans.

Premodern Europe and the non-secular people of contemporary European societies likewise believe in many “supernatural” entities. The English language reveals how secular and non-secular visions of the universe can blend together. The word “spirit,” for example, can be used to refer to a supernatural entity, like a ghost; it may also refer to the character, personality, or way of being of a particular person, in the scientific sense described above; it also can refer to the level of energy a person projects; finally, in the plural, “spirits” may refer to alcohol, perhaps because drinking alcohol can affect a person’s energy or persona, or perhaps because it can “possess” a person in the same way that a ghostly spirit can. In other words, a “spirited” person is most likely full of energy, but might also be drunk or possessed! The word “soul” likewise can be used in both a secular and a religious imaginary. A person’s soul might be imagined as migrating to heaven or hell—extra-earthly realms undetectable by science. But the word soul is also used in many modern, secular phrases. Soul music, for example, refers not to anything supernatural, but just to a type of music that is very moving, that can touch us deeply. Though this music has its origins in African American gospel music, many contemporary songs in this genre refer not to religious events, but to love, loss, and other emotions understandable to a secular as well as a religious audience. Compared to “spirit,” the interiority that “soul” refers to is more individuated and more serious. To tamper with someone’s soul is more dangerous, personal, and permanent than manipulating their spirits, which might be high or low on a given day for a variety of reasons.

In Chinese, especially in premodern writing, a number of characters refer to the variety of beings or forms of subjectivity that exist in one realm or another and animate human bodies. These include *jing* (精) and *shen* (神), *hun* (魂) and *po* (魄), *gui* (鬼) and *ling* (灵), *guai* (怪) and *xian* (仙), to name a few. In traditional Chinese culture, it is not just that there are a large number of beings with a variety of forms of subjectivity and physical powers, but also that one type of being might transform into another. Upon death, humans regularly become gods, ghosts, or ancestors. But traditional Chinese culture also imagined that through arduous discipline and training, humans could acquire seemingly supernatural powers.

Martial arts movies often depict humans who learn to leap from tree to tree in a manner that resembles flying, or to manipulate *qi*, the energy of life, in miraculous ways. Daoist masters could become immortals (*xian*). Commonly portrayed in novels, movies, video games, television dramas, plays, and stories, such transformations and beings are still very much part of contemporary Chinese culture. Just like the words spirit and soul are commonly used in modern English, the characters listed above are used in a myriad of everyday and metaphorical speech.

In modern Chinese, several compound words have been formed from the above characters to translate ideas from western writings. The compound word *jingshen* usually translates “spirit,” while *linghun* is used for “soul.” As in English, the term *jingshen*/spirit is used in ways that implies that the entity it refers to is less important than the one that the word *linghun*/soul refers to. One can discuss *jingshen* in a light-hearted way with phrases like “that blouse makes you look spirited” (*na jian yifu ting jingshen*). In contrast, discussing someone’s or some organization’s soul/*linghun* is almost always a serious affair. One can embrace one sort of a *jingshen*/spirit in one moment and another in the next, while one’s soul is relatively singular and permanent. In Chinese, the word *jingshen* is used almost exclusively in a secular way. It does not refer to any sort of supernatural being. But the word *linghun* can be used in phrases where a literal belief in a supernatural entity is implied. Moreover, in a manner that more fully reflects a traditionally Chinese religious imagination, there are a multiplicity of words that use the character *hun*, some of which translate as soul (*linghun*, *hunpo*, *hunling*, *jinghun*) and others which translate as ghost (*guihun*, *youhun* 幽魂, *youhun* 游魂, *yinhun*). On its own, the character *hun* can refer to both a soul and a ghost, indicative of the fact that in a religious Chinese imaginary, a person’s soul can become a ghost—and maybe even the idea that a particular spiritual agency might be seen as a soul by some people and a ghost by others.

By introducing ideas about secular and non-secular thought and the vocabularies of animating spirits in English and Chinese, I hope to make two points about the secularization thesis. The first is that secularization does not necessarily result in the end of funerals and memorialization, because it does not end thought about the forms of subjectivity that animate particular human beings. Even for people who disavow all forms of religious and “superstitious” belief, who think that there is only a single nature which is explained by science and that there is no such thing as the supernatural, there remains the question of what happens to the spirit, the persona, the character, or the way of being that used to animate the body of their deceased family member or friend. In their grief, or in their hopes for a better future, they may wish to re-member, to re-articulate, or even to emulate this spirit themselves. In other words, secular and religious thought may differ in the ways that they imagine the relationships between an animating subjectivity and the physical universe, but they both assume that some form of subjectivity exists. Moreover, even in secular imaginaries, this form of soul or spirit can

last longer than the life of any given individual. Second, even if a partial secularization of funerary ritual and memorialization has occurred, that is to say, even if more people approach death and the spirit of the departed in a secular way rather than a religious way, even if they do not believe that “gods, ghosts, and ancestors” can physically act in supernatural ways, the echoes of religious thought still reverberate in the very words that are used to speak of death, souls, and spirits. As the funeral of Mr. Wang demonstrated, even in a secular family, the words spoken at the funeral, as well as the ritual actions taken at all stages of the funerary process, proceed as if the soul of the departed still exists, still needs care in another realm, and can still physically affect the circumstances of the human world. In this sense, scientific and religious thought blend together rather than replace one another.

