

Green Funeral: A New Imagination of Death

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Abstract

Ecological civilization (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明) has become the major ideological framework for China's environmental policies. Except environmental concerns, it also aims to develop ecological awareness for the public. This thesis argues under the guideline of ecological civilization, green funeral/the funeral reform aims to construct a new recognition of death and environment for the public by changing the traditional Chinese funeral customs and burial method. From traditional earth burial to mandatory cremation for non-Muslim Chinese further to ecological and land-saving burial (*shengtai jiedi zang* 生态节地葬), which is now the main burial method promoted by the government. Some parts of traditional funeral rituals have also been considered as superstitions by the government. As a result, the government has repeatedly called for technology innovation, including the extensive construction of crematoria, the upgrading of cremation equipment, and the implementation of Internet in funeral services. This thesis further argues the vision created by the government also works as a sociotechnical imaginary for the public. Through analysis of academic discussion and the official green book *Report on Funeral Development of China* (*binzang lüpi shu* 殡葬绿皮书) from Ministry of Civil Affairs, regulations from the central government and its promotion of technology innovation, this thesis argues the central government aims to construct a vision with Chinese cultural and national continuity and socialist ideas with Chinese characteristics. Two interviews with staff members in funeral industry, one interview with an ecological graveyard buyer and related news have shown the public's mixed feelings towards this reform.

Foreword

First and foremost, I would like to give applause to my supervisor, Rune Svarverud, for all your support and guidance. Dear Rune, I could not express how much I appreciate all your help during this process. I have been struggling with choosing the topic and writing this thesis, but you and your words always lead me like a lighthouse. I am truly grateful.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	III
Foreword.....	V
Introduction.....	1
Motivation.....	3
Research Question & Structure of Thesis	3
Chapter 1. Methodology	4
Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework.....	7
Chapter 3. Green Funeral	10
Chapter 4. Death, Funeral and Burial	13
Chapter 5. Chinese Funeral and Burial.....	14
<i>5.1 The Change of Funeral Rituals.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>5.2 From Burial/Earth burial (Tuzang 土葬) to Cremation.....</i>	<i>19</i>
Chapter 6. The Implementation of Green Funeral.....	22
<i>6.1 A Selective Tradition of Green Funeral.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>6.2 Technology Innovation.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>6.3 Regulation, Policy and Corporation Response.....</i>	<i>30</i>
Chapter 7. Public Response	33
Conclusion	37
Reference	40
Appendix.....	49

Introduction

Death is an inescapable end in human life, through funeral and interment, humans find a way to extend the life after death. According to Thomas Laqueur, caring for the dead is the way humans create their social worlds, by connecting the past with the future (Laqueur, 2015). Funerals play an important role in the process of caring for the dead, not only comfort the people with loss, but also create another extended world for the past ones. Especially in China, the majority of people believe that those who passed away still live in another world, and that world is somehow connected to the present world we are in now, hence people tend to use rituals as a method to connect the two worlds (Crowder 2003, 1; Kipnis 2019a, 266; Scott 2007, 20; Watson 1988, 8-9). Although China is a country with a variety of different regions and cultures, the Chinese worldviews on death, society, and the spirit realm are more inclusive and well-systematized, which accommodates different funeral rituals without major ideological conflicts. (Crowder 2003, 25). This process was not formed on its own initiative, but slowly through different dynasties and different governments. Standardizations of ritual such as funerals and weddings are the key elements to create and maintain a unified Chinese culture. By following accepted ritual practices, ordinary citizens participate in the process of cultural unification. (Watson 1988, 3-4). Since the majority of public ritual activities in contemporary China are strictly controlled by the running Chinese Communist Party. These activities have directly related to central administration's political goals (Whyte 1974). Same as in funeral, it is the most important life passage ritual in China. In aspect of priority, cost and importance, funerals precede weddings and birthdays (Crowder 2003, 2). Interment or burial is as important as funeral rituals, most Chinese believe how the deceased relatives get buried will influence their life in another world, and their life quality in that world can decide the luck of their descendants (Crowder 2003, 18). According to *Book of Burial (Zangshu 葬书)* written by Chinese Historian Guo Pu (郭璞, AD 276–324), China has a long history of burial/earth burial as the majority. In Republic of China period starting from 1912, cremation was widely introduced and adapted. After the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, cremation even became a must for non-Muslims (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 77-78; Kipnis 2019b, 1). There were numerous voices against the nationwide cremation policy at first, later it gradually became normative among the public. Cremation policy is a turning point in China's funeral and burial industry, the emergence of funeral parlors, crematoria and collective cemeteries was because of that. Many corporations in this industry are private, but whether these funeral parlors, crematoria and cemeteries run by private corporations or

municipal governments, they all act in a hybrid state/private way (Kipnis 2019a, 259). It can be seen that the relationship between funeral industry and the government is very close; it also shows that government policy has a significant impact on the funeral industry.

In 2013, ecological civilization has become the major framework for the China's environmental laws and policies. According to Hansen, Li and Svarverud, in 2018, ecological civilization has elevated to a more prominent position in the constitution (Hansen, Li, Svarverud 2018, 195). Funeral and burial have also become one of the culturally aspects included in ecological civilization ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016](#)). Although it is an industry that is not getting mentioned too much in public, it is indisputably a necessity in one's life, especially in an aging society like China. In addition, funeral as an imaginary to connect past and future has existed in human history since the very start (Kipnis 2017, 759), it is not just a ritual for the alive and deceased, but also a collective and unified imaginary of culture and state. Green funeral emerged in order to build an industry that conforms to the ideology of today's ecological civilization. Green funeral is an emerging concept, and different organizations have different understanding and attention to it. Funeral parlors (*binyiguan* 殡仪馆) may pay more attention to the ceremony and process of the funeral, crematoria may pay more attention to cremators and emissions, and in cities where there are no major ethnic minority groups, local governments will pay more attention to cremation rates. However, the core of green funeral is based on the construction of ecological civilization. It is not only to advocate environmental protection, but also to build an environment-friendly and sustainable funeral industry in order to build the public's green awareness of China's socialist core values as the ultimate goal. In the first central document about green funeral, "Guidance on Promoting Ecological and Land-saving burial" (*Guanyu tuixing jiedi shengtai anzang de zhidao yijian* 关于推行节地生态安葬的指导意见) mentioned that ecological burial is an important measure to change customs and promote the core socialist values, and is also an inevitable step to promote ecological civilization construction ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016](#)).

The funeral reform and green funeral are not just the reform for funeral but also stands for interment. In Chinese it means funeral and interment reform (*Binzang Gaige* 殡葬改革), and based on the policies published by the government, this reform focuses more on the method of interment, for example: the demand of increasing cremation rate and promoting ecological and land-saving burial. However, in most of the English academic literatures (Stewart 2020; Zeng, Sweet and Cheng 2016; Zhang et al. 2021), they translate

this reform as the funeral reform and the act is called green funeral. Therefore, in this thesis, I will also use these terms “the funeral reform” and “green funeral”, but it means both funeral and interment. In addition, one introspection of this thesis, most of the literatures discuss about funerals and burial methods are based on Han Chinese customs, ethnic minorities’ funeral rituals are not included. In this thesis, the Chinese mostly will be referred to Han Chinese.

Motivation

One week before the Lunar New Year in 2020, my grandmother passed away at home in Wuxi, China. It gave me a close experience of funerals for the first time, there were long and tanglesome funeral rituals including, folding and burning numerous paper mâché (spiritual money for the deceased), clothes of my grandmother, paper clothes for her afterlife and 1:1 size of a paper house, having Daoist priest practice Daoist funeral rituals while two old ladies chanting Buddhist sutras in the background. I was sad but also worried since they all in violation of government regulations like do not burn stuff at home, do not keep the body at home and do not do superstitious rituals. The only rule me and my mother followed was cremation. However, when I told my concern to my mother, she had no clue about all these rules. From her perspective, these are the least she can do to let my grandmother rest well in another world. This is a different understanding between me and my mother, the belief of another world. If one doesn’t believe in another world, all of the funeral rituals are meaningless. The process of these funeral rituals is also a process of consolidating the belief of another world. This situation occurred to me and made me think why this situation happened. As far as I know, there are many news, public banners and online articles on green funeral, especially after President Xi Jinping has put ecological civilization as a major framework for China. I wonder the difference in imagination of death between me and mother is only us or more general.

Research Question & Structure of Thesis

As Dan Smyer Yu, James Miller and Peter van der Veer wrote in *Religion and Ecological Sustainability in China*: “the nation-state never stops reinforcing its secular moral compass as a civil religion and producing collective hopes for its continuity in the collective consciousness of its subjects” (Yu, Miller and Veer 2014, 5). Funeral in this case is the secular moral compass, it is a combination of different religions and folk beliefs. By creating a common and collective way of funeral and burial helps China unify different cultures and

beliefs. Therefore, green funeral is critical in reaching the goal of China's ecological civilization. And ecological civilization is also a state-initiated sociotechnical imaginary of global future (Hansen, Li, Svarverud 2018, 195-196). The aim of this thesis is to tell how the state constructs green funeral by changing funeral rituals and the way of burial, and further built a collective imagination guided by socialist ideas with Chinese characteristics. I will demonstrate how green funeral is established in China as a collective state-initiated sociotechnical imaginary based on the interweaved relationships between death, funeral, technology and state imaginary. This includes how are the imaginaries of death changed through the history of China, from earth burial to cremation and now to green funeral? How does the government create new imaginary of death by adapting and interpreting new technologies including cremation and crematoria? How does green funeral construct the new imagination of death for people? What are the public's responses?

In the later chapters I first explain my methodology and theoretical framework of this thesis then I demonstrate the definition of green funeral by government and the aim of it. In order to explain better, I provide a brief discussion on death, funeral, burial and their relationship in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter demonstrates the Chinese way of funeral rituals and the history of different burial methods. The sixth chapter explains how green funeral is demonstrated to public in the way ecological civilization was promoted to the public. There are mostly three ways of reaching that goal: using classical texts to prove green funeral is a traditionally existed ideology; formulate nationwide regulations and policies to ensure that green funeral is legally reasonable and mandatory, and through these regulations to discipline people to believe in green funeral; technology as an emphasis in central and local municipal government to improve green funeral. In the last chapter I combine news and my interviews to present the public's responses to green funeral.

Chapter 1. Methodology

The objective of this thesis is to demonstrate the establishment and impact of green funeral in China. It starts from the government and requires the public to adapt to it. Therefore, I decided to take a qualitative approach combining text analyzation and interviews in this thesis. The establishment of green funeral from the government includes governmental policy and regulations, articles and books published by scholars. In this thesis, I analyzed specific regulations on funeral reform and green funeral from the central government including "Regulations on the Administration of Funeral and Interment 2012 Revision"

(*Binzang guanli tiaoli 2012nian xiuzhengben* 殡葬管理条例 2012 年修正本)([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2012](#)), “Guidance on Promoting Ecological and Land-saving burial” (*Guanyu tuixing jiedi shengtai anzang de zhidao yijian* 关于推行节地生态安葬的指导意见) ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016](#)) Guidance on Further Promoting Funeral Reform and Promoting The Development of Funeral Undertakings (*Guanyu jinyibu tuidong binzang gaige cujin binzang shiye fazhan de zhidao yijian* 关于进一步推动殡葬改革促进殡葬事业发展的指导意见) (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2018). They are the major guidelines of China’s funeral reform representing the voice of central government. There are more relevant policies based on these three, which I have also added in the later chapters.

