

Governing Death, Making Persons: The New Chinese Way of Death

Huwy-Min Lucia Liu. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press. xviii + 252 pp. \$34.95 (pbk). ISBN 978150176227

The Funeral of Mr. Wang: Life, Death, and Ghosts in Urbanizing China

Andrew B. Kipnis. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. xi + 174 pp. \$29.95 (pbk, Open Access), ISBN 9780520381971

Carsten Herrmann-Pillath

University of Erfurt, Erfurt, Germany

Email: carsten.herrmann-pillath@uni-erfurt.de

The authors of the two books under review both note that funeral practices and death rituals in contemporary China remain neglected topics in research. Their contributions to this field are excellent ethnographies with rich detail and thorough theoretical reflection, and as such they significantly improve our knowledge and understanding of these topics. They will also be of great interest for people working in the fields of economic sociology (as studies of a particular industry undergoing culturally embedded market transition) and political science (as studies of policy design and implementation by the CCP and their transformations in state–society interactions).

The two volumes complement one another as each has a distinct focus. Huwy-Min Lucia Liu presents an in-depth study of a funeral parlour in Shanghai, based on her participant observation, extensive interviews with practitioners in the funeral industry and archival and documentary research. Using case studies, Andrew Kipnis reports the results of a decade-long interest in the topics of death and funerals during his highly acclaimed anthropological work in mainland China, especially in Nanjing. The respective foci result in different approaches to the themes tackled by the authors. Concentrating on the funeral parlour as the field site, Liu leaves out important themes that are covered by Kipnis: first, cemeteries and related policies and practices, and second, domestic rituals of death. Hence, Liu's book does not cover topics such as practices of worship after the funeral, for example the Qingming festival, nor practices beyond the funeral parlour, such as home altars. As Liu herself notes, this may be significant: she gives the example of the ritual of gift-giving between attendants of the ceremony and the mourning family, the white envelopes with cash and the return gifts. While such gift-giving regularly occurred at the funerals Kipnis observed, in Shanghai this practice has moved to the domestic sphere: only those who are unable to visit the home of the deceased donate gifts at the funeral. As a result, this activity is concealed at Shanghai funerals and is very different from the custom that Kipnis reports, in which gifts are received publicly and recorded in a booklet at the reception desk. The explanation for the divergent practice in Shanghai is that gift-giving is seen as a backward, "rural" practice that is shunned at the official funeral.

I cite this example at length because it illustrates other important topics covered in the two volumes. As the books extensively describe, funeral rituals were a target of transformative political intervention by the CCP after 1949. However, the Party's concerns had already been shared by modernizing elites in Republican times. Key themes are the shift to cremation and today to eco-burials such as sea burial, the frugality and "modernity" of funeral practices, and the battle against "superstition." Shanghai has always been the spearhead of these policies, because of its unique conditions (strong foreign presence before 1949, pressures of war, becoming a hotbed of the



Cultural Revolution, and its enduring relative prosperity compared to other cities). Liu gives fascinating details about the transformation of funerals in post-1949 Shanghai, which resulted in a key element: memorials. These were first promoted by Mao Zedong in a famous speech in 1944 and then widely adopted in Shanghai, although the CCP turned against them in the early 1980s. A memorial is a highly stylized appraisal of a dead person as a valued socialist citizen. Up to the 2010s, these memorials still often referred to the Liberation and sometimes included a speech by a work unit representative. As Liu reports, even the speech by a family member (typically, the eldest son) would not contain much personal detail. Although Kipnis also reports similar practices elsewhere, they are not as dominant as in Shanghai. What makes Shanghai special? Liu's answer is intriguing: memorials were widely seen as rituals of rehabilitation after the Cultural Revolution, and they expressed the "higher quality" of modern Shanghainese compared with other people, even those from other metropolitan areas. But as rituals of rehabilitation, they contained the seeds of disapproval of earlier political events, which explains the official retreat from memorials.

Two more fundamental themes emerge: the role of funerals in confirming the place of the deceased in the social community; and ritual performances of hierarchy. Regarding the former, Liu makes an important point that is also emphasized by Kipnis, namely that the political struggle over funeral rites is also the struggle over different forms of relationality – one is the exclusive loyalty to Party and state, detached from all other relationships, and the other is kinship, in the first place, and the wider social network. Liu shows how in Shanghai the two are reconciled in a modular fashion. Despite the centrality of the memorial, after the "farewell" a second stage suddenly shifts to customary practices, most visible through a break in the affectual regime: the memorial is solemn, without any emotional expressions, whereas the next stage brims with affects such as weeping. Further, the second stage also includes other customary practices, such as offering objects to the dead for life in the afterworld. In Kipnis's descriptions, these are much more salient; they include the use of paper replicas and even the banned spirit money (in fact widespread in China, and even found in Liu's examples). This reveals the persistence of certain ideas about the soul and life after death, which can be summarized, with Liu agreeing, as performing relationality via flows of gifts. Relationality means recognition by the community, which explains why in Shanghai the two stages co-exist ritually, though apparently staying in contradiction – the memorial recognizes communist citizenship; the next stage acknowledges embeddedness in kinship and social networks. However, in modern Shanghai the second aspect of relationality does not seem as salient, perhaps reflecting the claims of advanced modernity.

