

The lingering corpse in the Chinese urban

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In recent decades, an unusually large number of long dead bodies have overcrowded funeral homes and hospital morgues from major cities to county seats in China. Some of them have remained unclaimed for decades and others are contested. Among the contested corpses, some have been made to disappear by the local government. This phenomenon reflects the tension generated by China's economic reforms and urban development that now extends from the living to the dead. This study uses media sources and material from my own field research in Shanghai to shed light on the challenge for the Chinese state to manage the dead in this increasingly complex society.



Ghost Money. Reproduced under a CC license courtesy of Jan on Flickr.

The overflow of corpses

In the past few years, the Chinese media has reported on a 'shocking' crisis: the overflow of long dead bodies in China's funeral and hospital facilities. A 2014 investigation by *Southern Weekend* labeled such bodies as 'long-term residents' of morgues. Cheng Xinming, the editor-in-chief of *China Funeral and Interment Weekly*, confirmed that this phenomenon is widespread. This investigation provided specific cases in Xinxiang (Henan province), Jiaying (Zhejiang Province), and Fuzhou (Fujian province) where the long dead were kept in various facilities.¹ A 2016 report indicates that there were hundreds and even thousands of corpses in some of the morgues. In Inner Mongolia, there were about 200 bodies in the city of Hohhot alone and, on average, ten of them in each county hospital in that region. Cities such as Kunming (Yunnan province) and Jinan (Shandong province) have each housed 70–80 such 'long-term residents' in their facilities. Morgues in Guangzhou have reportedly stored 1300–1400 bodies due to the concentration of a 'floating population' in that city. Most troublesome is the length of time these bodies have lingered. Many have been kept for years; the longest for more than two decades.² These reports may have only revealed the tip of the iceberg. My research in Shanghai has uncovered similar cases, yet there has been virtually no report on this issue in Shanghai.

The accumulation of these long dead bodies has caused a number of problems. First, it has led to the shortage of available mortuary (refrigerated) cabinets. In 2017, in the northeastern city Shenyang, about 110 of the 170 mortuary cabinets at one funeral home were used to keep long dead bodies.³ In the same year, nearly half of the 15 cabinets at the Central Hospital in the city of Xiangtan (Hunan province) were occupied by unclaimed bodies, some of which dated back to 2007.⁴ The lack of space at official facilities has spurred a new and

often unregulated business in storing the dead. Most hospitals in Beijing have subcontracted the care of corpses to private, often unprofessional entrepreneurs.⁵ A county hospital in Shan'xi province outsourced the storage of bodies to a village where a residential cave was converted into a morgue. This cave-turned-morgue caused apprehension, fear, and an uproar among the villagers.⁶

Storing the corpses has also imposed burdens on other resources. Refrigeration involves expensive electricity. The 2017 report on the case in Shenyang pointed out the acute need of electricity in the heat of the summer and the ongoing consumption of electricity by the long dead. The corpses have to be maintained to prevent them from decaying, and must be relocated if the cabinets malfunction. For example, the Shenyang hospital has in the past ten years relocated the long dead bodies more than five times due to facility breakdowns.⁷ All this amounts to enormous expenses; one corpse in Xinxiang reportedly cost the funeral home 550,000 yuan (more than 80,000 US\$). The financial burden usually falls on hospitals, funeral homes, and the local government. Disputes over financial responsibilities have unsurprisingly led to lawsuits.⁸

Causes for the lingering corpses

There are generally four types of situations that have resulted in this accumulation of long dead bodies. Unidentified corpses (for example, the homeless, migration workers, or victims of a crime) is one. The second concerns bodies kept in storage due to an ongoing criminal investigation. The third involves family disputes over the responsibility for the burial. The fourth situation is more complex. Sometimes families are involved in a long-standing conflict with the authorities over issues involving, for instance,

medical malpractice, forced demolition and relocation, property seizure, corruption, state violence, and other perceived injustices.⁹ In these cases, the affected family often uses the corpse as leverage to protest and compel the authorities to resolve their issues.