For academic materials about green funeral, there is a leading academic source, which is the official green book *Report on Funeral Development of China (binzang lübishu* 殡葬绿皮书) issued by the 101 Research Institute in the Ministry of Civil Affairs. In each of the five annual reports, different scholars in their respective fields analyze the technological, cultural, historical, promotional aspects of green funeral. Except governmental policies, they are the most direct voice from the central government. By analyzing these materials, the idea on what the government is trying to achieve in green funeral and how they are going to achieve that goal became much clearer. There are some counter voices from other scholars as well. I summarized them and compared their content and perspective to analyze their aim behind their articles. I also analyzed other related literatures on death and the imagination of death, and Chinese funeral and burial culture. In the Chinese funeral and burial chapter, I summarized the traditional Chinese funeral rituals based on various literatures and also accord with my own experience in a Chinese funeral.

In order to understand better the practical aspect of green funeral, I had three interviews with people from different fields. All interviews were conducted through Wechat video, which is a nationwide social media app. Before the start of interview, I told them about my thesis topic and my intentions with the interview. I asked each interviewee’s consent for audio recording right before the Wechat video. In this thesis, all interviewees are anonymous. I labelled them as sales manager, ecological graveyard buyer and cemetery gardener. After I organized my notes, I deleted the audio recordings. I am familiar with the NSD regulations. Before, during and after the interviews, there was no personal information recorded in any form, hence my interviews are not necessary to report to NSD.

Due to the global pandemic, I was not able to conduct an on-site field trip. It was a big barrier for me at first, thanks to the internet and my mother, I was able to conduct interview with some great and kind-hearted people. Three kind interviewees not just opened their heart to talk to me but also widened my view on green funeral. One of them is a sales manager who sells ecological graveyard in a famous cemetery called Back Garden of Lingshan (*lingshan houhuayuan* 灵山后花园) in my hometown Wuxi. My mother and I met the sales manager before my grandmother's funeral. Since I don't have his contact information personally at first, my mother went to the cemetery to meet him in person and then I conducted the interview with him online through Wechat video. According to him, this cemetery is designed for ecological civilization and green funeral. The cemetery has nine gardens, they are still under construction, but later it will open for ecological graveyards as well. There are several different interments including columbarium in a Buddhist temple, flower/tree burial (bury cremains under trees or flowers in a stone chest) and graveyard with customized tombstone in a garden. He says: "The aim of this cemetery is to combine scenic spot and cemetery together, remove the gloomy and depressing atmosphere in the traditional cemetery and give the cemetery a brand-new image" (Sales manager 2021) Therefore, instead of cemetery, he would rather call it a Buddhist Garden. This cemetery fits all the requirements in green funeral, this place is an overview of how green funerals are shown in practice. Since the sales manager was still working, I couldn't interview him too long. The interview only lasts twenty minutes, fortunately I have prepared my questions ahead, the overall interview was well structured. However, the interview with him brought me another interviewee who is enthusiastic about green funeral.

While I was talking to the sales manager on Wechat, he had a visitor, a customer who has already bought one of the columbarium spots in Back Garden of Lingshan. She is a devout Buddhist, bought that spot because it is close to the Buddha. She showed a high interest on this topic, during my interview with the sales manager, she interspersed many her own opinions. Later after the interview with the sales manager, I asked her if she would like to have an interview. She gladly agreed, we had a total sixty-minute interview. Since I was not prepared to conduct an interview with her, this interview is less structured. However, she provided valuable insights as an ordinary person.

The third interviewee is a graveyard-designer in a cemetery in Shanghai. I found him on a website called *Zhihu* (知乎), where he posts information about funerals and burials in Shanghai. Including him, I also sent out interview invitations to various people who work in

funeral or burial industry on different website and online discussion forums. Others were only willing to accept interviews in text through email. I sent them the interview questions, but since I couldn't conduct my field work in China, I can't prove the authenticity of their jobs. Fortunately, the graveyard-designer, called cemetery gardener, was willing to speak to me through Wechat audio and was more than happy to confirm that his job by showing me his working environment and current project. He has worked in the funeral industry for more than 10 years and has his own unique opinions on the funeral industry from both the policy perspective and the perspective of an ordinary person. Based on that he has designed a special ecological interment and successfully implanted it in Shanghai Songyin Cemetery (*Shanghai Songyin shanzhuang* 上海松隐山庄). His goal is to launch an ecological way of interment that every ordinary people can afford and willing to be there. He explained in detail the various methods of burial and their problems. He also has a deep understanding of green funeral, the tomb he designed follows every suggestion in green funeral's guideline. Although I was well prepared for the interview questions, his extensive knowledge kept the interview going for over an hour and a half. He provides many valuable insights on green funeral. He is not only a practitioner of green funeral, but also an innovator in green funeral.

Since I don't have the chance to go to cemeteries on site, I mostly check the facts of cemeteries through their website and talking to their online customer service. Most large-size cemeteries not only have websites but also Wechat official accounts (*gongzhonghao* 公众号), some even have mobile applications. They showed specific information about graveyard types, services they provide and some even show their certificate to run a cemetery.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

Imagination is a critical word in my research question. People build their imagination of death, a collective imagination of nation and an imaginary of life that is constantly changing due to technology. Death and afterlife are constructed imaginations through the history of human beings. It must be dependent on shared experience, shared memory and the use of developed language (Renfrew 2016, 4). Scholars have approached imagination as a critical function in society and nation building. Benedict Anderson has described imagination as a useful tool to unite people in nation and construct a shared narrative of society, in order to create a more united nation (Anderson, 2006). In green funeral, protecting environment and saving land resources are the first steps. The ultimate goal in green funeral is to help the public create a green awareness, which is living a harmonious life with nature. This

environmental awareness is built based on the basic knowledge of environmental protection and combined with a collective nation identity and core values of socialism ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016](#)).

In Anderson's book *Imagined Communities*, the success of constructing one shared imagination is because of the invention of printing technology (Anderson, 2006). Technology has been a driven force in the history of Chinese funeral reforms since the 20th century as well. From earth burial to cremation nationwide, the government needs systematic and collective crematoria with cremators in every city, even village. Various technologies are required in green funeral as well, technology innovations combining funeral, burial and Internet together, reducing Dioxin emission in crematoria and degradable funeral and burial related products. In implementing Internet in funeral and burial services, the government emphasis on registering all funeral and burial related information online and building a comprehensive system that can connect all recorded data ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2018](#)). Since funeral and burial are still the responsibility of individual family, it is difficult to fully control the whole process by the government. Although cremation has already been a must for non-Muslim Chinese, following all the green funeral rules requires more initiative from the public to be disciplined. A collective imagination will help discipline the public. Therefore, imagination and technology are key concepts in this thesis. A comprehensive theory combining imagination and technology is Sheila Jasanoff's socio-technical imaginary.

The major ideological framework in China is ecological civilization. Based on the article by Mette Halskov Hansen, Hongtao Li and Rune Svarverud, they suggest "the idea of ecological civilization is a good example of a state-initiated sociotechnical imaginary in which cultural and political moral virtues constitute key components that are inseparable from technological, judicial, and political values" (Hansen, Li, Svarverud 2018 196). Green funeral is also a state-initiated ideology, according to Guidance on Promoting Ecological and Land-saving burial, it is a critical step in reaching the goal of ecological civilization ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016](#)). Technology, social and political values and collective imagination are the core of green funeral. These are also the key points in socio-technical imaginary.

In *Imagined Communities*, the nationwide media helps the nation to spread its idea, policy and ideology (Anderson, 2006). Sheila Jasanoff has taken a step further and raised a theory of sociotechnical imaginary. She agrees Anderson's idea that imagination can help uniting a social community with a shared perception of future (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 6). As technology has been booming in the 20th and 21st century, print is not the only technology helps the state control the discourse. Except big scale ideologies like nationalism, more

smaller scale ideologies could also be interpreted by sociotechnical imaginary (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 7). A state naturally has jurisdiction of their physical and virtual territory. Science and technology are included in the state's institutional imaginaries to practice its authority (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 333). Sociotechnical imaginary is associated with "active exercise of state power", the state can directly interfere with how people perceive themselves, including all things present, past and future (Jasanoff and Kim 2009, 123-124).

By the definition of Jasanoff, sociotechnical imaginaries are "collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures (or of resistance against the undesirable), and they are also animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology." (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 19) Specific national science technology projects can help countries build a form of social life with a more specific imagination (Jasanoff and Kim 2009, 120-121). In green funeral, the technologies are implementing collective cremators in state-run crematorium in every city and village, Dioxin emission and the combination of internet with funeral and burial. Although the second one is still in its experimental stage, it is certainly the most high-profile project in green funeral. In the official green book *Report on Funeral Development of China*, almost one third of them provided possible schemes about employing internet technologies in funeral industry. From this can also see the importance of scientific research in green funeral.

According to Jasanoff, through specific technology projects, the state can also be directly involved in individuals' hopes and desire for the future through socio-technological imagination and strengthening the connection between the past and the present. The imagination of the future is also a self-projection of the present and the past, because the imagination of the future is based on the present and the past (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 22). Past and future are important factors composed imaginaries. The embedding process also requires the public and nonstate actors to have share memory and desired future (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 327-328). An imaginary is "a continually rearticulated awareness of order in social life" (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 26), if the technology upgrades the imaginary will also be influenced. Therefore, constant innovation is constantly overturning the existing imagination. Death is a combination of past and future, the rituals for the deceased families project their imagination of the life after death based on the technology they currently have. By updating the technologies in funeral and burial, the imaginary of death has also changed.

Chapter 3. Green Funeral

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, the CPC Central Committee and the State Council have placed ecological civilization in a prominent position and make coordinated efforts to integrate this policy into the overall plan of “Five-sphere Integration (*wuweiyiti* 五位一体)” (China Daily 2012). According to Hansen, Li and Svarverud, ecological civilization in China works as a socio-technical imaginary to promote a vision of future. The initial point of this vision is not the environment. The government has not actively proposed solutions to the real environmental problems. It is more about placing the responsibility of environmental protection on the citizens, so as to build up the environmental awareness they want. This environmental awareness is not only the basic knowledge of environmental protection, but also combined with a collective nation identity and the ideas of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Hansen, Li, Svarverud, 2018 202). As Chen Xia, Peng Guoxiang and James Miller stated, protecting ecological systems is not just protect the ecosystems so human beings could have a more sustainable life. It also creates an ethical obligation to connect human beings with nature (Chen, Peng and Miller 2014, 82). However, the interpretation of how to reach this goal is fully controlled by the central government in China. As the Chinese state also controls the interpretation of modernity, nation, and science (Bruun 2014, 166). These concepts are the cornerstone for constructing an imagination. Imagination is an important reservoir of power and action, it not only helps to build a collective nation identity but also build a network with diffused responsibilities to depoliticize power in order to make government’s action more invisible (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 17). By controlling these interpretations, the new imaginary can therefore be constructed on a more solid level. Implementing a new imaginary requires building an intricate network, it needs step-by-step layers to weave this network. In this chapter, I provide the basic but critical background information of green funeral and an overall looking of green funeral. Later in chapter 5, I demonstrate the major parts that composed this giant network side by side including academic exploration and discussion by scholars, changes and implementations in policy, and technology innovation and improvement. Through these aspects, the government can realize the construction of imagination in green funeral.