This brings us to an important contrast in Kipnis's account, which highlights the social, psychological and spiritual tensions of modern urbanity that entails living together with strangers. For him, the 'ghosts' that are ubiquitous in traditional Chinese beliefs about life after death are spectres without the flesh of relationality, metaphors of strangers in the city. This relates to a significant difference between the two books, namely that Liu discusses "urban" practices, whereas Kipnis studies practices in "urbanizing" China. Kipnis argues that urbanization increases the role of strangers in everyday life. Strangers are associated with ghosts, reflecting traditional beliefs that souls who fail to receive care from relatives (i.e. through worship and gifts), morph into ghosts. Kipnis suggests that this may even reinforce the focus on kin in an urbanizing context, and eventually also explain the resilience of traditional funeral customs. But why does the CCP accommodate this in the many cities mentioned in Kipnis's book, and even in Shanghai?

Both books converge on one possible explanation and offer rich empirical material about the basic organizational features of the funeral industry in China: the duality of state-owned funeral parlours (originally just crematoria) and the market for funeral services ("funeral brokers" in Liu's book; "one-stop dragon entrepreneurs" in Kipnis's). The parlours offer no-frills public services at a reasonable price, but also many add-ons (such as the adornment of the funeral hall) that are calculated with a profit motive. Brokers are less constrained on what they can offer, hence they include the full range of "superstitious" items. But the brokers often also mediate between parlours

and the bereaved, usually approaching them directly at the hospital where most deaths occur. There is huge pressure on the bereaved to get things done within the officially prescribed three days after death, which is a big departure from tradition.

In other words, in the funeral industry, market transition appears as one of the drivers of the resurgence of traditional funeral customs, mostly justified in neutral terms such as “meeting the customers’ demands.” This accords with one conspicuous feature of Xi Jinping’s reign: the approval and even promotion of filial piety, discussed by Kipnis (p. 123). Independent from actual beliefs, holding a proper ritual is an expression of filial piety. This has repercussions for values, since funerals are traditionally key venues of asserting patrilineal authority. Here, the second general aspect comes into play, hierarchy. The modernist claims of Shanghainese are status-based, indicating civilizational excellence, a theme that is also salient in Kipnis’s book. The social status of each cemetery differs, and funerals express status distinctions. In this sense, if a highly ranked Party member adopts a modernist funeral, it almost paradoxically reinstates traditional stances towards hierarchy. In Liu’s account, this generic function of ritual is what holds the various modules of ritual together. Hierarchy is also a key aspect of filial piety. Kipnis shows how this may eventually give legitimacy to traditional rituals, though in an aesthetically but not substantially transformed way. His example is the lavish use of flowers in modern rituals, which is a functional equivalent of burning replicas and spirit money.

There is a marked theoretical difference in how the two authors explain such phenomena. Liu juxtaposes a socialist and a market frame and criticizes opinions that interpret market transition in China as the emergence of a “neoliberal subject.” For her, the failure of the further modernization of funerals in terms of “personalized” and “eco” funerals reveals its limitations. On an abstract level, funerals maintain basic aspects of Chinese ritual, relationality and hierarchy, and the importance of orthopraxy. A sole example that shows a clash between CCP norms and current practice is a Protestant (hence “orthodox”) funeral, which brings Christian beliefs into confrontation with CCP worldviews. Kipnis puts his argument forward in a more differentiated way as he distinguishes five different “economies” salient in the uses of money and pecuniary standards: the inter-household gift economy; the intra-familial inheritance economy; the state redistributive economy; the small-scale informal economy; and the large-scale formal state-regulated market economy (p. 74). Among these five economies, the topic of inheritance deserves attention, as in the wake of urbanization conflicts over inheritance (mostly apartments that have gained tremendously in value) have become rampant, often immediately after the funeral and even at the funeral banquet (p. 77). Indeed, Kipnis emphasizes that many funeral brokers have also assumed the role of mediators in family conflicts. So, another paradox emerges: the celebration of relationality and kinship turns into a destructive force of these, as many siblings break apart after the funeral.

A final question remains: what do the Chinese really believe? Liu does not give an answer, as her interviews only centre on funeral practitioners, and we do not learn about beliefs beyond interpretations of the observed behaviour of the bereaved. Kipnis has much richer detail, but he cannot cover the full breadth of aspects of how funeral practices relate to Chinese religion in general. So, both books are rallying calls for further research. A key topic is what Kipnis calls “recombination” (p. 146), which conforms to approaches that see Chinese religion as “polytropic.” China is still undergoing the transformation of urbanization, which has already torn down the duality of the “urban” versus the “rural.” What does that imply for funeral practices in the future and their roots in values and beliefs? Both authors note that given the stigmatization of funeral work in China (another tradition that survives in allegedly “modern” urbanity), almost all funeral brokers come from rural areas. Shanghai is exceptional in being effectively blocked from the merging of the rural and the urban, and therefore may not reliably indicate the “New Chinese Way of Death.” China’s second- and third-tier cities are the places to go in order to further elaborate the anthropology of death in China.