THE SOUL OF THE PARTY

The last chapter discussed the “materialism” that Party rhetoric refers to when dismissing the desires of people in China to hold funerals and bury their relatives’ ashes in cemeteries. I also noted that despite this rhetoric, Party propaganda often memorializes the subjectivities, spirits, or souls of which it approves. Of course, most governments around the world carry out such activities. Almost every country has national cemeteries, tombs for unknown soldiers, and war memorials. In her analysis of the reburials and the toppling of memorial statues that occurred after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Katherine Verdery (1999, 1) notes that “Dead bodies have enjoyed political life . . . since far back in time.” In China since 1949, there has been no regime change as dramatic as those that took place in Soviet Union, but the changes in the policies of the Party after Mao’s death required some adjustments to memorial practices. At the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery in Beijing, China’s burial place for national leaders, heroes and martyrs, bodies, or more recently, cinerary caskets, have been dug up, removed, and relocated many times. The former Cultural Revolution-era vice chairman Kang Sheng, for example, was exhumed from the cemetery at the same time as he was expelled from the Party. Conversely, He Long died ignobly during the Cultural Revolution in 1969, but was posthumously reinstated into the Party in 1975. The government relocated his cinerary casket to the Babaoshan Columbarium that same year (Wang and Su 2011).

Such dramatic events focus attention on the forms of transcendence or immortality upon which political regimes rely. The lives of certain founders or heroes come to represent the political soul of a particular regime or movement. Regime change thus requires a toppling of this soul. When the slogans carved on tombstones no longer represent the political spirit of the time, entire graveyards may need to be dug up or closed to the public, as occurred with the Cultural Revolution graveyards in Chongqing. But even in times of political stability, when regimes retain legitimacy and graves and memorials rest in peace, the soul of political

movements continues to evolve. In a temporal way, secular political parties face the same dilemma that secular families face at death: while individual bodies come and go, and while the stances of political parties continually evolve, the spirit that a person or a political body stands for must be imagined in a more permanent way.

At the Babaoshan Revolutionary Cemetery, several strategies allow the everlasting soul of the Party to evolve. Students are routinely taken through the cemetery to have their patriotism reinforced by learning the stories of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the Chinese nation. The ability of political educators to frame such lessons in a manner that resonates with the politically correct themes of the present relies on three mundane devices. First, many people are buried there. Political educators can take students to the graves of those whose life stories most closely fit current concerns. When I visited the cemetery in September 2015, military men who had died in the war against Japan were being highlighted. Second, interpretive signposts are placed in front of the graves the educators discuss. These signs provide a relatively flexible medium for framing the words carved in stone on grave markers. Finally, a gigantic television screen has been installed so that recently re-edited stories of the deceased's lives can be presented.

The entire idea of erecting tombstones, or any memorial in stone, is to assert that a particular soul or spirit will last forever. The flexible contextualization of words carved in stone is enabled in many Chinese graveyards today through the use of two-dimensional matrix codes (二维码) on tombstones. Such marks enable visitors to immediately download a life history of the person buried there on their smartphones. Needless to say, the life-history that is saved in cyberspace can be amended as necessary.

But even the words carved onto tombstones are chosen to be reinterpretable while masking the shifting nature of their referents. The sales offices for most graveyards have photographs of various styles of gravestone and lists of suggested words and phrases for etching onto them. These phrases reveal three strategies. The first is to mask the ways in which the meanings of the words might shift over time with references to eternity. Phrases like “never forget” (不忘), “never-ending” (无绝期), “ever-existing” (永存), and “everlasting” (永在) are ubiquitous. The second strategy is to use words that refer to a type of abstract but easily accepted ideal persona or virtue—kind mother, caring father, or loyal friend. While it is possible that the words these virtues invoke will fall out of style, they are also easy to reinterpret. What makes someone a good parent or a loyal friend can be retold in different ways. The third strategy is to choose words that enunciate relatively simple statements of fact—when a person was born, when they entered the Party, or what awards they received. These statements can be used to tell a wide variety of stories. There are limits to reinterpretation that make revolution and the consequent tearing up of graves and memorials sometimes seem necessary. If, as may have been the case during the Cultural Revolution, the very idea of being a good parent is called into question, then the desecration of graves that declared someone to be

a good parent might seem like a good idea. In short, at the same time that the current Chinese regime attempts to project its soul as something that is permanent and steadfast, it also must allow this soul to evolve. It thus combines a threefold strategy of stating permanence (either literally or metaphorically by carving words into stone), seeking flexible means of contextualizing the permanent messages, and digging up, destroying, or otherwise completely erasing previous messages about souls that now seem beyond the pale.

