



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Demography and deathcare in a changing East Asia

Description: As East Asian countries like Japan, China and South Korea experience rapid population ageing due to declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy, the demographic shift in the land of the living is having a parallel impact on what happens after life. Deathcare -- which encompasses post-death services, products, policy, and governance -- is changing too. Rapid urbanisation has disrupted long-observed burial practices and post-death rituals, while smaller family sizes and a jump in one-person households has put pressure on age-old East Asian traditions that centre the handling or the honouring of the dead in the family home. And just as new business models and services are emerging to meet the living needs of greying populations in East Asia, deathcare too has had to innovate, with new technologies and digital solutions aimed at both disposal and memorialisation of the dead. Anthropologists Dr Hannah Gould from the University of Melbourne and Professor Andrew Kipnis from The Chinese University of Hong Kong join Ear to Asia host Sami Shah to explain how demography in the region is reshaping deathcare. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Listen:

<https://rss.com/podcasts/ear-to-asia/1669982/>

Voiceover: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform, under agreement between The Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Sami Shah: Hello, I'm Sami Shah, this is Ear to Asia.

Hannah Gould: The closer you kind of get to touching bodies or interacting with dead bodies, then tends to be a higher degree of stigmatization associated with that labor. For contemporary workers. I've talked to a lot of young people who perhaps they're worried about automation and they're worried about other jobs, and they think, well, "Hey, look, a lot of people in Japan are dying. This is an industry where I'm always going to have a job."

Andrew Kipnis: In some Chinese contexts, the stigmatization actually makes the work somewhat lucrative. So because people are reluctant to go, some people have been reluctant to go into it, there are business opportunities there, more so than in other fields.

Sami Shah: In this episode. Demography and deathcare in a changing East Asia.

East Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

As East Asian countries like Japan, China and South Korea experience rapid population ageing due to declining fertility rates and increasing life expectancy, the demographic shift in the land of the living is having a parallel impact on what happens after life. Deathcare, which encompasses post-death services, products, policy and governance, is changing too. Rapid urbanisation has disrupted long observed burial practices and post-death rituals, while smaller family sizes and a jump in one person households has put pressure on age old East Asian traditions that center the handling or the honoring of the dead in the family home. And just as new business models and services are emerging to meet the living needs of growing populations in East Asia, Deathcare too has had to innovate with new technologies and digital solutions aimed at both disposal and memorialization of the dead. So what does modern deathcare look like in a

country like Japan, where deaths now outnumber births by well over 800,000 per year? How has the important practice of ancestor worship in culturally Chinese societies been impacted by massive migration from rural to urban areas? How are governments and religious institutions adapting, and how readily are ordinary people willing to embrace, or at least accept, evolving practices in handling and paying respects to the dead. Joining me to discuss are two anthropologists of East Asia who specialize in researching the practices and rituals around death. Professor Andrew Kipnis of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. And Doctor Hannah Gould of the University of Melbourne. Welcome to er to Asia, Andrew and Hannah.

Hannah Gould: Thank you for having us.

Andrew Kipnis: Thanks very much, Sami.

Sami Shah: Let's begin first with some basics. Hannah, if we can start with you, broadly, how has deathcare evolved as populations, age and family structures change in your area of focus in East Asian societies?

Hannah Gould: Yeah. So I think it was nicely summed up there, which is that kind of the same changes that affect how we live, living society also have those following impacts to death. And predominantly where you have a situation in Japan of a really low birth rate and quite a high mortality rate. So lots of people dying and not a lot of new young people being born to replace them. You have a kind of unequal system. It was almost explained to me, like the contemporary taxation or pension system. Right? You don't have enough young living people paying their taxes to support the pensions of the elderly. In the same way, you don't necessarily have enough living people to support the welfare and look after the dead and the dying. So you have this kind of unequal, unbalanced demographic situation emerging, and that leads to a whole range of disruptions. Some of them are negative, some of them are experienced as kind of a loss, an existential crisis. What are we doing? How can we not care for our elderly and our dying and our dead? And others are experienced as opportunities, new ways to hold funerals, new ways to make graves, new ways to memorialize so both, you know, positive and negative emotions associated with those changes.

Sami Shah: Andrew, is it a similar change in the rituals and the customs and traditions around death in China forced by demographic issues.

Andrew Kipnis: Um, well, there's some slight differences. So in mainland China, where I used to do research, I haven't been there for a couple of years. The demographic crisis is not quite so far along. Rates of migration are extremely high, and government interference or control of the policy is also probably much larger than in Japan. Now, in Hong Kong, where I am now, they're probably demographically, it's not so different from Japan. Maybe the biggest difference in Hong Kong is that it's a, you know, it's a single city. So it's a relatively small place. People very rarely move so far away from their family that they can't regularly visit. And there's even though family size is much smaller, there's also an awful lot of networking among related people in their small households, so perhaps I'll give those few changes. But definitely some of the things that Hannah mentioned are still very much on people's minds.