In green funeral, the government and some scholars from the 101 Research Institute in Ministry of Civil Affairs, believe that promoting green funerals can raise citizen’ green awareness and green funeral is a sense of Chinese cultural continuity and identity. Based on

the official green book *Report on Funeral Development of China*, Green Funeral refers to the use of advanced science and technology, advanced equipment and advanced management concept, in order to achieve sustainable development of the funeral model. Through this model to construct the green awareness of citizens. (Yang, Sun and Qu 2010, 2-3). Green funeral should abandon the undesirable customs of funeral, reform the burial method, innovate the memorial mode, highlight the humanistic characteristics, and construct modern funeral modes. There are three major modes: environment friendly, resource saving and the combination of nature and man (*tianrenheyi* 天人合一) (Zhou 2017, 2). This long-lasting funeral reform starts from changing the traditional burial method which stores the deceased body in a coffin and bury it underground with tombstone on top as a graveyard. Most of these graveyards are located near their family members, normally the backyard of the family or an empty space in the village (Kipnis 2019b, 2). Until 1949 the founding of People's Republic of China, this tradition started to be replaced by cremation nationwide. However, almost all of the cremains are still buried underground with traditional graveyards in collective cemeteries. In green funeral, it suggests preserve cremains in a more environmental-friendly and sustainable way or even not preserving cremains. This is building for the ultimate goal of not preserve cremains, but only preserve the deceased life culture. In other words, is the memory and story of one's life, nothing tangible should be stored. Thus, the long chain of funeral reform can be interpreted as first changing from preserving bodies to cremation (not preserving bodies). Then shift to not preserve cremains but keep graveyards and tombstone by using biodegradable materials or scatter the cremains in the cemeteries. The last step is only preserving one's life culture, the life stories of him/her and keep no graveyard and tombstone. China at present, is in the step of promoting mandatory cremation nationwide. Promoting green funeral could push China's funeral reform further.

Green funeral contains two burial methods, ecological burial and land-saving burial, the only difference is ecological burial does not preserve cremains while land-saving burial does. In the guideline of promoting ecological and land-saving burial, ecological burial aims to save resources in nature, put environmental protection as the value orientation, in order to encourage and guide people to adopt tree, flower and grass burial which cremains are buried underground in biodegradable cinerary caskets and on top there are trees, flowers and grass. The cremains will be decomposed in the soil after years. Another method of not preserving cremains is scattering cremains in ocean (sea burial) or cemeteries. ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016](#)).

Land-saving burial, namely, to save land and resources. It aims to encourage and guide people to occupy as less land as possible for burial. It includes tree burial (bury cremains inside a stone chest made of marble underground but replace tombstones with trees), deep burial (bury cremains deep underground) and store cremains in columbarium. Through land-saving burial, the cremains can be buried in a way that does not occupy or occupy less land and consumes less resources (Ma, Zhu, Zhang and Xiao 2010, 5). At the meantime, using less non-degradable materials, in order to make the funeral activities conform to the ecological concept of harmonious development between human and nature (Huang 2017, 1). All these burial methods mentioned above are not the common way of burial in China. This overturns many Chinese perceptions of burial, which underscores the importance of building new imaginaries. Building a new vision of death can make people more receptive to this new way of burial. However, it can also be understood that promoting policies and new burial methods can change people's previous imagination of death, just like cremation. This is a mutually reinforcing process.

At present, a "crematorium and cemetery" dual mechanism based on the characteristics of the Chinese funeral culture is the core of the modern social service system. It basically creates a closed-loop service chain including transfers of remains, cremation, memorial hall and storage of cremains (Ma, Li and Guo 2017, 1; Kipnis 2019a, 271). By limiting the public to institutions like crematoria and cemeteries, weaved the network tighter and tighter. These institutions have absolute control over burial methods and funerals rituals. Since these institutions are either state-run or private companies with close ties to the government, they would strictly follow the regulations.

The government has been pushing Internet service in funeral industry, which focuses logging every step of a deceased body from dead to buried online. First, register the deceased death information online once he/she passed away, so his/her pension and other welfare will be cancelled automatically. Second, register the deceased arrival information at the funeral parlors to avoid individuals holding funeral ceremonies with corpse at home. At last, register cremains at crematoria and later to cemeteries to monitor the cremation rate and buried location, in order to prevent private earth burial and bury cremains in coffin (Li 2017; Ma, Li and Guo 2017; Ma, Liu and Yan 2017; Qi 2017). Through this, the government can keep track on every deceased body and make sure those bodies followed their standard procedure.

Based on Jasanoff and Kim's definition of sociotechnical imaginary, it is a collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable

through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 4). As a nationwide reform, green funeral already has collectively held and institutionally stabilized aspects. Technology has always been the priority in green funeral as well. Technology innovation in burial method, cremators and Internet services are the major discussion in it. It is only lacking public perform with shared understandings in green funeral. Therefore, the state combines green funeral with Chinese traditional values to create an illusion that green funeral has been a Chinese tradition for a long time in history. It not only builds a tradition but also a continuously national and cultural identity.

Green funeral as a concept and mode, the key to the implementation lies in people's recognition. Deng Haijun (邓海骏) and Guo Lin (郭林) who wrote the paper on green funeral that has been cited and downloaded the most in China Academic Journals. They argue, this recognition requires the public to first identify with the funeral and burial mode that is conducive to resource saving and environment protection, and then link green funeral to the significance of cultural connotation and ecological civilization. The more important recognition is that through green funeral, the public can identify with the traditional Confucian concept of compassion and filial piety. Taking family identity as the starting point, it can rise up to social identity, and then rise to ethnic and national identity (Deng and Guo 2013, 83). According to these arguments, it can be seen that environmental protection is not the only goal of green funeral. The ultimate goal of green funeral is, to establish an ideology dominated by the core values of socialism with Chinese characteristics and supplemented by ecological civilization. In order to understand green funeral better, it is crucial to explain some important concepts first, like death, funeral, burial and the Chinese understanding of them.

Chapter 4. Death, Funeral and Burial

An inevitable topic in green funeral is the relationship between death, funeral and burial. In this chapter, I will provide some background information about death, funeral and burial overall, in order to connect imagination with death, funeral and burial better. Different cultures have various understanding of these concepts and the relationships between them, but there is a universal core, which is imagination. In the ancient philosopher Lucretius's word, the relationship between a dead body as a person is nothing but an act of projection (Laqueur 2015, 57). People react to their thoughts and emotions as if the deceased are still

aware of the living's behaviors. These are based on the living's imagination of death. The imagination of future is also a self-projection of the present and the past.

People fear death and respect death. Memento mori in western concept means to respect life and death and emphasize on the definite of death (Shaw 2009, 251). Death in China means becoming either a spirit who has a continued relationship with its family or a ghost that endangers society (Crowder 2003, 2). In Andrew Kipnis's words, "one person's ancestors are another's ghosts" (Kipnis 2019a, 263). Although in materialism perspective, the deceased will be vanished after death. However, the deceased still matter, "because we cannot bear to give them up, because the ordinary dead partake of the holiness of the special dead and its equivalent in the modern world, and perhaps simply because they have always mattered" (Laqueur 2015, 54). Funeral is not a must in every culture. A systematical funeral and burial process is a not just a response to the death but also a social response based on shared experience and shared memory (Renfrew 2016, 4). It is not the body that got buried, but the personas (Kus 2013, 1). It is the memory, the life marks of the deceased. Funeral helps the living to continue to remember their deceased family members and creates ongoing interactions with them as well (Crowder 2003). Funeral as a ritual sacralize the deceased either as a soul or a form of spiritual value to let them live on (Kipnis 2019a, 254-255). By sacralizing the deceased, funerary rituals become a tie that glues secular and religious world together. The gap between those two worlds is much blurrier in funeral than in any other aspect. Funerary ritual is the product of the accumulation of social and cultural values. Funeral as the connection between past and future, creates a common imagination of death and the deceased among human beings. More importantly by creating that collective imagination, a shared identity is also created and kept through the practice of funeral.

Chapter 5. Chinese Funeral and Burial

Green funeral aims to substitute the traditional part of the funeral to a Chinese socialism mode, combining a strong national identity. In the first part of this chapter, I demonstrate a typical Han Chinese funeral and burial process. It is based on my own experience in China, but all details have academic literatures as support, which I also put citation after them. In the second part of this chapter, I further elaborate on how Chinese funerals have changed from the end of 1950s, when the first funeral reforms began, to the present day, and how burial method changed from earth burial to cremation. The state has been actively involving in people's imagination of social life. It changes the imaginary of the

future funeral, implementing a mode fits more in Chinese socialist values. For instance, mandatory cremation for non-Muslims, frugal funeral and burial, no superstitious products in funeral. Mandatory cremation constructs a new collective imagination of death, by eliminating the core of tradition funeral and burial, the corpse. From the belief of afterlife to a materialistic world, from an individual decision to a state mandatory regulation.

A shared identity is formed by memory, culture and language (Smith 1998). Funeral rituals as an expression of cultural identity have great impact on self-identification for Chinese. As Watson states, “Those who chose not to perform funerals according to standard procedure were marked as non-Chinese or, worse yet, as dangerous sectarians” (Watson 1988, 17). In Chinese funeral, common rituals help unify the diversified Chinese culture, but it also allows room for regional differences (Watson 1988, 3-4, 15). In contemporary China, a government enforced policy has enhanced it. Funeral and burial should be an individual’s decision. However, mandatory regulations from the government make funeral and burial become a collective action and let the state directly involved in individual’s everyday life through mandatory cremation and abolition of major funeral rituals (Whyte 1988, 308-309). Individual started to vanish in society. According to Jasanoff and Kim, imagination can help unit a social community in shared perceptions of future and afterlife that should or should not be realized (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 6). This imagination has been changing since the first funeral reform, in the end of 1950s. Green funeral brings the funeral reform into a higher level. In the first funeral reform, it aimed at abolishing superstition and saving land. Today’s green funeral hopes to realize the public’s identification with Chinese culture and even national identity by changing the way of funeral and burial.

5.1 The Change of Funeral Rituals

生在阳间有散场， 死归地府也何妨？

阳间地府俱相似， 只当漂流在异乡。

—— 唐寅 《伯虎绝笔》 / 《临终诗》

There is always an end in this world we are living, it doesn't matter if we are going to the underworld.

The life in this world and the underworld are all similar, it will only feel like drifting in another land.