Another sort of reinterpretation of the lives of revolutionary martyrs takes place through the development of so-called red tourism. Many Chinese localities try to establish themselves as sites of red tourism by claiming the right to erect memorials to the deceased revolutionary martyrs and national leaders who had been born there. This trend is especially prevalent in Hunan province, the birthplace of Mao Zedong and thus a center of red tourism. In 1999, Peng Dehuai's cinerary casket was dug out of Babaoshan and returned to Xiangtan in Hunan, where a memorial hall was built around his new grave and his former residence was reconstructed as a tourist site. In 2009, He Long was similarly returned to He Long Park in Zhangjiajie, Hunan, while one of the "old five" members of the communist party, Lin Boqu, was returned to Lintan in Hunan in 2013 (Liu Ziqing 2014). While the new memorials in Hunan undoubtedly reproduce politically correct biographies for these famous past leaders, they can do so in a manner that gives more emphasis to the role of their birth locality in developing their revolutionary personae. In the context of Vietnam, Heonik Kwon (2006) provides an insightful analysis of the state reburial of national martyrs and the differences between the way the local and national governments narrate the lives of the war dead.

As a regime ages, the founding leaders are immortalized, but those of the middle periods become less important. Contemporary leaders establish rhetorical links to the founding fathers while ignoring their more recent predecessors. This strategy of memorialization likewise makes it easier to project an unchanging soul of the Party, as the complications of many generations of leaders with somewhat differing ideas can be ignored. As the rewriting of history loses its emphasis on the recent past, the political sacredness of the original leaders is enhanced by their historical distance from the present. The lack of living memories of their presence further makes the rewriting of their biographies easier.

In China, the most famous dead body of all is that of Mao Zedong, whose mummified corpse is preserved in his mausoleum in Tiananmen Square. As the historian Geremie Barmé (1996) points out, Mao's legacy has been reinterpreted by a wide variety of actors for a wide variety of purposes both within and outside of China. For the first time since the 1990s, I revisited his mausoleum in September 2015, at 8:00 a.m. on a Thursday morning, and was struck by three aspects of how the presentation of his persona had evolved.² First, the entire square had been redesigned for tourists from the Chinese hinterlands. In the crowds of thousands of people milling about with me that morning, I saw not one non-Chinese face.

Most of the people there were dressed in a manner that suggested that they came from the countryside. The square itself had been redecorated with a nearly life-sized, plastic-flower-and-bird covered Great Wall replica. This replica allowed tourists to get a perfect photo of a Great Wall-like structure without actually going there. Its pristinely clean but plastic construction marked it as designed to appeal to frugal tourists, mostly from rural areas, who desire a nice photo but do not want to pay for a Great Wall tour and do not care about authenticity.

Second, the presentation of Mao has made him more god-like. While a sacred attitude towards Mao's body was always encouraged, the mausoleum used to take more steps to encourage an appropriately secular, communist attitude.³ Recently, Mao has been treated more like a god (see Wardega 2012). Entrants to the mausoleum must now take off their hats and remain silent. In addition, all of the visitors I saw bowed three times before his statue at the entrance of the mausoleum, before placing flowers (sold for 3 yuan at the entrance) in the cauldron in front of his statue. While the rule of silence prevented prayers from being said aloud, at the exit to the mausoleum I heard at least one couple discussing the wishes for good fortune that they hoped Mao might make come true. Overall, the ritual of visiting the mausoleum both resembles and distances itself from the standard way one worships at a Chinese temple. The bows replace kowtows and the flowers replace burning incense. Thus, the communist ritual simultaneously declares itself different from "superstitious religions" while mimicking their form. Finally, upon exiting the mausoleum, one is faced with a variety of stalls selling Mao tourist kitsch. There are both official stalls within the cordoned-off area of the mausoleum and unofficial stalls outside. Even the official stalls sold Mao badges and emblems of a type that seemed a blasphemy against Mao's virulent anti-capitalism. One 20-yuan gold colored badge, for example, was decorated with a circle of fake diamonds and had a giant 福 (prosperity) character printed on the backside. Such badges are often dangled from the rear view mirrors of taxis or in the entrances to restaurants to bring these businesses good fortune and to protect them from danger. While there have long been Mao badges that present him like a god of wealth, to see them for sale at an official tourist stall next to his mausoleum on Tiananmen Square struck me as indicating a new degree of official acceptance of this reinterpretation.