Sami Shah: Hong Kong is such an urban place. When you compare that with China, which has so much rural area still, what impact has the urbanization of China had on burial practices and post-death rituals?

Andrew Kipnis: Um, yes. China is changing so rapidly in both its regulation of the deathcare industry and in the demographics. And so people have been moving to the cities a lot. This means, for some people, a choice. Where do they want to be buried? Are they going to be buried back in their rural home, or do they want to be buried in the city where they have moved to? And legally, what are the options in both places? Because this also can change very regularly. So it's quite a complex situation and also varies from place to place in China. And it's very hard to give a single answer. But I would say the biggest question is that where should I be buried? Where should my parents be buried? And if they're not buried in the same place as me, how can I visit them?

Hannah Gould: Yeah. So this is not so different to Japan in some ways, really. The post-World War II migration into cities, urbanization has led to this kind of rural depopulation problem, and actually a condition called *hakabanare*, or like the social condition of living away from one's grave, one's ancestral grave. So just for listeners who might not be aware and both, you know, most of these kind of situations, we're talking about family graves or household graves where you have multiple generations that are buried in the same location or, you know, cremated or then interred in the same graves. And there's a real big question now of these kind of neo local urban families. Do they choose to have those ashes, those remains placed in the family grave, which might be 3 or 4 hours away in the countryside, quite difficult to get to? Or do they try and establish a new grave in the urban city centre? But obviously it's very difficult to find land in somewhere like urban Tokyo and very hard to purchase a new grave. And then there's also the kind of ongoing question of, okay, well, even if we do put them in the countryside grave, you know, can I really get time off work to go and visit them? How easy is it for me to go and look after the grave? You know, it's not just set and forget. There's obligations that you need to perform. You know, *Obon*, the Hungry Ghost Festival, or New Year's or all these kind of like death anniversaries. You need to kind of be able to access the grave so that urbanization, that kind of condition of living away from one's grave. And then also in Japan, living away from the temple, the Buddhist temple that might run that grave and help with those ritual processes has become kind of this big kind of question or point of contention for families.

Sami Shah: Some of the ways that families handle these responsibilities was by sharing the labor of post-death rituals, particularly caring for the dead. Now, in Japan, you're seeing such a rise in one person households. What impact has that had?

Hannah Gould: Yeah, one person households are really kind of a problem for the traditional system of families and households and graves in Japan, because the whole kind of system is built around this idea of the household, the *ie* being this continuing system that stretches back through generations, and it will continue into the future through reproduction of the family, right through kids. And your kids look after you and their kids look after them. And single person households, you often kind of have people who not only in life but in death, then kind of are homeless, the orphaned households, so households that don't have any descendants to look after them, or people who kind of don't know which grave to go into. Right. There's a real question of, well, can I convince my uncle that I'm allowed to be put into that grave, or do I need to look into new forms of graves, or new forms of interment that allow for single person interment, single person kind of ashes being put into a communal grave? Even so, you know, I think an easy way to kind of think about it is like, oh, it's individualization, right? That we have these collectives and now we're moving to individuals. It's not necessarily the case. It's that different new forms of collective are emerging. And if they're not the household, if they're not the family, if they're not the local rural village, then maybe they're friends, or maybe it's a company, or maybe it's the local group in this area. A different kind of ways of kind of collective care for the dead that aren't just the family, the household.

Sami Shah: Andrew, how expensive are funerals and post-death rituals, etc. traditionally in China? And have the smaller family sizes affected the economics of that?

Andrew Kipnis: Um, there's a huge variety. So here in Hong Kong, I mean, there are many, many poor people in Hong Kong. So there are many, many funerals that are actually arranged by the government through kind of social workers. And they are very minimal. I mean, there is some costs, but, you know, there's nobody to pay the cost. So it's just absorbed by the government. And so what would be a minimal funeral. So at hospitals they have small rooms where you can hold a service. So you don't even need to rent a funeral home, which a family would do. So renting a funeral home is a large expense. There are only a few in Hong Kong and it's quite expensive, so they can have a brief ritual at the hospital. The bodies are then taken to the government run crematorium. It's cremated and they have. If there's no family members to claim the remains, there are places where they scatter the ashes, cemeteries where they have designated places for the ashes of lonely deaths, with no family members to claim if it's a death with family members to claim but a very poor family, then the government will allow them to choose some places to scatter the ashes, but again at very little cost to the family.

Andrew Kipnis: On the other side, if you're extremely wealthy and you want a big funeral followed by burial in a private cemetery or a private columbarium, you know you could spend, I don't know, you could spend the equivalent of AUD 1 million on a funeral if you wanted to. So there's this whole range in Hong Kong, I would say in China the range is less, but there is still a range, right? And so many rural people will try to avoid paying anything for a funeral, so they will utilize the government services. You have to be cremated. They say, okay, well, if I have to be cremated, I'm not going to pay for it. So they get cremated, they get the ashes, they bring the ashes home. They do all the ritual themselves without hiring anybody. So it's just a family affair. But then you get to wealthy urban areas and people who want a fancy funeral. They can pay a lot to do it if they really want to. Though in China, there are political pressures not to be too ostentatious with your wealth.