Tang Yin “Elegy from Bohu” / “Deathbed Poem” (1470-1524)

(Tang 1970, 160)

Thomas Laqueur has argued in a conference discussion that in China there is no radical dualism of separating body from soul. Unlike European's thought that body and soul will be forever parted (Watson 1988, 8), Chinese believed a continuity between the current world and the underworld (Watson 1988, 8; Crowder 2003; Kipnis 2019a, 266). Another world or underworld (*difu* 地府) is a highly bureaucratized supernatural domain, there are many parallels with today's life as well. A court of hell is the place for the deceased to be judged based on their life before death and their relatives' "bribery" during funeral rituals. Those "briberies" mostly are paper mâché (spiritual money) that burnt during funerals, normally at least ten packs of paper mâché with one hundred pieces in each pack will be burnt in one funeral, a funeral accessories store owner told me during my grandmother's funeral. After the trial, those souls will be allocated to different regions based on the result of the trial. According to Maspero's observations in Jiangsu and based on my experience as a native from Jiangsu, a 1:1 size house made of paper is crucial in funeral, they must live around the palaces of the Yama King's (*Yanluo Wang*, 阎罗王) infernal and continue one's job in his/her early life (Maspero, 1981; Cohen 1988, 187; Crowder 2003, 9). Yama King is a Daoist god who judges dead people in the underworld based on their behavior in their early life. Burning a paper made house could give the deceased a place to live, so they won't worry about housing problems like in the living world. The spirits of deceased could rest well, it will also assure the good fortune of the living. These rituals are the paving stones for deepening people's imagination of death, and through these rituals, the image of underworld becomes much more convincing. The image of afterlife is much clearer, the idea of an extended life is rooted in people's mind.

Most Chinese funeral rituals are combinations of Daoist and Buddhist ideologies (Watson, 1988; Naquin 1988, 40-41; Gu, 2000; Crowder 2003, 11; Hetmanczyk 2019, 222-223; Belloq 2012, 102), but as Tucker and Grim said, unlike western views of religions, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism in China are not completely separated religions (Tucker and Grim 2014, 22). Although Chinese funerals are mixes of different religions, they remain as unified rituals with their local or regional distinctiveness (Watson 1988, 17). Based on the literature reviews and my own experience, Chinese funerals consist of four parts. The deceased are usually enshrined in their homes, and there are refrigerated caskets designed to protect the body. Normally the lid is made of glass so the people that come by later to show their respects could see the body without having an open lid. The first step is to dress up the body with burial clothes (*shouyi* 寿衣) or fancier clothes the deceased one has, then put the

body into refrigerated casket. Next to the casket is a home altar filled with sacrificial supplies, including incense sticks, candles, fruit, snacks and a picture of the deceased person. This kind of setting usually lasts 3, 5, or 7 days so the friends and families will have enough time to come by and pay their respects (Kipnis 2019b, 3; Bellocq 2012, 99). The second step is notifying all the friends and families, while waiting for them, the family members also need to do various rituals like folding and burning paper mâché (spiritual money), keep the incense sticks and candles illuminated non-stop. Kins of the deceased need to perform kowtow (*ketou* 磕头) every time they change incense sticks or candles, friends and families also need to perform kowtow when they visit (Kipnis 2019a, 261). The third step is transporting the body to the funeral parlor. It is a one-stop center providing services like transporting and conserving the body in refrigerated lockers, providing memorial halls, cremating the remains (on site or at the nearest crematorium), returning the ashes to the family (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 86; Bellocq 2012, 104-105). People from one-stop dragon (*yitiaolong* 一条龙), a small private company cover all funeral related matters from start to finish, help the deceased family members dealing with other businesses like booking music bands for the funeral, contacting Daoist priests and deliver the body to crematorium and later to cemetery. They will help move the body from the refrigerated casket to a wooden one and fill the wooden casket with flowers and paper mâché (Kipnis 2019a, 256). Before cremation, there is a memorial meeting at the funeral parlor. The body will be displayed in the open casket, while the representatives of the family will give a short eulogy.

One notable detail here is, every memorial meeting is hosted by a staff member working in the funeral parlor. Usually, not only do they control the proceedings of the memorial meeting, but they also ask people to bow instead of kowtow at the end. After the first funeral reform in the end of 1950s, funeral parlors have been one of the discourses for the government to abolish feudal superstition like suggesting bowing instead of kowtow (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 77; Whyte 1988, 295), hence in such a formal venue, people are only asked to bow. State-run crematorium and funeral parlor represent the state aesthetics, but the private crematorium also bonds closely with municipal government, it is a sub-representation of state aesthetic. They help to monitor and influence funeral practices.

Funerals revolve around the body in the home. For policy reasons, people who passed away in hospitals in urban areas must be placed in funeral homes directly (Cemetery gardener 2021). Funerals are held in funeral parlors as well, but this greatly affects the funeral rituals. According to my interview with a staff member that works in a cemetery in Shanghai, who

sees himself as a cemetery gardener. He claimed this type of workers at formal funeral parlors can have great influence on the funeral rituals if the deceased relatives are not familiar with traditional funeral rituals. He said: “normally, those people who lost their kins are extremely sad and try to compensate the deceased with luxurious funerals (Cemetery gardener 2021). The staff sometimes even promote unorthodox businesses, such as placing fake copper coins (usually worth between 100 and 1,000RMB, approximately 16-160USD) in casket before cremation, in an effort to boost sales. I have also been asked by the staff in crematorium before they put my grandmother to be cremated. They said it will be a good fortune for me and my mother in the future. They are using the vulnerable parts of people, the sadness of losing a family member, the virtue of filial piety and the expectation of good fortune in the future.

However, they are not always the most important site in funerals. According to Andrew Kipnis, in rural funerals, the only function of state-run crematoria/funeral parlors is to cremate the deceased body, funeral rituals mostly take place at home. In urban China, state-run crematoria/funeral parlors have more significant role in funeral rituals. Since most urbanites, unlike people in rural areas, are not familiar with funeral procedures or relatives who have this kind of knowledge (Kipnis 2019b, 2-3). As Jasanoff claims, sociotechnical imaginary is not only performed by the state, but corporations could also articulate and propagate it. It is the same in green funeral, corporations like funeral parlors and cemeteries helps creating a new imaginary of death. A possible future is once the infrastructure in rural areas is improved, more funeral parlors and crematoria will emerge. This will help implement green funeral spread across the country in the future. The government is also focusing on building cremation facilities in rural areas.

After the memorial meeting, the body will be cremated, and the family will receive the cremains in the cinerary casket they have already bought. After that, comes the burial, but it is up to the family to choose. For those who haven't bought or cannot afford a burial site, they can deposit the cremains at the funeral parlor. If they have already bought one, they can go straight to the cemetery. The last step of the funeral is banquet, the size may vary depends on the wealth of the family, but in rural area comparing to urbanites tend to spend much more money on that. (Kipnis 2019b, 4).

The funeral ritual in urban area is fragmented. Green funeral discourse incorporates and defines the dead in a collective way, both structurally and morally. Chinese funerals focus more on the interactions between the deceased and the living, and the future image of both sides will have. As Bruun said, Chinese popular religion forms part of a complex

dialogue with state rationalism and provides backing to popular life goals and values (Bruun 2014, 166). Funeral as one important practice in Chinese popular religion, how funeral is practiced is crucial to the state. Green funeral wants to be the continuity of traditional culture, but it also requires modern ideologies and technologies to support it. Under the govern of Chinese Communist Party, funeral needs to fit more in socialism with Chinese characteristic. Same as funerals, burial methods also play an important role in green funeral.

5.2 From Burial/Earth burial (*Tuzang* 土葬) to Cremation

As my grandmother and many other elders always said: “The most important thing is to be buried well, I can only rest well in peace by being buried (*Rutu weian* 入土为安).” It reflects the importance of burial in traditional Chinese culture. Most Chinese believe there is a continuity of their spirit after their death (Bellocq 2012, 103). Thus, preserving the corpse/body underground as a whole is necessary. Earth burial is a form of burial in which human remains are first placed in caskets and then buried underground. Gravestones and memorial platforms are set in front of the grave for later generations to hold memorial ceremonies. A well buried body like that will later become a peaceful spirit, which will give the family good fortune for many generations. On the contrary, a body with improper disposal will later become a fierce spirit and will cause damage on the livings’ luck. If the spirit is strong enough, it will cause more horrible havoc (Crowder 2003, 2). Hence a proper burial not only functions as a respect to the deceased, but also as a continued interaction between the living and the deceased. Therefore, location becomes a crucial part when choosing grave land. Many funerals with earth burial will have geomancer around, they will choose a flourishing land that is also close the deceased family (Bellocq 2012, 101-102; Yu, Miller and Veer 2014, 10). Chinese authorities have long ago ruled out traditional *feng shui* as a positive contribution to modern society, both culturally and scientifically. Remarkably, there was also a consensus among early Chinese ecologists (Bruun 2014, 174). Therefore, the belief of continuity of living spirit is the main obstacle in the funeral reform. Hiring geomancer later also be considered as a feudal superstition, which should be abolished in green funeral, according to Regulation on Funeral and Interment Control (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2012).

Earth burial is described as a primitive and land wasting funeral mode in the *Report on Funeral Development of China* (Huang 2017, 2). It mainly exists in ethnic minorities and some areas lack of economic developments at present time. Earth burial is not considered as

ecological and sustainable as cremation (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 76-77), especially land resource is wasted. A graveyard normally constitutes a tombstone and caskets underneath it. They can be placed in the backyard of a family or some fields in the village (Kipnis 2019b, 2). Based on the first funeral reform, earth burial not only took much space but also impeded mechanized farming method. Therefore, in 1954, an extensive campaign was launched to promote cremation.

Earth burial has always been the majority until Republic of China in the early 20th century, cremation has been brought up again to against feudalism (Hetmanczyk 2019, 226-228). After the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, cremation has become the dominant method to dispose bodies. In 1956, several leading cadres from the CCP signed a petition to agree on cremation for themselves including, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and etc. ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2019](#)). It is an official proclamation that the government has decided to use cremation instead of earth burial. In addition, due to the tremendous high death rate in 1958-1962, traditional earth burial could not bear all the dead bodies at one time, cremation became an inevitable choice. (Hetmanczyk 2019, 234). This has also accelerated the implementation of cremation in China.

Although cremation has existed in China for a long time, the idea of funeral parlor and crematorium is very recent. The wide popularization of funeral parlor and crematorium did not exist until 1970s-1980s (Aveline-Dubach 2012; Kipnis 2019b, 7). It built a solid cornerstone for the implementation of cremation. The new technology in crematorium has made a collective cremation possible nationwide. Instead of just burning the corpse in fire, a more efficient cremator with less emission of Dioxin has to be built.

Cremation is the core of green funeral, but it is still harmful to the environment. According to a report on cremation, the emission of cremation pollutants will continue to increase in twenty years, thus affecting the improvement of the overall ambient air quality. In the National Implementation Plan, the funeral industry (cremation of human remains) is listed as one of the six priority industries for dioxin reduction, with specific requirements and timetabled (Wang and Xue 2017, 4). Another report on cremation claims a stricter emission standard and installation of best available flue gas purification system are necessary (Xue et al. 2015, 35). Dioxin is a long lasting persistent organic pollutant, which is stable in air. It is extremely hard to be completely filtered. One of my interviewees, cemetery gardener, he said "dioxins cause a lot of air pollution. It costs millions of dollars to treat the emission in crematoria, but it cannot be completely cleaned up. Families living near crematoria have a higher risk of cancer. If the government really wanted to protect the environment, it would

not just promote cremation, such as in Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai, where 100 percent cremation is an indicator of a civilized city (*wenming chengshi* 文明城市)” (Cemetery gardener 2021).