Despite the evolving interpretations of Mao's persona, his memorial is framed with reference to eternity. Carved in stone at the entrance is the stock phrase "remain forever without deterioration" (永垂不朽). Thus, as with the souls presented in Babaoshan cemetery, Mao's soul is presented as unchanging even as it is made to evolve. Moreover, to a striking extent, the worship of Mao's soul in a religious fashion (of Mao as a god who can grant wishes in the present) is permitted even by a Party that declares its soul to be anti-superstitious to the core.

In addition to memorials and cemeteries, the souls of Party members are immortalized in the speeches given at their funerals and the words written in their obituaries. A cadre in charge of funerary arrangements for retired officials at a

university once described to me the care taken with official obituaries. While no obituary can say anything bad about the deceased, the subtle gradations of positive words must be calibrated to match the rank of the retired cadre. “Fixing the words when you close the coffin” (盖棺论定) is a Chinese tradition, this cadre concluded. While immortalizing the souls of their cadres, the Party thus also seeks to immortalize the hierarchies created through its political rankings (see also W. Tsai 2017). The content of obituaries and eulogies, like words on tombstones, are selected to be generically acceptable. Themes of patriotism, loyalty to the Party, and greatness predominate. But the emphasis on recreating political rank in death reveals another aspect of the Party’s soul—it is hierarchical to the core, in a military, Leninist, authoritarian fashion.

Why does the Party need a soul? I see it as part of the necessary work of any modern political entity. The soul is like an ideal, and ideals are necessary to rally people around a particular political identity. This soul must be abstract enough or vague enough that different people can relate to it in a variety of ways. The vagueness required to unite different audiences makes it vulnerable to deconstruction by a determined intellectual critique. To avoid such deconstruction, political leaders make their symbols sacred. The soul of a party should be above criticism so that no one comes to doubt it. In their resistance to a scientific “materialist” questioning, the dynamics of sacralization create a religious tone. For this reason, even the most anti-religious, anti-superstitious entity in China, the Communist Party, treats its own soul in a religious fashion.

THE SOULS OF THE PEOPLE

It is not only the Propaganda Department that finds the dynamics of sacralization soothing or finds it useful to link tropes of transcendence with practices of transience when memorializing souls. Speaking ill of the dead is not welcomed in most societies, especially at funerals, and I never heard of or witnessed a Chinese funeral where anyone said anything negative about the deceased. The tombstones in the most common of cemeteries contain phrases implying that the soul of the deceased will last forever. In the funeral of Mr. Wang, the calligraphy written on flower wreaths given at funerals also used tropes of eternity, as did the words displayed around the entranceway to the funeral parlor hall where his farewell meeting was held. In death, the demise of the body is so obvious, especially where cremation is practiced, that gestures towards permanence might be understood as a way of comforting the grieving.

Like the soul of the Party, the souls of the people link transience to transcendence in both secular and religious fashion, and sometimes in ways that blend the two ways of thinking. A more secular way of blending could be seen in the colors in which names were etched onto Mr. Wang’s tombstone. Mr. Wang’s name was written in black, while his wife’s name was colored red and will remain that way

until she passes away. The names of the children, their spouses, and the grandchildren were also painted in red, as they all were alive at the time of Mr. Wang's burial. In addition, Mr. Wang's surname remains in red, as will his wife's after she is buried. This coloring indicates that family names are eternal, even though individuals are mortal. The spirit of the family continues even when any individual passes away. In this manner, Mr. Wang's life is framed as a sacrifice to the cause of the Wang family, while his wife, perhaps unintentionally, will be framed as having contributed primarily to her natal family (most women in China do not officially change their surnames after they get married). The practice of burying couples together also suggests that marriage itself transcends death.

This pattern of coloring names links eternity to transience in a secular manner because the spirit of the family is seen as sequentially embodied by the successive generations of the family. It does not require belief in a soul that lives in another realm, or a soul that can still influence earthly affairs after the demise of its body. The secular memorialization of familial souls can also be seen in tombstone carvings that depict the deceased as a loving mother, father, aunt, or uncle, in farewell meeting eulogies that do the same, or in the kinship terms used when addressing the departed. The spirit of one's mother or father can be actively embraced by their children. Addressing this spirit as mother or father suggests that those people did properly act in the role of a caring parent when they were alive.