Hannah Gould: A stealth wealth funeral, as it were.

Sami Shah: In Japan then. Is there a similar attempt by the government to help subsidize it? Sounds like in China that seems to be a preferred option for many lower economic classes. Is that the same in Japan?

Hannah Gould: Yeah, so it's a little complicated as all things are, because under Japanese law, both cemeteries and crematorium are supposed to be only run by basically non-profit organizations, local councils or metropolitan area councils or religious organizations, because for a very long time, like Buddhist temples have had total control, cultural and social control over funerals in Japan. So there's a, you know, the classic phrase of born Shinto, die Buddhist in Japan. Right? The Buddhist temples, kind of this is the domain. The domain is death. But basically what's happened is that those kind of like government sectors have proven to be unable to keep up with the demand, both for graves in urban centers, but then also for cremation and funeral homes. So funeral homes have always been private companies, but a lot of crematoriums and graves remain in some way connected to a religious or public organization, even if you've got a private company kind of behind it making the money. But it still remains the case that a lot of crematoriums are run by local councils, outside of Tokyo, at least, and they will provide a free or very cheap cremation to anyone. And I should say that Japan is almost entirely cremation. I think there's about 300 cases of burial per year. So up there alongside South Korea, with one of the highest rates of cremation in the world. And then, you know, in terms of the funeral, you can spend as much or as little as you want. As Andrew says, you know, it's very much about status and class and, you know, demonstration of the importance of the person during their life. I think this remains kind of a universal truth about funerals.

Hannah Gould: I think one thing that's interesting to note, though, is that there has been a huge rise in family only funerals in Japan. So *kazokuso* -- so only family attending the funeral and sometimes, well, a lot of the time that is actually because of the economic pressures and the obligations that surround a community event, if you make the funeral a community event, so you have to provide food for everyone who comes to the wake, and then everyone who comes to the wake has to provide the condolence payment, called incense money that helps you pay for the wake. But then in return for that, you have to give them a thank you present. And you know, there's a kind of multiple layers of well, they're my aunt. And so I pay them this amount of money or they're my sister or they're my brother or high school friend, there's a different amount of money. And that kind of social obligation and payment and exchange has become quite burdensome for a lot of people. And it's better to not even do that kind of big social funeral and just have a very small, family only funeral. So that's been a big trend, which, interestingly enough, kind of meant that Japanese funeral rituals were somehow protected from the impacts of Covid 19 in some cases, whereas in many countries, you know, massive disruption because you couldn't gather people to come together for a funeral. Japan already had this trend of very small micro funerals happening with less than ten people. So in some ways, there wasn't so much of a big disruption during Covid because this smaller trend was already going on.

Sami Shah: There is a stereotype of discussions around death being more taboo in postwar Japan than pre-war Japan. Given these negotiations that have to happen between family members and everyone, how do those cultural norms and taboos play out? Are people talking about death more openly?

Hannah Gould: I mean, the longevity of Japanese people is such that, you know, there's a whole generation now coming up, like the war generation, that it is a very kind of open discussion about an ageing population and the problem of death. If anything, I think death is kind of openly discussed as a social problem, maybe not individually, but as a social problem of, okay, what are we going to do with elderly people? How are we going to look after them at their end of life, in palliative care. You know, where are they going to die? The funeral. Like, there's there's hotlines that you can call about problems with graves or, you know, there's advertising on trains all the time for new types of cemeteries and crematorium. So I think the kind of pressures on the deathcare system are such and the pressures on, you know, people maybe in their 40s or 50s or 60s who have elderly parents now who are nearing the end of life, are such that people have come to openly discuss it more because this is a big concern. You know, what are we going to do with the ashes? Can we find a grave? Where do we put the grave? They're just like constant concerns for people. So. And therefore it's started to emerge in conversation.

Sami Shah: What about in Hong Kong and China, Andrew? Is the taboo around talking about death of loved ones or family members something that gets in the way, or is it something that's being overcome now?

Andrew Kipnis: I mean, I feel both situations exist, so there's certainly a lot of groups, NGOs and individual social workers who do death education campaigns, and they try to get people to talk about it and explain options, especially here in Hong Kong. I would say there are still many families that don't talk about it, though. You know, there's these countervailing trends and exactly where it is, I don't know. I feel in mainland China it's even more repressed, in part because of government policy. So there's a trend by which the government has decided, oh, you know, burying people in cemeteries and even crematoria are a waste of land. Um, and so it should be prohibited. So they have a ban on new cemeteries, for example. And then there's a lot of tension around the issue. Right. So, you know, talking about, oh, I'd really like to have a cemetery plot for my parents could be seen, as, you know, in an extreme case, a type of anti-government sort of conversation. So there's very little, from what I can see, public promotion of discussion around issues of death.