Except saving more land, mandatory cremation for the public also promotes the socialist values of the current government, which is a further advantage of cremation. By removing the main focus of the funeral ritual, the body of the deceased, can reduce the symbolic power of the funeral ritual. In traditional funeral practices, it was necessary to practice some rituals in order to bind the corpse and its soul together at the beginning. Therefore, the deceased could continue his/her underworld life (Watson 1988, 8). Laqueur points out that in China there is no absolute dualism between a body and a soul (Watson 1988, 8), it means the soul will not leave the corpse after death. As Whyte states, “Cremation itself expresses the finality of death, with no remaining bones and souls requiring perpetual care” (Whyte 1988, 309). Now if the center of the funeral, corpse, no longer exists because of cremation, the soul will probably be burnt and disappeared with it. If both the body and the soul disappear, then it is a complete dejection from the world. There will be no underworld and afterlife. Without underworld and afterlife, it will be impossible that the deceased could influence the present world. Without this concern, the main obstacle in green funeral could be alleviated. Demanding cremation as an obligatory for citizens is a base for constructing social and environmental awareness for them. Therefore, in green funeral, cremation is one of the essential conditions. Not only is it going to be more sustainable, but it’s also going to change the imaginary of death. In Laqueur’s *The work of the dead*, he comments “Cremation in its technological, economic, and ecological registers thus embraced a hopelessly utopian high modernism” (Laqueur 2015, 521). Perhaps the future of cremation in China is uncertain, but for now what is certain is that the government is doing everything possible to promote this. In summary, cremation is not very environmentally friendly but only because it fits in the socialist ideas with Chinese characteristics.

Normally, those funeral rituals related to underworld and afterlife are considered superstitious and harmful by CCP (Whyte 1988, 293). However, the public still shows strong will to preserve and care for cremains (Whyte 1988, 309). It can be seen that the traditional thoughts are not easy to change. The obstacle that people still believe the continuity of living spirit cannot be completely solved. Therefore, a further step has been proposed, which is green funeral. In order to achieve goals in green funeral, further implementations were made.

In the next chapter, I explain the details on how the imaginary of green funeral is implemented through academic discussion, technology, and government policies.

Chapter 6. The Implementation of Green Funeral

6.1 A Selective Tradition of Green Funeral

Like Pan Yue in establishing ecological civilization (Hansen, Li and Svarverud, 2018), some scholars also have significant impact on promoting green funeral. Some scholars in *Report on Funeral Development of China* choose selective materials to prove Chinese traditional beliefs is one of the fundamentals in green funeral, because they believe green funeral is a long-existed tradition in China. Most of them are researchers from 101 Research Institute in Ministry of Civil Affairs, some are scholars from funeral research groups at leading universities, while others are professors in various fields. By choosing selective traditional materials, some scholars in *Report on Funeral Development of China* and government use traditional texts to extend the continuity of a traditional culture and a collective nation in order to enhance nation's collective identity. In addition to traditional beliefs, most scholars in *Report on Funeral Development of China* believe that some traditional cultural characteristics should be maintained in green burial, such as filial piety.

The nexus linking filial piety and funeral rituals or ancestral worship is also a delicate issue for the Chinese Communist Party. In a soon-to-be aging society in China, the challenge of caring for the large population of elderly will fall to their children. Filial piety as a long-lasting traditional virtue, now has also become a rationalization of the government's lack of care for the elderly, in order to spread the responsibility of caring for the elders onto the individuals (Kipnis 2019b, 10-11). At the same time, since the Republic of China in 1912, the government has been promoting to public to put as little energy and financial resources on funeral customs as possible (Hetmanczyk 2019, 226-228), and tried to separate filial piety from funeral customs (Kipnis 2019b, 10-11). Therefore, 'Thick Care, Thin Funerals' (*Houyang Bozang* 厚养薄葬) has become a repeated slogan when promoting green funeral. The literal meaning is treating your family well while they are alive, bury them frugally when they die.

Some authors in *Report on Funeral Development of China* have been trying to prove that thin funeral or frugal burial has always been a Chinese tradition. However other scholars also claim that there is also a long history of costly burial in China (Han 1998; Lu 1996; Qi 2015). Most scholars in *Report on Funeral Development of China* quote classic Chinese

philosophers like Confucius, Xun Zi, Mo Zi and Zhuang Zi's idea of frugal burial to prove the orthodoxy of green burial. Scholars holding the opposite views have argued that even though Chinese socialists and Confucianism in ancient times have the same vision of frugal burial, their starting point is completely different.

In the official green book *Report on Funeral Development of China*, one of the scholars Wang Juan (王娟) who is now an associate professor of Chinese literature at Peking University. She wrote an article claiming that in the history of traditional Chinese funeral, frugal burial has always occupied a dominant position. The history of funeral in China, more accurately, should be a history of thrifty or frugal burial (Wang 2015, 8). She believes that the ancient custom of frugal burial is of great significance to the contemporary reform of burial. Promoting frugal burial can alter the concept of costly burial as a traditional Chinese burial custom. Wang also claims that from the perspective of history, although the trend of costly burial has existed since ancient times, it often goes against the tradition, and it has been criticized by the majority in all dynasties (Wang 2015, 8-9).

Another scholar Wang Fuzi (王夫子), who is the co-founder and now the head of the funeral department at Changsha Social Work College (*Changsha Minzheng Zhiye Jishu Xueyuan* 长沙民政技术学院). It is the first and largest funerary program among Chinese colleges, aiming to raise well-educated funerary workers. The network of its graduates spread all over the nation in cemeteries, funeral parlors and crematoria. This college keep solid relationship with state, employers and the school. This college is at the forefront of the funeral and burial industry in China (Kipnis 2019a, 256-259). Wang Fuzi claims that the Chinese traditional funeral culture system is subordinate to the Chinese traditional Confucian culture system. Confucianism has always had the tradition of 'Thick Care, Thin Funerals' (Wang 2013, 4, 9). The main editor of *Report on Funeral Development of China* Li Bosen (李伯森), who is the director of 101 Research Institute in Ministry of Civil Affairs. He quotes Confucius, Mo Zi and Zhuang Zi's texts to prove that frugal burial has been the leading role in history of funeral culture in China, Thick Care and Thin Funerals has always been the main theme as well (Li 2017, 18). However, in his earlier articles in the official green book, not until the latest book in 2017, he has never mentioned traditional texts about frugal burial. In his reports during 2010-2015, costly burial is still considered as the Chinese traditional custom.

The scholars above are historians, in all of their articles, they quote historical text to prove the orthodoxy of frugal burial in China. However, in the same book, other scholars who

are not historians have the opposite understanding. Their articles are mostly about current issues in funeral and burial industry. Although, they didn't try to prove the importance of costly burial in history like the historians above did, many details showed they believe costly burial is the Chinese traditional custom. They naturally call costly burial as the traditional Chinese culture as a fact. For instance, in the main article of each year's green book, "Report on Funeral Development of China 2014-2015". This article is written by the main editors of this book. They claim, "We must be aware of China's traditional customs, such as being buried in the grave for peace and costly burial, formed over thousands of years, are still deeply rooted in people's mind" (Li, Xiao, Ma and Zhou 2015, 12). One of the main editors of this green book, Xiao Chenglong (肖成龙). He is a deputy director of 101 Research Institute in Ministry of Civil Affairs. In his article, "The Inheritance and Development of Funeral Services in China", he said that "the main funeral custom of the Han Chinese emphasizes on costly burial" (Xiao 2010, 12). More details can be traced in this book series. When scholars point out that there are some remaining issues in funeral industry, scholars tend to use costly burial as a reason for slow progress in green funeral (Huang 2017; Li, Xiao, Ma and Zhou 2015; Wang 2015). They argue that costly funerals are so deeply embedded in people's perceptions that it is difficult to change them now. Therefore, it is safe to say costly burial and frugal burial have both existed in the Chinese history for a long time. However, it is not legit to use this as a proof to claim the orthodoxy of green funeral as a long-lasting tradition. History is dialectical, different cultures and values could co-exist in the same society. As Jasanoff said, different imaginaries can co-exist in one society as well (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015, 4). Linking traditional values to green funeral is helpful to continue the national identity, but the aim behind tradition and green funeral is different.

Philip Hetmanczyk has a thorough observation on costly funeral and frugal funeral in China. In his view, China has a long history of costly burial. Although its shape and practices have changed throughout the Chinese history, the idea of burying the dead in a ritually and economically elaborate manner is a persisting feature of Chinese burial culture (Hetmanczyk 2019, 221). He rejects any link between Confucian culture and 'Thick Care, Thin Funerals' which is now promoted by the government. Since when the Chinese socialists were on the rise, they see feudalism as a cultural and historical problem of China's economic modernization. They were trying to detach themselves from the Confucian culture of feudalism. Some even blame Confucian culture for the costly funerals (Hetmanczyk 2019, 238). In the context of socialism, death is no longer a family affair, but a problem of the

commune and the work unit. The commune and the work unit are responsible for holding a memorial service (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 86-88; Bellocq 2012, 106-107). This is completely different from the Confucian view of funeral.

Hetmanczyk believes Confucian objections to costly funerals were not a consequence of economic considerations, but a side-effect of an imaginary social and political order based on family values and rituals (Hetmanczyk 2019, 226). Wang Fuzi also agrees with this point (Wang 2013, 6). Confucianists condemned costly burials because it harms one's social status. In a Confucian society family ethics is especially important including the hierarchies and their privileges and duties in the performance of family rituals. For the Confucians, costly funerals represents a danger to what they perceived as a stratified social order. Thus, frugal funeral become the ideal ethical method in family ethics (Wang 2013; Hetmanczyk 2019, 221). Hetmanczyk and Wang both agree with this perspective. However, socialists did not refer to family ethics, but to the task of building up a socialist civilization and to frugality as an important moral and ethical virtue to do so. Socialists see costly funerals as a social tradition based on class and status, which is incompatible with the socialist idea of a classless society. Hetmanczyk argues in Communist China the promotion of frugality in death and burial is not to ensure social differences and hierarchies, but to ensure equality and community (Hetmanczyk 2019, 229). In the socialist context the new memorial service also signaled that death is no longer a family affair but a concern of the commune and the work unit, which would be responsible for holding the funeral service in funeral parlor and crematorium. Thus, although the current government and traditional Confucian culture both promote simple and frugal burial, their starting point is completely different. One starts on the basis of social class, while the other aims to abolish social class orders. It is not a valid supportive argument to prove that frugal burial has always been a dominant position in Chinese history, not even to mention green funeral.