But there are more religious ways of invoking familial relationships while linking permanence to transience in contemporary Chinese funerals. A Buddhist priest once explained to me the reason for chanting sutras on behalf of the recently departed: it helps the soul of the departed to forget their earthly families and make the journey to Western Paradise. While priests, or sometimes tape recorders, chant sutras, it was important for the family members not to cry. The priest explained: "Crying makes the soul of the deceased less willing to leave this world and transition to the Western Paradise. It creates unnecessary attachment. Birth and death are all part of life. Without death there could not be birth. We monks never cry at the funerals of our brethren." But if life is presented in Buddhist ritual as transient, both the soul and the Western Paradise, especially as they are popularly imagined, persist forever. The existence of this other realm where the soul itself lives on, enjoying the pleasures of Paradise, marks this practice as non-scientific, as does the soul's ability to hear the cries of the living after its body has perished. The desires and dangers of crying at the funeral envision familial bonds as something that must be broken at death.

Beyond familial souls, middle-class Chinese people sometimes memorialize the spirits of their loved ones in terms of their career. A teacher, or doctor, or anthropological researcher dedicates herself to an abstract calling that transcends any individual life. Words depicting career accomplishments, as well as artistic renderings of symbols of particular careers are often carved into tombstones. In addition, tombstones sometimes memorialize souls as belonging to a particular religion, ethnic group, or manner of inhabiting the earth. The devoted Christian,

ping-pong player, or calligrapher might consider their devotion a matter of personal calling, a political identity, or something altogether different. Farewell meeting eulogies can also mention all of these souls.

Some elite cemeteries divide their plots into sections according to the careers of the deceased. There can be sections for military men and women and their spouses, sections for actors, artists, and cultural elites, as well as sections for academics and scholars. In some cities, there are entire cemeteries or sections of cemeteries devoted to Muslims or Christians. In Hong Kong, where ethnicity, especially in the past, was determined by the part of China from which one had emigrated and the dialect of Chinese that one spoke, there are sections of cemeteries reserved for those of Chiuchow (潮州) and Hakka descent. Such cemeteries or sections of cemeteries often contain statues or stone carvings that represent the spirit of the religion or ethnicity of those buried there.

From a functional anthropological perspective, the souls of the people can play a role similar to the soul of the Party. They can serve as a rallying point for a particular identity: that of a Muslim or a Christian, a Hakka or a Chiuchow person, a teacher or a soldier. Even when someone is only memorialized in a familial way, their soul can become a rallying point of a familial identity for all those who mourn the same person.

In addition to serving as a rallying point for a particular identity, secular imaginations of the spirit of the deceased can console the living by providing a reason to live. For those with a career or an identity beyond that of their family, memorials devoted to a career or to both a career and a family can console. But for those with nothing but a rotten job, meaning is often obtained from familial reproduction. One “eats bitterness” to earn money for the sake of one’s family. Memorializing the familial devotion of one’s parent provides inspiration to continue one’s own familial devotion.

Consequently, while familial reproduction might be seen as a theme with deep roots in premodern China, it is also modern. Moderns do not simply farm as their parents did. Rather they must find a career, or at least a job. For those who toil in alienating jobs, the meaning of the work usually derives from the contributions to familial reproduction that income from the work enables. In this sense, devotion to family and the types of memorialization such devotion enables are not just vestiges of a premodern era, but central to modern life itself. Those who find meaning in a career are equally the products of modernity’s division of labor. If modernity involves secularization in addition to the need to find a job, this secularization does not end the existential uses of memorializing the souls of the deceased.

Just like the spirit of Mao Zedong can be worshipped as a god rather than simply as the political soul of the Chinese Communist Party, so can various careerist souls be worshipped as gods. I have seen people lay wreaths at the tombs of famous writers while bowing and making requests for success in their careers. I have also seen mothers burn incense in front of military tombs, kowtow and ask for the protection of their sons in the army. But more than demonstrating how some

people embrace premodern, or superstitious, or religious beliefs, I think that many such practices indicate the ambiguity at the heart of memorialization. The stringent anti-superstitious governance of the Chinese Communist Party makes many disavow religious belief and express a preference for secular funerals. But at the end of the day, especially at an emotional level, the practices of caring for a soul in another realm by offering sacrifices of various types, and respecting a spirit that one hopes to embrace in one's own life, are not so different. By worshiping, speaking to, giving offerings to, or praying to a particular soul, one demonstrates the sincerity of one's emotional disposition as much as the content of one's belief.