Sami Shah: Hannah, one thing we hear a lot about when we talk about death and death rituals in East Asia, China and Japan, both is ancestor worship. Can you give us a bit of a background before we get into some of the complexities of how that's changing now, how serious and how ritualized is ancestor worship in Japan and China?

Hannah Gould: Well, first of all, I will say that the term ancestor worship is like highly contested. Probably amongst myself and Andrew, we might have different ideas about the use of this term. Um, because certainly I think in Japan people have slightly hesitated to use the word worship and would probably tend to say something more like ancestor veneration or care for the ancestors. I think, you know, on the basic level, Japan and South Korea and, you know, China and Sinosphere countries are countries that tend to be associated with this idea, this culture of memorialization, where the living care for the dead in some way, and that care occurs through offerings of food, offerings of incense, offerings of recent stories and memories and bits of news from the living. And in return for that care that they offer the dead, the dead are able to provide guidance and good wishes and fortunes and blessings for future generations. The dead are usually beneficent in many contexts, but if they are abandoned, or if they are neglected, then there is the kind of potential or promise that the dead can somehow haunt or affect or interrupt the lives of the living. Right? Whether that is through illness or loss of fortune for the family, or in some cases, even natural disaster.

Hannah Gould: So there's this kind of I mean, at the basic level, a system of ancestor veneration is a kind of system of interdependence between the living and the dead, whereas there's something that the living can do for the dead, and there's some sort of benefit that the dead can provide for the living. How that is articulated in all of the different religions across the region and different cultural traditions. And within those religions, the different schools of Buddhism and Confucianism and Taoism and ancestor veneration is all very diverse, but it is a kind of probably a primary characteristic of death and death cultures in Asia is this kind of interdependence between the living and the dead, which, you know, we may be not so familiar

with in a lot of parts of the Western world, where in general the dead are dead, and all you can kind of do for them is remember them. Right? As opposed to care for them.

Sami Shah: Andrew, would you agree with that definition of ancestor worship?

Andrew Kipnis: Yes, definitely. I think what Hannah said is very insightful. And we just had a discussion about this because I've been running focus groups for people in Hong Kong, and we talked about the term for visiting your ancestors. And it's literally, well, I guess I translated there as visiting. So it's *baishan* which means something *bai* can be visit, but it can also be worship or it also can be respect and *shan* literally means mountain. Now some people were saying well for them because they're don't really have any, quote, supernatural beliefs, it's literally visiting the mountain. And this is two meanings behind that. First of all, they said a lot of these ancestors, "I never even knew them. I never met my great grandmother, but my father dragged me to visit the mountain of her all the time. So for me, I'm not even visiting my great grandmother, I'm just visiting the mountain. Right? Because it's up on a hill and we have to walk up the slope." And other people were saying, "Oh, you know, I knew my ancestor. But for me, it's a form of maybe like reciprocity", like what Hannah was saying. So it's like, "They took care of me when I was younger. And so part of the reciprocity of this is that I should go visit them and bring foodstuffs, and that's all I can do for them. You know, my grandmother passed away when I was ten years old. What could I do for her before I was ten years old? I did nothing for her. So now is a chance for me at least, to express my willingness to do something for her." So this is a real secular interpretation. Secular? I don't know a very not -- you don't believe they're actually ancestral spirits of interpretation of this very practice, but it still persists in a way that is not usually seen in Christian countries. So it's still the idea of it. It is an exchange.

Hannah Gould: This is kind of when our previous conversations about wealth and class and status kind of intersect here. Because obviously if the ancestors have been good to you. Right? if you have inherited wealth, then you have a lot of motivation to repay them. Right? And to perform these actions. And you do see, like in Japan where I was doing research, you know, if, for example, a windfall comes into the family suddenly, so someone wins the lottery, for example, people might be motivated to go out and buy a new altar for the ancestors, because there is kind of some sense that this thing that happened to them through luck or chance or whatever, must be the result of, you know, the previous generations, the karma that they've inherited. On the other hand, you know, if you've kind of grown up in poverty or you haven't received much from your ancestors or you're very disconnected from them, right. So you're kind of living far away from them. You don't have a lot of interaction with the graves, with the household, with the land, the rice paddies, whatever it is you've inherited, then perhaps, you know, there's not so much of a motivation to look after them. In Japan in particular, you see these interesting relationships between kind of merchant families in Kansai and Osaka and how much they invest in ancestor veneration versus, you know, in certain other areas where people might not have so much motivation to do so because they don't have this, you know, multi-generational businesses that they're running, for example.

Sami Shah: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au you'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Sami Shah and I'm joined by East Asia anthropologists, Doctor Hannah Gould of the University of Melbourne and Professor Andrew Kipnis of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. We're talking about how demographic changes in East Asia have impacted the handling and commemoration of the dead. You know, from the old religions and the rather traditional beliefs in ghosts, we now have a new form of funeral care and deathcare that's emerging in Japan and China using tech services. Hannah, can you give us some examples of how digital services and new technologies are emerging in deathcare.