The same situation happened in ecological civilization as well. According to Hansen, Li and Svarverud, Pan Yue and other scholars advocate ecological civilization build an imaginary with selective, reductionist and contested interpretation of ancient Chinese philosophies (Hansen, Li and Svarverud 2018, 198). In Chen Zeng, Willian Sweet and Qian Cheng's article on green funeral has the similar interpretation on traditions. It is one of the few published English academic journals about green funeral, names "Ecological Citizenship and Green Burial in China". It is first published on the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*. They argue green funeral reflects traditional Chinese values which is respect humanity. Furthermore, they claim "For when we respect human value, we respect

the value of nature in general” (Zeng, Sweet and Cheng 2016, 992). By proving this, they quote from Mozi “elaborate funeral and extended mourning really cannot enrich the poor, increase the few, remove danger, and regulate disorder, it will not be magnanimous, righteous, and the duty of the filial son¹”. They quote Mo Zi’s idea of simplicity in funerals as evidence the Chinese people’s reverence for nature during funerals dates back to ancient times (Zeng, Sweet and Cheng 2016, 993). This quote only shows the Chinese value of filial piety, any reverence towards nature was not mentioned. Their conclusion based on the quote from Mozi is not solid for understanding green funeral as a traditional ideology.

However, they furthermore argue, “traditional forms of burial not only reduce the human being to a commodity but involve a degradation or an alienation of human value” (Zeng, Sweet and Cheng 2016, 992). They claim people are still deeply controlled by materialistic values, even in funerals and burials. Traditional burial method involves too much of materialistic ideas like extravagant funeral, the size of the cemetery, the height of the gravestone etc. However, they forgot these behaviors are based on the imagination of death and afterlife. According to Watson, Crowder and Kipnis, who are the leading scholars in Chinese funeral and burial culture, the underworld and afterlife is normally the mirror image of the living world. That is the reason that funeral products keep updating as well, from spiritual money and paper made house to paper made iPhones, cars and home appliances (Kipnis 2019b, 9-10). As long as the real world does not change, the afterlife will not change. It is therefore unfair to attribute the extravagance of funerals to traditional culture. It seems the only aim of them claiming it is to connect Marxist or socialist with Chinese characteristics with green funeral. Proving that abolishing those old traditions will create a better world with socialist values. However, they ignore the origins of traditional funeral customs. As Hansen, Li and Svarverud argued, the imaginary of ecological civilization may be regarded with Chinese Communist Party’s idea of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Hansen, Li and Svarverud 2018, 202). In green funeral the vision is applied as well. When scholars in *Report on Funeral Development of China* talk about the continuity of traditions in green funeral, cremation has been forgotten completely. For instance, Confucianists believe cremation is evil and demanded burial (Kipnis 2019b, 1). From the Song Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, emperors imposed severe penalties for cremation (Mueggler, 2017). Cremation was also associated with poverty in the early 1950s (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 77). Nowadays, when

¹ The original text is: 用其谋，厚葬久丧实不可以富贫众寡，定危理乱乎，此非仁非义，非孝子之事也，为人谋者不可不沮也。(Mo Zi, 2021).

promoting green funeral, nothing about that was mentioned. Thus, traditional texts are not strong evidence for the legitimacy of green funerals, based on the selectiveness of scholars when writing about the cultural continuity of green funeral.

6.2 Technology Innovation

Technology has always been the top priority in green funeral, including technology innovation in funeral and burial industry, solution for cremation emission and combining funeral and burial service with Internet. In the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Civil Affairs, it is proposed to promote Internet + funeral services, innovate and optimize the supply of funeral services, and provide more high-quality funeral public service products ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2018](#)). The fundamental purpose of the construction of “Internet + Funeral Service” is to realize the digitization of government management and decision-making, the informatization of public service, the standardization of market order and the convenience of the demands of the public. According to the director of 101 Research Institute Li Bosen, it has become an important driving force to promote the scientific development of funeral undertakings (Li 2017). Based on the government guidelines, technology development is a crucial topic in green funeral, including technology innovation, digitization and informatization ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2018](#)).

Like in ecological civilization, technology innovation also plays an important role in green funeral. In the most recent *Report on Funeral Development of China* in 2017, one third of the book is talking about combining technology, funeral and interment. In central government policy and local government response, technology innovation, digitization and informatization should be a driven force for green funeral. Online rituals are widely promoted by scholars in *Report on Funeral Development of China*, it is seen as the vision for future funeral. They believe technology innovation could transform some traditional ideas to more science-based, which fits more in the ideology of ecological civilization.

Online rituals/online tomb-sweeping: Online rituals has been carried out in Shanghai for two years, but not many people used it. It is an online memorial hall. Based on the search list of google and mobile application store, many websites and apps have already launched this kind of service. Some are only websites, but more websites collaborate with cemeteries in offline world. Usually, an online memorial hall has a tombstone with the name and photo of the deceased person on it, as well as some options for worship. These options include giving flowers, burning incense and candles, sweeping tombs, as well as custom decorations

to decorate tombstones. There is usually a fee for custom decorations ([See Figure 1.](#)). Most of the cemetery websites have online memorial halls. Many authors in *Report on Funeral Development of China* and municipal government highly support online rituals for not only people's family member but also for public figures like celebrities and martyrs. They claim that even though most traditional funeral rituals cannot be replaced by online ritual for now, but online ritual can be seen as a vision and driving force for the future funeral styles (Wang, Zhu and Qiao 2011; Xu 2013; Yang and Sun 2010).

In the past, the imagination of death and funeral still had a certain locality, which required people to build a complete imagination in certain scenes, such as cemeteries and graveyards. In green funeral, it attempts to shift this kind of scene to the digital world. It is not clear that it aims to shift all green funerals online in the future, but it is certain that online worship can now be used as an auxiliary tool for on-site tomb worship. If there is more technology innovation, there will be more development with the rapid development of the Internet (Ma and Xu 2013, 11). In online tomb-sweeping, people no longer need to be in a certain place to feel divinity, they can do so through the cyber world. In the future, many rituals may not need to be so localized as well, because the Internet provides a more immersive way to imagine, and it is also more convenient to do it anytime, anywhere. At the same time, this network also limits the diversity of rituals. The only few buttons on the website limit the types and methods of worship in order to fit into state's aesthetics. Eventually, ritual practices will become more entrenched because of the Internet (Huang 2015, 4-5). Or even worse, capital will control the ritual methods. This is because most people living in cities are not familiar with traditional funeral rituals themselves anymore (Kipnis 2019b, 2). As the fast urbanization in China, in the future, will only be fewer people who are familiar with traditional funeral rituals. They can't tell and they don't know which is the tradition, some even don't believe in afterlife, but they still have the urge to at least do something for the deceased because of filial piety (Kipni 2019b, 10).

A recent tragedy is the loss of the father of China's hybrid rice Yuan Longping, who passed away May 22, 2021. Many netizens mourned the passing of this great man, and many local people in Changsha organized themselves to see him off. The Hunan provincial government also set up an online memorial hall the following day. On the website, white chrysanthemums surround Yuan Longping's photo, with rice in the background and illuminated candles at the bottom of the frame. There is a button in this memorial hall for a flower offering. When you click on it, it will show you the number of people who has offered a flower. I accessed this website on May 23, the evening of the memorial hall opening, and

there were already more than eight million people who had paid their respects. This not only requires a collective imaginative connection with this person and also an imaginary of a memorial hall instead of actually being in one. They believe the online one functions the same as offline.

A service between online rituals and offline in-person visits to the cemetery is on the rise as well. Valet worship is a newly booming service in cemetery. During the outbreak of COVID-19, people could not go back to their hometown and sweep tombs of their ancestor during Spring Festival and Tomb-Sweeping Day. As a result of this, the valet customize worship in cemetery arise. Cemetery staff will provide corresponding services according to the requirements of customers, and then customers can either watch the whole process online through streaming apps or cemetery staff will shoot a video of them doing the service. This kind of service will help boost the implementation of green funeral especially under today's special circumstance, said Cemetery gardener (Cemetery gardener 2021). The specific service content of valet worship is fully controlled by the cemeteries. If they strictly follow the government regulations like using flowers instead of burning foil papers, bow instead of kowtow, the worship rituals will change drastically. The interview with the cemetery gardener has also confirmed this argument. He said since the cemetery should strictly follow government regulations, valet worship won't do any superstitious rituals including burning spiritual money and paper offering (house, cars, home appliance, etc.), kowtow and having Daoist priests and Buddhist monks on site (except the cemetery is in a Daoist or Buddhist temple). Although people might require some of those rituals, due to the strict state policy, there is nothing they can do (Cemetery gardener 2021).

Technology innovation not just on internet but also in burial method. My interviewee cemetery gardener is the designer of a graveyard names elevate burial (*shengjiangshi muzang* 升降式墓葬). It is a wall of drawer, which is buried deep underground, and can be elevated above ground when needed. When the drawers are underground, they are completely hidden (See [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)). It is only launched in the cemetery he works for. Elevate burial replaces traditional stone made tombstones with a big electronic screen. On the electronic screen, each deceased one has a QR code, which can be scanned by their family members. By scanning this QR code, family members can see the photos of the deceased and learn about their life stories. When the later generation comes to sweep their ancestors' tombs, they will have a more specific impression of their deceased relatives. This is the final step of green funeral, only preserving life culture. He said it was a big success first, but unfortunately the

less profitable nature has made it unpopular among other companies (Cemetery gardener 2021).

According to Cemetery Gardener, Shanghai government has recently published an intelligent funeral and burial service, which is one code for everything (*Yi Ma Tong* 一码通). It is putting QR code on cinerary casket to show which cemetery it was buried in. After logging the QR codes with death certificates into the system, the government could have a better and clearer control of the cremains. Cemetery Gardener told me, “This service aims to prevent private burial by individuals. It will leave no chance for the people who wants to have private earth burial or be buried again in caskets” (Cemetery Gardener 2021). These innovations are ostensibly intended to further the development of the funeral and burial industry, but in essence they are simply designed to help the government better regulate people and things that don’t conform to the rules. Therefore, specific rules and regulations are also upgrading.

6.3 Regulation, Policy and Corporation Response

Hetmanczyk argues perhaps socialist utopia is no longer the party’s political priority, but that is still the government’s official attitude. CCP continues to explain recent historical development from the perspective of socialist utopia. He believed that consequently, social mobilization will not be the major question when building such a utopia a question of discursive hegemony in the future (Hetmanczyk 2019, 237). The utopia can also be interpreted as the same socio-technical imaginary of ecological civilization. To construct people’s imagination of society by controlling absolute discourse power.

As James Watson, Evelyn Rawski and other scholars proved in their book *Death Rituals in Late Imperial and Modern China*, political circumstances could influence rituals variability and modification. However, these changes have always been in the range of a recognizable framework, which conformed to general notions of “Chineseness” (Watson 1988, 6).