THE SPIRIT OF FILIAL PIETY AS POLITICAL COMPROMISE

When I explained my way of distinguishing religious and secular imaginations of the soul to one Chinese woman, she replied: "For me, personally, I neither believe in geomancy or any of the other ways that my father's soul could affect the world in the present, nor do I think that my father was a particularly good person or devoted parent whom I should emulate. But when my father I died, I thought that it was my filial duty to give him a good funeral, burial, and tombstone." While I am not sure how many people would admit to not liking their parents, especially after they have died, the idea that giving one's parents a proper burial is a filial duty is common. Like ideas about embracing the spirit of one's parents' familial sacrifice, such filial piety might be considered secular; it requires no belief in anything supernatural. But it is even more abstract. Filial piety becomes an ideal to be embraced by all even if one's own parents did not embody it.

This ideal is also precisely the one that some members of the Party attempt to counter with the rhetoric of "thick care, thin burial." According to the logic behind this slogan, there is no need for a proper burial if you have taken good care of your elderly parents in life. By performing care in life, you have completely lived up to the ideals of filial piety. Moreover, because taking care of one's parents when they are alive is typically done in private, while funerals and burials and cemetery visits after death are done in public (and tombstones are available for anyone to see even if you are not there), private care is the more honourable form of filial piety. Only you know how kind you were to your elderly parents, but funerals are for public display. Consequently, funerals become a way for children who did not perform proper filial care for their parents to assuage their guilt, or, worse yet, to put on a public display of being filial when in fact they were not. At least that is how the orthodox Party argument goes. But people like the woman quoted above imagine filial care expressed via death rituals to be just as important as filial care in life. This woman was not concerned with her public image. After all, she had even admitted to me that her father was not a particularly good parent. Rather, she was simply concerned with paying respect to the ideal of filial piety itself.

Those whose job it is to be both pro-Party and to support the funeral and cemetery industry echo such views. Their jobs require them to devise ways of countering arguments against funerary ritual and memorialization without seeming to oppose the Party. One way of doing so is to cover the walls around and within cemeteries (and funeral homes) with Party propaganda about the importance of filial piety. These images suggest both that the cemetery management is staunchly loyal to the Party (they are, after all, devoting resources to reproducing Party messages), and that customers who spend money to memorialize their relatives in the cemetery are also being loyal to the Party.

One of the most publically visible Party propaganda campaigns of the early part of Xi Jinping's reign was that of the "Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety" (二十四孝). Though it has since faded from public prominence, the slogans and posters from this campaign still have a presence in many cemeteries. The title of the campaign refers to twenty-four stories of filial piety originally compiled nearly one thousand years ago during the Yuan dynasty, each of which was often represented visually in a picture. The Propaganda Department updated them with twenty-four more modern images of how to treat your parents well when they are elderly.

The reasons behind the campaign were multiple. China is both a rapidly aging society and a highly mobile society. Large numbers of elderly people live apart from their children. The government worries about possibilities of elderly discontent. During the 2000s, many elderly people protested about pension rights. Because they didn't have jobs, they could not be pressured by their employers to stop protesting. Having fewer years to live, they were also often less fearful of state retribution than young people. If elderly people live alone and feel neglected, or blame the Party for the fact that their children must leave their hometowns to find employment, might they be even more motivated to protest? In addition, as the costs of elder care rise, many in the government would like to see individual families shoulder most of the financial burden.

Cemeteries both reproduce the posters associated with this campaign and install statues, essays, calligraphy and other artwork from older versions of the Twenty-Four Paragons of Filial Piety. One cemetery in the city of Changsha, for example, erected an engraving of an essay on filial piety written in literary Chinese at its entrance. The essay begins: "Of all of the traditional Chinese virtues, filial behavior towards one's parents is the most important. While they are alive, treating them kindly and pleasing them comes first; supporting them is a blessing. After death look for a cave in a dragon vein [that is, a gravesite with excellent geomantic location], to bring peace to everyone. . . ." The essay goes on to describe how the cemetery was created with the support of the local government and how it was blessed with excellent mountains and water, the ingredients for powerful geomancy. In other East Asian locales, filial piety is also used to market cemetery plots and funerary services (Han 2016).



FIGURE 16. Carved depiction of filial piety at cemetery. Photo: Andrew B. Kipnis.

The theme of filial piety is often invoked in funerary ritual as well. At Mr. Wang's burial ceremony, for example, Mr. Chen used the phrase "The filial piety of the sons and daughters is as deep as the ocean." As several one-stop dragon entrepreneurs told me, even when there are serious conflicts among siblings over inheritance issues, they try to present a united front during the funeral and the period leading up to it. Since having one's children fight over inheritance is thought to disturb the soul of the deceased, this temporary presentation of unity is also an act of filial piety.