Hannah Gould: Yeah. I mean, I think this is a great example of how kind of cultural practices and religious practices that we might think of as traditional, as old as, you know, inherited change with the times, as with

everything else. So, you know, in particular, in Japan, we have seen a lot of technologies emerge around accessing funerals and streaming funerals. But more so than that, perhaps because, you know, as I said, attendants, we have small funerals. You know, trying to attend a funeral is not so important in that way. A lot of the digital technologies and I suppose kind of robotic, mechanized technologies are emerging around the care of graves and the care of remains. So you have automated columbaria, for example. They're kind of a little hard to describe if you've never seen one, but they're basically an office building that you go into and it looks all kind of nice, like a little hotel lobby. But behind it is a kind of Amazon warehouse with multiple, multiple shelves, and all of those shelves have thousands of different sets of remains, and you might use a card with a little chip in it to call up the remains of your family, of your ancestors, and then they're kind of automatically delivered using a mechanized robot hand and a conveyor belt, and they're delivered to a little booth where you can spend time with the ashes of the remains. And, you know, as you're spending time, there might be a screen next to the remains that have photos of of your, you know, deceased grandmother and music that she liked to play and that kind of thing.

Hannah Gould: And it's all kind of the the handling and storage and presentation of remains through non-human attendants, right through these high tech technological interfaces. In some ways, it's a perfect solution because unlike outdoor traditional graves, these buildings can be built close to train stations and they take up very little space. You can store multiple thousands of sets of remains in a small area, and you have the technology to kind of automate and then also time lots of different people accessing these remains. So those have become quite popular. And I think there's a lot of a lot of the technologies in Japan on new technologies are focused around kind of managing and storing and then like commemorating ashes. And that's an interesting development. I don't necessarily think we've seen move so far out of places like Japan and South Korea, but, perhaps, are beginning to emerge throughout Asia as a way to kind of handle this important need. Because, of course, if you're in a country or a culture with ancestor veneration that you have to care for the dead, you need to access the remains. In some ways, you can't kind of just put them somewhere. So I think that's a really interesting development.

Sami Shah: Andrew is similar digitization of deathcare happening in China and Hong Kong as well. And and if so, is it a generational acceptance of that the older generation is more willing to consider this as well? Or is it just the youngers?

Andrew Kipnis: Um, I know there are some companies trying to promote both web based versions of memorializing people. So you don't even need to have a grave, right? You can visit them online. I don't think they've taken off very much. I think that there is a notion that you should visit your ancestors. At least you should make the effort to visit them, and just doing it online isn't quite enough. Maybe it will take off more in the future. I also have seen some examples of what Hannah was talking about. The crematoria where their vast warehouses and they're mechanized to deliver the box of ashes, or the vase of ashes to a particular room where a family can visit them, but those also have not taken off so much. I visited one in Singapore, which was doing very poorly, and there haven't been any yet in Hong Kong. There are a couple of reasons for this. I don't know how true this would be in Japan. One is that visiting the ancestors is usually done on particular days, so everybody wants to do it on the same day or around the same time.

Andrew Kipnis: And that would make it impossible to have this sort of just a few rooms, right? If people are all going on different days, it would work out better. And the second is the idea that you should be giving your ancestor a home. And if they're in a warehouse where one day they might be in one place and another day they might be in another place. It's sort of like they don't really have a home. Now, some people are letting go of this idea that you should give the ancestors a home. But what happens here in Hong Kong, and I think also in China, is then the push is to go for scattering of ashes, either scattering of ashes in a garden of remembrance, or scattering of ashes at sea. And so for people who are willing to forgo the idea of a home, then what's being promoted and what seems to be increasing a bit every year is the rate at which people scatter ashes. Nonetheless, scattering of ashes is still under 10% of cases here in Hong Kong, though it's rising every year.

Sami Shah: Hannah one rather modern change that's happening in Deathcare rituals in Japan and China is green burial and disposal options, eco friendly options. How hard is this to implement and how open are people to doing this?

Hannah Gould: Yeah, it's so interesting because, I mean, I do a lot of comparative work and research in Australia as well. And like eco or environmental consciousness is a massive trend in Australian funerals. Right. And so things like natural burial or even things like composting or getting buried in a shroud or a cardboard box or whatever it is, I'm always surprised [at] the kind of the extent to which that hasn't penetrated the Japanese market. I think part of it is just because cremation is so entirely widespread and adopted in Japan, that the idea of being buried or having a natural burial is kind of pretty much abhorrent to most people that I have talked to. I mean, I remember being in one of these big funeral industry expos and, you know, some Japanese colleagues looked at me and said, oh, gosh, you still put people in the ground in Australia. Like, how could you? Um, so those technologies have really not taken off. But I think when we talk about environmentalism or green, as it were, there's the kind of sustainability push. But then there's also the environment or the natural cycle as a kind of metaphor or even an emerging spirituality that might make meaning for people around death in place of religious ideas in particular. Right. So one big trend in internment in Japan is a tree burial -- tree internment plots. So this idea that you would cremate the body, but then the ashes would be interned and you wouldn't have a full grave marker, but you might have a beautiful cherry blossom tree or a maple tree or a little shrub or a flower, for example. And that idea of a return to nature or connecting with nature has become really popular as like a metaphor for people to make sense of life and death, perhaps even more so than like a desire to lower the carbon footprint. I think it's less kind of sustainability driven and more maybe like meaning driven.