However, none of the four situations seems to warrant the extraordinary length of time thousands of bodies have been kept across China. The phenomenon reflects deep issues in the 'reform era' of Chinese society: the loopholes in regulations and laws; the gap between regulations and social reality; the heightened consciousness among people in terms of their rights on the one hand, and the widespread mistrust of the law and government by not only the survivors, but also the officials themselves, on the other.

The central document that governs this matter is the "Regulations on Funeral and Interment", issued by the State Council on 21 July 1997, and revised and reissued on 1 January 2013. This document contains detailed limitations to earth burials, but only two brief provisions regarding the corpse: the body has to be handled in a way that ensures public and environmental safety, and a death certificate must be issued by a public security bureau or by a medical institution before cremation can take place.¹⁰ The document does not specify which of the two should sign the death certificate under which circumstances. It also does not provide any guidelines for dealing with abandoned or disputed bodies. And so, in December 2013, the Ministry of Health, the Public Security Bureau, and the State Council together issued a new document: "Announcement of Further Standardization of Medical Certificate of Population Death and Information Registration and Management". This document stipulates that as of 1 January 2014, a standard medical death certificate should be used.¹¹ It places responsibility for dispensing death certificates on medical institutions, but remains mute on the issue of disputed and unidentified corpses.

Provincial and local governments have tried to fill the gap. The "Municipal Regulations on Funeral and Interment" in Hohhot (Inner Mongolia) specifies that the public security bureau will issue a public notice for abandoned bodies, and give 60 days for anyone to claim the body. Beyond the 60 days limit, the bureau will issue a death certificate and the body will be cremated. However, in practice, the local public security bureau often failed to exercise its authority, continuing to leave bodies in the mortuary beyond 60 days after the public notice, in fear of family members coming forward to claim the body and sue the bureau. The fear of lawsuits is the main cause of inaction by the public security bureau.¹² This situation reflects both the heightened awareness of rights among the Chinese people, and the lack of trust in regulations by the public security bureau.

Medical institutions and physicians, whom the Chinese state entrusted to issue the death certificate, are also not a neutral party in the management of death. The financial interest of the hospital is often its utmost priority.

Just as some Chinese hospitals have withheld newborn babies from their parents to force payment of hospital bills,¹³ some hospitals have leveraged their authority in issuing death certificates to collect payment first: no payment, no death certificate. In one of the cases I studied in Shanghai, a family evicted from their home sent their 80-year-old sick mother to the Central Hospital of Xuhui district in 2006, where she later died. The son refused to pay her bills, on the grounds that the district government that evicted his parents should foot the costs. As a result, the hospital denied the family the death certificate and has withheld the mother's body ever since.¹⁴ This case demonstrates how the officially designated certifier of death can stand in the way of a death certificate, a key element in processing the dead.

Compared with the U.S. 'Standard Certificate of Death', which involves only two entities/persons and their signatures – a physician as the medical certifier and a funeral director¹⁵ – the Chinese death certificate requires more extensive family involvement, for instance, in the investigation of the cause of death and in dealing with the public security bureau to cancel the household registration of the deceased. If the family with a conflict of interest refuses to provide necessary information about the dead, it is almost impossible for the authorities to process the case.

One family in Shanghai lost their 95-year-old mother in 2017, more than a decade after she had been physically removed from her privately-owned home. The family petitioned the eviction from the start. On the day of their mother's death, the family told the district authority that they would not cremate her before the housing issue was resolved. That night, the body disappeared. When the family reported her body missing, local authorities admitted that they had taken the body away but have since refused to give them any specifics.¹⁶ In this case, the woman's corpse had come to embody a long standing housing conflict and the government simply removed the body to avoid the housing issue.

Clearly, all the regulations on death, from Beijing to provincial and local governments, have not helped to ease the overflow of long-dead bodies. The mounting tension generated by urbanization and economic development, the weakness in the enforcement of regulations, the pursuit of economic interests above all else, and the public's mistrust in the government have together crippled the Chinese state's ability to manage the dead. The thousands of corpses lying in wait in funeral and hospital facilities across China speak to this failure.

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Notes

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