The Chinese Communist Party abhors anything associated with the belief in death, and all the glitz that comes with it. In the beginning of People’s Republic of China started from 1949, the total cost of an ordinary person’s funeral could be the equivalent of four years’ income. Even the funerals of farmers and workers cost an average of three- or four-months’ wages (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 76). Therefore, at the end of 1950s the first funeral reform emerged. There are six major regulations: cremation instead of burial; offering fresh

flowers and artificial fruits instead of burning paper mâché, incense and candles; replacing traditional mourning outfits with black armbands; secularization of funeral ceremony should take place at a work unit under the government authority instead of home. Lastly, a more discreet style of mourning was suggested. Bowing of the head, contemplation and silence should replace prostration, wailing, crying (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 77). It was the first-time funerals had been regulated in People's Republic of China, where traditional funeral customs were considered feudal superstitions. From the national level through the policy to change the form of a traditional culture. Replacing those products changes people's imaginary towards death and afterlife. Burning of paper mâché, incense and candles is the living sending messages to the deceased (Scott 2007, 20). By abolishing that, the living lost a method to "communicate" with the deceased in the underworld, or even the belief of underworld. Practicing funeral rituals under authority watching like work unit, state-run funeral parlors and crematoria is a method to force the implementation of this regulation.

Furthermore, the CCP found the traditional funeral style is in direct conflict with CCP's fundamental value. The belief that the living generation's fortune could be influenced by the funeral rituals, is in conflict with Communist idea that each individual is responsible for one's own fate (Aveline-Dubach 2012, 76). In green funeral these ideas were again brought up into the guidelines. A slogan called Changing old customs and tradition (*Yifengyisu* 移风易俗) has been mentioned throughout the campaign. It is a state-initiated promotion of changing cultures to fit more into a more socialist idea. It requires people to alter their existing perceptions of traditional culture, which needs to be switched in line with China's core socialist values. These changes not only promote green funeral, but also deepen people's perceptions of China's socialist core values.

In modern-day China, funeral still heavily influenced by the central government (Kipnis 2019a; Kipnis 2019b). As mentioned before, the funeral and interment has gradually changed throughout the history. The first two steps have already been achieved, which are not preserving remains to preserving cremains. The CCP's next step is not preserving cremains and the final goal is only preserving life culture. This is the core of green funeral and the funeral reform in China. However, it still has a long path ahead. Regulation and Policy are the most direct voice from the government to be heard by public. Government could use specific regulation and policy to construct a society imaginary, the authority can build specific imaginaries for the public. In 2016, the state issued *Guidance on Promoting Ecological and Land-saving burial*, which clearly pointed out that green burial is an

important measure to promote the construction of ecological civilization, the harmonious development of human and nature, and carry forward the core socialist values. They hope to develop a style of burial with Chinese characteristics. It directly proposes to realize the sustainable development of the Chinese nation ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016](#)).

Although the government has issued several regulations on green funeral, the measures implemented by the local government and the acceptance of the local people vary greatly. The government has also adopted some subsidies policies to attract more people to participate in green funerals. In 2012, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the “Guidance Opinions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs on Implementing the Beneficial Funeral Policy for the People” ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2012](#)). According to the overall report in each volume of the official green book, subsidies have been a way for the government to promote green funerals. Different regions also have corresponding subsidy policies. While the cemetery gardener told me that despite these nominal subsidies, in Shanghai, if one person chooses flower burial, his family members will get 1,000 yuan (around 157 USD). However, the application procedure is extremely troublesome, they need to go to many different bureaus, and among the 1,000yuan, 500 yuan is subsidy to the cemetery. Therefore, the actual amount for one individual is only 500 yuan. “That’s a reluctance for a lot of people to do it,” he said (Cemetery gardener 2021). Thus, the government regulates corporations to let corporations discipline people. For instance, the government decreed that there should be no feudal superstitions such as burning paper offering or foil paper made like actual money in cemeteries. However, the local government can’t control everyone, so it’s time for the cemetery to manage the people who come to worship.

Most cemeteries are owned by private companies, not state-owned ones. Normally, these private companies have excellent partnerships with the government (Kipnis 2019a, 259). These companies have a deep understanding of the policy. However, they are still primarily driven by profit, so their needs to be balanced. For instance, the new burial method designed by cemetery gardener has been praised and promoted by the authorities, but it has not been implemented well because of low profitability. So far it has only been built in one cemetery. Hence, it is still a long way to go for green funeral.

This year’s Tomb-Sweeping Day (*Qing Ming* 清明, usually in the beginning of April) is even stricter. As a traditional Chinese festival, Tomb-sweeping Day has a profound influence on funeral and burial culture (Kipnis 2019a, 264-267; Kipnis 2019b, 9-11). Normally, people will go back to their hometown, where the ancestors’ graveyards are. They

will clean the tombstones and hold a simple ancestral worship there including burning paper offerings and kowtow. The Ministry of Civil Affairs has further promoted green funerals by promoting green Tomb-Sweeping Day. On the home page of the Ministry of Civil Affairs' Green Tomb-sweeping Day, green funeral is presented as its main content.

One of my friends in Sichuan told me that this year 2021, all the grass-roots cadres were taking to the streets to check people going to cemeteries, and any items relating to paper mâché, incense sticks were confiscated. There is even a whistleblower hotline for it. Cemetery gardener in Shanghai also confirmed this regulation, claimed that the local government decreed no smoke should be seen at cemeteries. However, based on Andrew Kipnis's article in 2019, paper offerings are still common at cemeteries in Shanghai. There were stalls near cemeteries selling spiritual money and cemeteries have paper home and appliances for sale as well (Kipnis 2019b, 8-10). In two years, things have changed drastically. Cemetery gardener told me, "Even though it is not allowed to burn paper offerings at cemeteries, people who really want to do this will burn paper offering at home, no one will say anything, they don't want to destroy other people's fortune for no reason" (Cemetery gardener 2021). While this caused more safety problems, many residential places have more or less fire disasters during the Tomb Sweeping Day. Thus, even though a new sociotechnical imaginary can be built for people through the strong push of the government and cooperation, the public's response is still critical.

Chapter 7. Public Response

Green funeral is a state-initiated project aiming to create an ecological funeral and burial industry and construct a green awareness for the public nationwide. China is a country with diversified regions and cultures. Although a common funeral ritual helps unified different regions and indeed cultures are fluid (Watson 1988), challenging the whole concept of funeral is difficult for the public to accept. The process of green funeral's implementation takes time (Li 2017). In this chapter, I will combine news and my three interviews with three representative people in each industry to present a more comprehensive response from the public. I asked all three interviewees some basic questions about green funeral and ecological civilization including but not limiting: how they understand green funeral and ecological civilization? How would they explain them? Are there any connections between green funeral and ecological civilization? Does green funeral have any impact on their personal life? How will they follow green funeral's rules for their family members and themselves? Lastly, do they think the goal of the green funeral in their understand will be reached?

I have interviewed a sales manager from Back Garden of Lingshan in Wuxi. According to the sales manager, for now, the major service is tower interment (*Tazang* 塔葬) and wall interment (*Bizang* 壁葬). Tower interment is originally from Tibet, now it has been designed as a storage box inside the temple. The cremains could be stored in the box and there will be a twenty-four-hour background music of monk chanting sutras. Wall interment is a normally outside in the garden, a standing wall with storage cells inside. According to him, tower interment is much popular than wall interment, since people don't want to be alone and Buddhist chanting music will give them peace and let them rest well (Sales manager 2021). When I asked him what he thought ecological civilization and green funeral meant, he said ecological civilization meant energy conservation, environmental protection and saving land resources. When I asked him what he thought green mean in green funerals, he said green should be like a park, creating a five-star environment that doesn't make people feel like they are in a graveyard, which normally gives an eerie feeling. In his understanding, this "green" is more to describe the real green color. It shows that not only the method of burial should be green, but also emphasizes the improvement of cemetery environment and the development of land resources to the utmost.

I spoke to another staff member at a Shanghai cemetery who designed a new ecological burials method: elevate burial. He calls himself cemetery gardener. Green, he argues, in green funerals is increasing green coverage at cemeteries. He said Fushou Garden's (*fushouyuan* 福寿园, a famous and the biggest cemetery in Shanghai) greening area has reached 40% of the total floor area. However, when I checked online, its website says it has 80% greening area. Cemetery gardener explained, "it's because the surrounding greening areas outside the graveyard are also counted in, not just the greening area near the graveyard. Since there are so many people dying every year, it is impossible to let the scenery of the cemetery become more important than graveyard space. After all, cemeteries can only increase the greening area by planting more trees in the non-burial area." In his understanding, green funeral includes two methods of burial. The first is ecological burial, which means ashes should degrade naturally within 10 years, and cremains should come into direct contact with soil. However, most burials now have a stone box in the soil to keep cinerary caskets. This does great harm to the soil, because the stone itself cannot be degraded by soil and makes biodegradable cinerary caskets useless. Keeping a large number of stone boxes in the same land makes the soil difficult to stay healthy. He pointed out that for this reason, the cemeteries he worked for had an issue of hardened and whitened ground. There is

also a method called Land-saving burial, which mainly refers to some burial forms that retain the ashes but occupy a small area, which is also the main direction of his design. In his elevate burial, a cell covers less than 0.04 square meters, and he describes it as an apartment building built downward into the land. This design has been praised many times, he said “unfortunately this one is not favored by most of the cemeteries” (Cemetery gardener 2021). His understanding of green funeral is the same as the state promotes but with much more details. I couldn’t find these details anywhere in governmental regulations online. These details provide a more in-depth and specific requirements from the government to funeral and burial industry. At the end of the interview, he said, “I sincerely hope Chinese people could have an affordable burial that still fits Chinese culture. Let everyone in the future will not worry about their afterlife is my biggest wish” (Cemetery gardener 2021).

I had a chance to interview a buyer when I called the sales manager in Back Garden of Lingshan. She is a 60-year-old Buddhist, who has bought a cell in tower burial in the Back Garden of Lingshan. She provided an aspect from an ordinary person. Although she does not work in funeral and burial related industries, she still expressed great understanding of green funeral. I took the opportunity to chat with her about the definition of ecological civilization and green funeral in her cognition. She believes that ecological civilization emphasizes a community with a shared future for mankind (*Renlei Mingyun Gongtongti* 人类命运共同体), because the environment is the responsibility of all mankind. For the future, only everyone knows low carbon environmental protection can we protect the earth. “Green” in green funeral is lucid waters and lush mountains, they are invaluable assets (*Lvshui Qingshan Jiushi Jinshan Yinshan* 绿水青山就是金山银山). This is proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2005 and later become a repeated slogan for vigorously promoting ecological civilization. In Chinese, the literal meaning of this sentence is green water and green mountain is gold mountain and silver mountain. In her understanding, the green in green funeral comes from here. In my conversation with her, she emphasized the importance of lucid waters and lush mountains for many times. Hence, I further asked her what she thought was the connection between ecological civilization, green funeral and funeral reform. She said that green funeral not only continued the traditional Chinese idea: ancestor worship culture, it is also an essential link that China could create a more profound connection with the international community, since environment is a global concern for every country. She also mentioned that “China is an aging society at present. It is not desirable, if the land resources consumed in the cemetery. Our country does not have so much land, so in the near future there will be a

shortage of cemeteries” (Buyer 2021). Therefore, when I asked her whether green funeral was possible to succeed, she told me firmly that it is an inevitable trend of development. “It is the concept of new composition through social development, it is also the result of close integration with traditional Chinese culture, so the success of green funeral is only a matter of time. Economic development is also a critical part, because economic development will also drive social development. It is because of the fast economic development in Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai areas, there will be a modern ecological cemetery like the Back Garden of Lingshan. People like us, we are not worried about our own death, because I have already known I would rest in some place nice like here. For people from other provinces with worse economy, I can completely understand why they don’t want ecological burial, because the cemetery conditions are not that good” (Buyer 2021). Although she still has an imaginary of afterlife which makes her be more concerned with the cemetery environment. However, at the same time, she also has a soaring awareness of ecological civilization and green funeral. It is not that hard to see that she balanced these two ideas very well.