Sami Shah: But the effects are the same.

Hannah Gould: Sometimes, hopefully. I mean, I think as with, actually, with Australia, you know, sometimes they can get mistaken. And you know what we really should be doing to lower the impact of cremation is to invest in kind of quite boring things like filtration and hydrogen and alternative fuels, which are very important for lowering the carbon footprint, but not super romantic or beautiful to sell to families, whereas a beautiful tree or a natural landscape. And this idea of returning to nature, becoming one with soil is a little easier to sell. So hopefully they align, but sometimes they don't.

Andrew Kipnis: Yeah, I find it very interesting. Certain things are labeled as green burial, but what does that mean? So, you know, I've had lots of discussions with people and a few things come out. One is that, first of all, some people would dispute that scattering ashes at sea or in a garden is green because they would say, "You know, humans could have like lead fillings in your cavities, in your teeth. There might be heavy metals, there might be other things that are not good for the environment." And you shouldn't be putting these into the ocean or even into the soil. So there's this question. There's questions of, "Well, you know, cremation. If it's not the right type of crematory oven, it really pollutes the air." And, you know, it's one of these, quote, eco-friendly practices. But I'm not sure. You know, I don't really know exactly what the accounting of eco-friendliness is here. Secondly, the reason it's promoted by governments is mostly about saving land. So in other words, you know, you don't want to expend land on the dead. That land could be used for the living. Again, is that eco-friendly? Well, in some ways, yes.

Andrew Kipnis: I mean, it's conserving a valuable resource, but in other ways people will say, well, you know, grave land is not necessarily the same land as non-grave land. And so there are different types of land that can be used in different ways. So for example, grave land is often high in the mountains where it's not easy to build buildings for the living for example, or not easy to farm. And the final aspect of this is the question of call it spiritual pollution, which is do the spirits or the ghosts or whatever you would like to call them, of people whose ashes are scattered? Do they somehow pollute neighborhoods? And so there are lots of "not in my backyard" -- NIMBY movements about there should be no scattering of ashes at sea in a place where the ashes could wash up on a beach near my house, or there should be no scattering of ashes in county parks. And in fact, in Hong Kong and in China, the places where you might scatter ashes are

extremely regulated for this reason. So the meanings and the actuality of what is green and what is pollution are, I think, they're very complicated.

Sami Shah: We were speaking earlier about demographic changes in China and Japan. We got, you know, younger labor forces are decreasing in number. You've got an aging population. How does that work out when you're looking at a deathcare industries which require labor, they require workers. Is there still a level of prestige attached to working in deathcare even, or is it now just seen as a shrinking industry?

Hannah Gould: So on the question of a deathcare workforce, I think this is a really important area of emerging area of research that we need to do more work in. My ethnography was working alongside people who worked in this in this area. And this is I'm really interested in their experiences. It still remains the case that deathcare work is pretty heavily stigmatized, I would say, both in Australia and Japan. I mean, it's not very well paid. There's not a huge amount of prestige associated with these positions. And historically in Japan in particular, the handling of dead bodies in particular, and cremation workers have been associated with a caste system. And so this kind of group of what we might translate as untouchable people or a caste of people, I will say the word here, it's not a word that most people in the industry would claim anymore, but a community known as *Ombor*, who used to stoke the fires right, and cremate bodies. And that work has always been very heavily stigmatized and subject to kind of caste discrimination in certain ways, somewhat similar to other work that's written, being researched, that's been done on, for example, burakumin or *ito hi-nin* communities in Japan. It's interesting, though, for contemporary workers. Um, I talked to a lot of young people who perhaps they're worried about automation, and they're worried about other jobs, and they think, well, hey, look, a lot of people in Japan are dying.

Hannah Gould: This is an industry where I'm always going to have a job. This is an industry where those human soft skills, those caring labors, are required and needed. And for a lot of young women who end up working in the funeral services, then this is kind of an understanding and explanation for them. I will say that a lot of that work is quite heavily gendered in terms of young, you know, young women working in these kind of caring labors, caring roles. Um, but there still remains quite a heavy degree of discrimination surrounding certain parts of the sector, more so than others. I don't know if this is the case in the sinosphere, but, you know, the closer you kind of get to touching bodies or interacting with dead bodies. That tends to be a higher degree of stigmatization associated with that labor. And maybe someone who's selling a Buddhist altar is perhaps subject to less discrimination to someone who is washing the body, for example. But it's an incredibly essential labor force and work force, and one that we probably don't care for enough.