Within the Party, at least two versions of filial piety can thus be seen. The more totalitarian version only acknowledges the value of caring for one's parents when they are alive. But the version of Party members and supporters working in the funerary sector sees the importance of filial piety in death as well. This version also seems widely dispersed among the people, and with good reason. The totalitarian version gives no space for acknowledging the souls of the common people, while the later version attempts to unite the souls of the people and the soul of the Party around the theme of filial piety. It emphasizes multiplicity and diversity around a common theme. The tension between these two versions of filial piety reveals one of the most basic problems of politics. On the one hand, power in politics comes from the unification of a vast number of souls and spirits into a single spirit or voice. All politics involves attempts to rally support behind a singular person or identity. On the other hand, the total unification of these spirits threatens their annihilation. If they were truly one, they would cease to be many, and lose the power of a diverse multiplicity. A powerful political party must be simultaneously be multiple and singular.

These contradictions come out even in Mao Zedong's writings on funerals. In his famous essay "Serve the People" he writes:

All men must die, but death can vary in its significance. The ancient Chinese writer Szuma Chien said 'Though death befalls all men alike, it may be weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a feather.' To die for the people is weightier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather (Mao 1975, 3:177).

Here, the number of souls in the world are reduced to two: that of "the people" (functionally, another term for the Party), and that of the Party's enemy. One's soul is either for the Party or against it. Memorializing a soul in terms of its contributions to a family, a religion, an ethnic group, or a career would be beside the point. Memorializing the spirit of filial piety itself, as an ethic which all must live by, would likewise ring hollow. But later in the same essay, Mao writes:

From now on, when anyone in our ranks who has done some useful work dies, be he a soldier or cook, we should have a funeral ceremony and a memorial meeting in his honor. This should become the rule. And it should be introduced among the people as well. When someone dies in a village, let a memorial meeting be held. In this way we express our mourning for the dead and unite all the people (Mao 1975, 3:178).

Here the multiplicity of the masses is introduced. Not only should those who are "in our ranks" be memorialized, but even those residing in villages (over 95 percent of the Chinese people at the time Mao wrote this essay) deserve a funeral. In this sense, Mao's essay moves from seeing a world where there are only two types of souls (pro- or anti-Party) to one in which a multiplicity of souls can be unified. The two versions of filial piety described above can be mapped onto the two visions of memorialization in Mao's essay. In the first version, the only soul that needs to be memorialized is that of the Party itself; in the second, the celebration of filial piety can be used to unite the masses and the Party with a compatible set of ideals.

The later version of filial piety also echoes the way filial piety was used as an ideology of rule during the Qing dynasty and earlier. Imperial ideology held that the relationships between fathers and sons mirrored those between the emperor and his subjects and that filial piety required both that sons to be loyal to their fathers and that subjects to be loyal to their emperor. All relationships were hierarchical, and the hierarchies of different relationships could be mapped on to one another. By upholding the spirit of filial piety, people were simultaneously being loyal to the spirit of their families and to that of the ruling regime (Zito 1987).

Compatibility between familial souls and the soul of the Party is also sought out in some contemporary Chinese funerals. Mr. Wang, for example, chose to be buried in a Western suit to demonstrate his opposition to the "superstition" of traditional longevity dress and, hence, his loyalty to the Party. In her analysis

of memorial meetings in contemporary Shanghai, Lucia Liu (2021) notes how many working-class families want their deceased loved ones to be memorialized as having contributed to both nation and family, as both parents and as communist “comrades.” She further notes how the text of Mao’s essay, “Serve the People,” is displayed in the restaurant where most people hold banquets after funerals in Shanghai (Liu 2015, 251). The essay serves as a public argument that there is nothing anti-Party about having a proper funeral.

The discourse of filial piety is powerful throughout East Asia. Common people and governments use it to both justify their own behavior and to criticize the behavior of others. Debates about what exactly constitutes filial piety emerge in a number of contexts. While many sociologists and anthropologists argue that the quality of care for elder people depends more upon the practical availability of resources than the existence of cultural traditions (Ikels 2004a; Janelli and Yim 2004; Sorensen and Kim 2004; Wang 2004; Whyte 2004; H. Zhang 2004), others argue that ideas about filial piety have a strong influence on both ritual behavior and family dynamics. Charlotte Ikels (2004b), for example, describes how families in the city of Guangzhou would sometimes risk the wrath of the Communist Party to satisfy the desires of their ancestors for a form of funerary ritual that the Party did not like. John Traphagan (2004) argues that parents in rural Japan during the 1990s had at least some influence on the decisions of their married sons about where to live and work. Akiko Hashimoto (2004) argues that Japanese mothers use ideas about filial piety to control their children, thwarting their will to separate, with the result that resistance to parental authority in Japan takes the shape of avoidance, withdrawal and sabotage rather than direct confrontation. Steven Sangren (2017; 2000) analyzes the psychodynamics of Chinese families through the lens of the contradictions that ideals of filial piety entail. While a full analysis of the social and cultural ramifications of ideals of filial piety are beyond the scope of this book, it is clear that ideas about filial piety are important to Chinese families in both the manner that funerals are conducted and the ways in which families memorialize their deceased loved ones in cemeteries.