One valuable aspect she mentioned is regional differences. According to the “Report on Funeral Development of China 2017”, the author Li Bosen found out that more than 90 per cent of the total investment in funeral and burial industry was made by local governments (Li 2017, 14). In 2017, a Beijing News (*Xinjingbao* 新京报) reporter made a comparison of the ratio of deaths to cremation in various provinces and cities ([See Figure 4.](#)). As can be seen from the chart, Henan and Shandong provinces have the lowest proportion of cremation. As the buyer said, people from some other places might not react to green funeral so well. At the end of May 2012, Zhoukou City in Henan Province, launched a vigorous “grave removal project” (Pingfen yundong 平坟运动). The aim is to demolish all private buried graves that are not in the official cemeteries. In just three months, more than two million graves were forced to be demolished (Wang 2015). It has aroused widespread public controversy. At the end of 2012, the State Council amended Article 20 of the “Regulations on the Administration of Funeral and Interment 2012 Revision”, which states that “if a body should be cremated or buried underground or a grave is built in any place other than a cemetery or a rural public welfare cemetery, the civil affairs department shall order it to make corrections within a time limit”. The part that “if no correction is made, it may be enforced” was deleted in the revision ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2012](#)). This means that after the amendment of the regulations, the civil affairs department has lost the legal power of enforcing funeral reform. This is also the country’s reflection on the implementation of the funeral reform that is too tough.

A further extreme case occurred in Anqing, Anhui province. In the middle of April 2014, the local government published a new regulation of mandatory cremation after June 1st. At the same time, all coffins should be confiscated. Six elderly who had been saving their coffins for several years or even decades, committed suicide in order to be buried without being cremated (Tatlow 2014). This also shows that the implementation of green funeral is not overnight, it needs to be done step by step. The imaginary of death and afterlife still embodied in people's mind.

Conclusion

Green Funeral is a state-initiated sociotechnical imaginary run by the CCP. It aims at creating a modern funeral and interment industry that is more in line with socialist values with Chinese characteristics. By controlling the absolute right of speech at the national level and enhancing the technologies in funeral and burial industry, from burial to cremation to ecological burial, it constructs a new imagination about death and afterlife for the public.

As Watson proposed, in China the standardization of ritual practice almost always took precedence over efforts to legislate or control beliefs. He believes the imperials focusing on orthopraxy (correct practice) of funeral instead of orthodoxy (correct belief) helps the people with different ethnic or regional backgrounds and beliefs into an overarching social system. They allow some varies in some local areas (Watson 1988, 10-11). It is similar in green funeral as well. Green funeral emphasizes on the certain way of funeral rituals and burial based on the state's aesthetics. In the state level, it still allows ethnic minorities to have their own funeral rituals and burial ([Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016](#)). Although, in local government's view, cremation rate is still the most important indicator. Some ethnic minority groups have to change their customs.

The cultural and national continuity has been emphasized in green funeral. Although China has various regions and different cultures, standardization of rituals has always helped the government to create a unified culture throughout the history (Rawski 1988, 32). A strong and solid cultural identity could strengthen one's national identity. From the cultural identity in funeral and burial, to a collective national identity connecting to socialist ideas with Chinese characteristics. Some scholars tend to use Chinese traditional text to prove the orthodoxy of green funeral and frugal burial in the history of China. However, they either chose selective texts or interpreted the texts in a narrow perspective. There is also the involvement of companies, after all, such a large ideological imagination cannot be completed by the state alone.

Technology has always been the leading force from the first funeral reform to green funeral. In cremation, the large-scale implementation of crematorium has made the nationwide cremation possible. Cremation is an important tool for changing people's imagination about death and afterlife. When the most important part of a funeral, the body, is no longer there, the image of death changes. As the most important part of green funeral, cremation is not a very environmentally friendly technology, and local governments have not actively strengthened the control of this aspect. In contrast, as an ideology, cremation is more appropriate to strengthen the belief of theism of the Communist Party of China.

From the government's constant calls for technology innovation to the application of Internet technology to green funerals, the government has been trying to use technology to better control the public. In the process of Informationization, all information needs to be recorded in the system. Everyone is under the watchful eye of technology and government, from death to cremation to burial. The Internet could also change how people think about funeral, death and the afterlife. The online memorial may take some time to catch on with the public, as valet customized worshipping is already widely adapted in real life. The same is true of the ecological and land-saving burial, which was first mentioned in green burial.

Through news and interviews, we also find that people do need time to accept green funeral. However, just like the comprehensive promotion of mandatory cremation, people's views on traditional funerals are not completely unchangeable after a certain degree of promotion. In many cases, factors such as the price of a graveyard and subsidy from the government, these financial aids can drive green burial practices more quickly.

Like ecological civilization, green funeral could also be seen as an imaginary of global future. According to the data from The Cremation Society website, except Muslim countries, cremation rates have been steadily increased in most of the countries globally ([The Cremation Society](#), accessed 2021). The discussion about how to store all these cremains will be an inevitable topic in the international world.

Death and afterlife are always unknown to people, so we can only give death and afterlife some color through continuous imaginations, make death less scary. Imagination of death is also a belief. It can intimidate us, it can comfort us, it can make us more peaceful. This is an unexplored world for the ever-inquiring human being. Green Funeral, on the other hand, hopes to change people's imagination of this unexplored world through controlling the interpretation of technology and policy.

In the history of modern China, a closer to present or even future style of cemetery was created during the Great Leap Forward. It was a period weight production the most,

everything else should not matter. In order to maximize the use of land resources, cemeteries in Shanghai were mainly used for the breeding of pigs, sheep and fish. Even the spaces between graves were used for growing cereals and vegetables (Aveline-Dubach, P.78, Shanghai Funeral Museum). It's not hard to see from this, those traditions are not that untouchable. Traditions can be adjustable based on the social environment. Maybe in the future, green funeral is going to be one of "Chinese" traditions.

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Appendix

[Figure 1](#). A screenshot from [Tiantang Wang](#) (天堂网), which is an online memorial hall. It is an example of virtual graveyard.



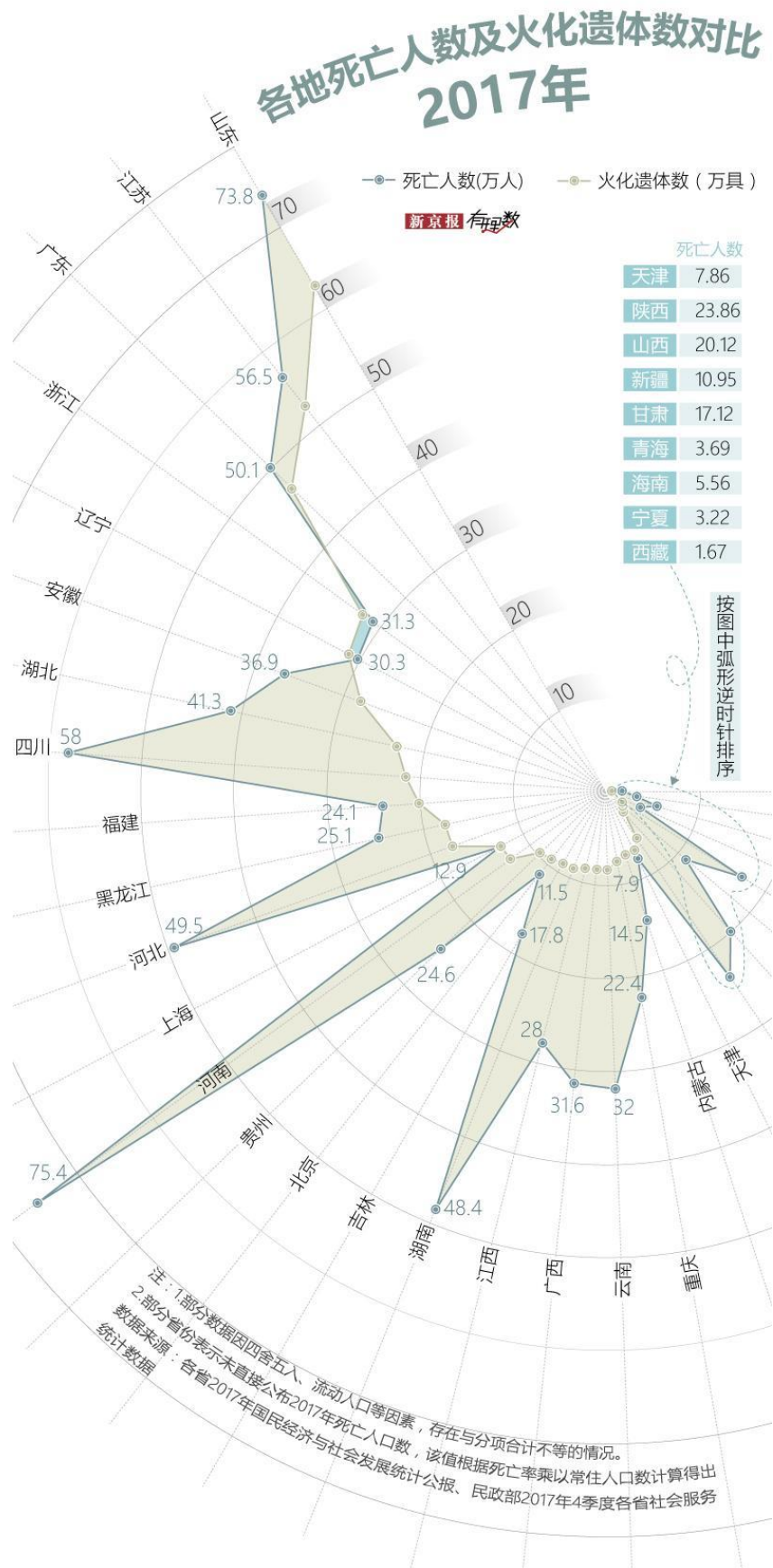
[Figure 2](#). Elevating burial (Sheng jiang shi mu zang 升降式墓葬) designed by cemetery gardener, when it is elevated.



[Figure 3](#). Elevating burial (Sheng jiang shi mu zang 升降式墓葬) designed by cemetery gardener, when the wall is underground.



Figure 4. A comparison of the number of deaths and cremated bodies in 2017



List of Interviewees

1. Sales manager in Back Garden of Lingshan (lingshan houhuayuan 灵山后花园) in discussion with the author, April 4, 2021.
2. Ecological graveyard buyer in discussion with the author, April 4, 2021.
3. Cemetery gardener in discussion with the author, April 14, 2021.