Sami Shah: Andrew, is it similar in China and Hong Kong?

Andrew Kipnis: I think there are some similarities. So there's definitely a stigmatization and things like people not being able to get married because, you know, not so much your partner, but what will your partner's family, you know, you can't introduce them to the family. So it results in a marital stigmatization. In some Chinese contexts, the stigmatization actually makes the work somewhat lucrative. So because people are reluctant to go, some people have been reluctant to go into it, there are business opportunities there, more so than in other fields. Some people think that the degree of stigmatization is lessening. Perhaps also the case. I mean, this is interesting with other trends of people not caring so much about getting married. Right? Especially for a young woman who doesn't think she wants to be married and doesn't want to be pressured into getting married. Some of the service sides of it could be interesting. So I don't know. I think I see here in Hong Kong there are certain funeral directors I know, and they are constantly attracting what they call disciples. Right? So they, you know, allow people, you know, you can come with me and help me run a funeral. I'll tell you what to do and you know, you can learn how to do it. I'm not sure that there are not enough people going into the industry. It doesn't feel that way to me, but I wouldn't know. I would have to do further research.

Sami Shah: We've spoken about the labour issues. We've spoken about the environmental issues, about politics, cultural elements. What we have not yet discussed is religion and religious institutions, and how

those are adapting to changing deathcare practices and preferences. Hannah, do they still have an influence amid this kind of increasing secularization we keep hearing about?

Hannah Gould: Yeah, I think it's both true to say that Buddhist temples and Buddhism are still associated in most deaths, most funeral rituals in Japan, and also that the influence or involvement of Buddhism is slowly dwindling. Many scholars and commentators have kind of indeed critiqued the entire of Buddhism as a religion, in Japan as funeral Buddhism. Right? Only interested in death and bodies and handling death like this was the great selling point of Buddhism to Japan. Like, we'll handle this aspect. And certainly, you know, it still remains the case that the majority of funeral rituals or funeral services you'll usually call a Buddhist priest in, and they will come and chant some sutras for the dead. And most of the time you will also still buy a posthumous name, a Buddhist name for the person who dies. However, that is becoming less and less and less, and it's more likely now that you will go through a secular funeral home, a commercial secular funeral home, and they will kind of outsource the ritual aspect of it to a monastic. And, you know, they come in for ten minutes and the kind of the funny thing is that these kind of funeral directors funeral homes are always kind of in a fight with the priests. Now about how long the chanting goes on. Right? And there's also kind of always pressure from the family to like, "Oh, I know we need Buddhism, but just can we just do a little bit of it? You know, we don't understand what the chanting means anyway."

Hannah Gould: Um, it's kind.

Hannah Gould: Of.

Hannah Gould: Almost a stereotype, but a lot of people.

Hannah Gould: You know, only find out what Buddhist school or temple they belong to. When someone dies, they go, oh gosh, oh, wow, we were actually Pure Land, or we were Zen Buddhist or we were all right, we'd better go and call the Nichiren priest because he's the one that grandmother wanted to chant. So, you know, I do predict as kind of generations change, older people in Japan tend to have a far closer relationship with the temple, particularly if they're in a rural area. You probably like to see a lessening of the influence of temples and Buddhist priests in the funeral service and the memorial services, and in graves. There's still a really strong part of funerals, but it is certainly remarkably less and less and less.

Sami Shah: Andrew, is it the same in China?

Andrew Kipnis: I think a couple of differences might be that, first of all, here in Hong Kong, basically, if you were to go to a funeral home, one of the first questions they would ask you is the two basic options would be a Christian funeral or a Daoist funeral. You could choose among those. You could also do something else, so you know. But funeral homes will give you this option. And there's just the entire way the funeral is structured is different for a Christian funeral and a Daoist funeral. So that's why it's a basic choice, even for people who are not necessarily that religious. You still have to have a basic format, and the basic format does come out of a sort of religious background. Having said that, it's also the case that in China, I mean, China was historically very polytheistic, and so there's no reason why you can't do something from five different religions or ten different gods in the same funeral. And so the idea of a really strict division among religions is sometimes not apparent, and also the line between what is a quote. Secular funeral and a religious funeral is also very blurry, because a lot of elements can go on in a funeral that have a sort of religious aspect to them, but they just feel kind of like, oh, that's what you do at a funeral. To a lot of people, for example, there used to be a division of Hong Kong into ethnic groups according to the part of China you were from. So they would say, "Caozhou". *Caozhou* is a place in China. And then there would be the *Caozhou* group in Hong Kong, and then they would have a chow chow style funeral and a *Caozhou* style funeral.