CONNECTING THE PAST TO THE FUTURE: THE LIMITS OF SECULARIZATION

In his study of the transformation of funerary ritual in Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Thomas Laqueur (2015) states that though he set out to look for discontinuity, he found continuity. This continuity was apparent across a number of concrete historical transformations, including a shift from burial in churchyards to burial in cemeteries, a shift from burial to cremation, a rise in practices of listing, writing, and carving the names of the dead, and perhaps even a degree of secularization in the ways the souls of the dead were imagined. What remained constant was the ability of funerary ritual to connect the past with

the future. While I am not certain that the underlying continuity Laqueur finds deserves more emphasis than the transformations he details, connecting the past to the future is undeniably important. Death disrupts life. Those who remain alive, whose lives in some way were defined or affected by the life of the deceased, must find some way to give meaning to their own continuing existence.

In a period of rapid urbanization and modernization, when China, in a compressed and accelerated manner, is undergoing many of the same changes in society, economy, and culture that Europe experienced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a similar argument could be made. Though there is a shift from burial to cremation, a shift from village burial to urban cemeteries, and a rise in the use of tombstones with names carved on them and other ways of memorializing the dead in writing, an emphasis on connecting the past to the future remains. In a traditional Chinese religious imagination, these continuities are often imagined as a ritual duty. The soul of the deceased continues to physically exist in some other realm and can somehow affect us in our own world, for better or worse. We should care for our deceased loved ones by providing a proper funeral, and by making sacrifices at the grave or an ancestral altar. These obligations can be imagined as a matter of care or exchange. Either we should care for our deceased loved ones out of an ethics of filial duty, or we should do so because it is in our interest to provide care so that our ancestor will help us rather than harm us. The continuing need for care and exchange link the past and future as they become endless obligations. In a secular imaginary, the souls of the deceased do not exist in another realm but become ideals that should be embraced by the living. These ideals can be those of familial devotion, religious piety, or even simply a manner of inhabiting the earth. They can be political ideals around which a particular nation-state or ethnic group rallies. In the case of filial piety, the ideal need not even be something that the deceased stood for, but rather something that is embraced in the very act of caring for the dead. On holidays like Qing Ming, when Chinese people often visit graves in multigenerational family groupings, one can even teach this spirit to the youngest generation. Because these ideals transcend the death of the deceased, they likewise link the past to the future.

In a period of rapid modernization, the need to link the past with the future may be even more urgent than in previous periods. In many ways, grandparents have lived in and belong to different eras than their children and grandchildren. Their formative experiences were different, the education they experienced was different, and the media and technologies they feel most comfortable using also differ. Moreover, China's rapid modernization presents its citizens, especially its youth, with a mind-boggling array of choice. Not only is there choice in the realm of consumer products, but youth must also choose their occupations, jobs, courses of study, spouses and potential dating partners, hobbies, religions, and worldviews. Without a series of potential models to emulate, a variety of spirits to embody, how is one to make these choices? Funerals provide an opportunity to

memorialize the spirits of the deceased and, in so doing, provide the living with templates to make their own choices, to stick with the choices they have made, and to find reasons for continuing to live. Their own efforts become contributions to an everlasting spirit rather than the mere maintenance of a human body that is bound to die anyway.

Because the human need to link the past to the future is ongoing, no modernization can eliminate the human need for a soul. Death rituals can become less complex, but I doubt that they will ever end. If, as the Party official cited in the last chapter suggested, someone were to donate their body to science, to demand that no ritual be held for their death and that no tombstone be erected in a cemetery, then that person would most likely be memorialized by the Party itself. She or he would be immortalized in books, websites, and movies as a spirit for emulation by all Party members at least!

The subjectivity that the soul represents must be seen to live on in some form, even if it departs the body that it originally animated. The need for the soul to live on, to be immortalized, limits secularization. As the language used in cemeteries, in obituaries, and in ritualized speech at funerals demonstrates, as well as the use of stone as a medium for remembering the departed, the quality of existing forever is an important theme for memorialization. This quality pushes most acts of memorialization towards the supernatural, as nothing natural last forever. Respect for the deceased and the feelings of loss close family members experience add an element of sacralization to funerals. Criticism of the deceased is rarely tolerated. The language and practice of funerals often blends religious and secular imaginations of the soul, and the very words we use to speak of the entities that animate human bodies have long histories that likewise blend secular and religious imaginaries. This blending, along with the elements of timelessness and sacralization, makes even the most secular of funerals feel religious.