Andrew Kipnis: I mean, in some ways it's a Chinese funeral, but it would have certain elements of it really emphasized and this would make it slightly different to another funeral that you would get. So and these

elements, though, could be quasi religious elements and could be about the involvement of, say, a Daoist priest or something like that. Another thing that has gone on is that in the past in China, burial was what everybody did. And then they have started to emphasize cremation. And there's been a huge rise in cremation rates. Um, it's still possible to do burial in Hong Kong, and there's space for it. And it's not that expensive, actually. If you go through a public gravesite and the tradition of burial in Hong Kong used to be double burial. So, in other words, you bury the body once, let the flesh rot away, dig up the bones, and then you bury the bones in a special type of urn in a second burial. This type of practice is really on the decline, and the main reason it's on the decline is because you have to have a lot of rituals run by a Daoist priest. So there's a ritual at the first burial, a ritual when you dig up the bones, a ritual when you clean the bones, and a ritual at the second burial. And people are fed up with having that many rituals and having to hire the Daoist priests that many times, this is what people say. And so the result is, is only a few people do this.

Hannah Gould: That's certainly the case in Japan. I was like, how many times do I have to call this Buddhist priest out? Not just for the funeral, but then for the 49 day ceremony and then also for the memorial and that sort of thing. I will say that burial is possible, or at least technically possible in Japan, it's pretty much exclusively only practiced by migrant communities and in particular Muslim and Catholic communities. And it is extremely difficult to access and extremely expensive. And there has been a lot of contestation around the creation of new grave sites in certain locations in Japan to accommodate Muslim migrant populations, which is in some ways kind of extraordinary, because Japan used to bury completely, and had a system of burial that, for many different reasons changed to cremation almost exclusively. But there are still some pockets of Japan, and I suppose ethnic Japanese people who do bury and there tend to be associated with the Shinto religion as opposed to Buddhism and certain villages associated with Shintoism. And it's interesting, Andrew, what you say about double burial, because in those communities there's often a tradition of not double burial, but double graves. So you will have one grave that is for the body and one grave that is for the spirit. And you might go and visit the spirit grave, but not the body grave? Because Shintoism is perhaps very concerned with purification. Right? And the body is a polluting force. It's I mean, we always say it's kind of technically possible to get buried in Japan, but it's incredibly expensive and difficult and highly contested, so most people just don't attempt it.

Sami Shah: It does sound like a lot of the changes we're talking about here seem to have to do with the modern world kind of intruding upon traditional practices in modern world, whether that's labor issues or online and tech related issues, and how they change our attitudes towards things and our sense of patience for tradition and culture. How is it possible then, and is it possible at all rather, for example, let's start with Japan for that human touch to be maintained, for it to be preserved rather than being faded away by the encroachment of the digital world?

Hannah Gould: It's a really great, provocative question, because I think a lot of the changes in death and dying in Japan are inflected with a lot of sadness. Right? Sadness that people can't carry out the kind of traditional system that the village practiced, or that the temple practiced, or that their grandparents practiced. They can't get the time off work to visit the grave. They don't have enough money or time or patience to hire the Buddhist priest. They don't have that knowledge tradition that was passed down. So there is a lot of sadness that's associated with that. But it's interesting because occasionally what ends up happening with this kind of imposition of modernity, as you phrase it, is that it ends up actually forcing people or inviting people to have a more intimate relationship with death and dying and the kind of question of the end of life. So just a small example here. But because graves have become more and more difficult to purchase, and people are worried now that they live far away from their family grave, there has emerged a tradition in Japan now, where I say it's a tradition, maybe it's a new tradition of storing ashes in the home, in the family home for many months, if not weeks, if not years, as people kind of wait and debate and make the decision about what to do with them. And, you know, traditionally this was kind of very taboo and that you would never have the ashes in the family home, like there was a kind of a quite strong taboos from, from Shintoism about pollution of the dead body.

Hannah Gould: But increasingly, what you're seeing because of this kind of problem of modernity and urbanization, where you can't get a grave is now the ashes kind of hang around in the home for a really long time, and people might put them on or next to the Buddhist altar, and you might talk to the dead and you might, you know, actually offer the food in the home as opposed to at the grave. And you might even put some of those ashes into a piece of jewelry or a little urn or a keepsake that you actually carry around with you. Right? Or keep in your home, or even, you know, you would never think of this a couple of generations ago. But even in your bedroom or even in the kitchen, or even a kind of banal domestic space of the home. So I think it is possible to find real connection with death and dying in that kind of tactile relationship with the dead, even sometimes because of the necessity of modernity kind of breaking down traditional rituals, which is, I think, really interesting and kind of almost lovely to see for people.

Sami Shah: Andrew, is this space for the tradition in the hyper modern world that is, you know, modern Hong Kong and modern China.

Andrew Kipnis: I think there's definitely space. I mean, tradition gets recreated in a million ways. You know, if you just even look at video games in China, they're very often based on ancient Chinese novels. I mean, this great new rave about the Monkey King, Sun Wukong. There's been a huge video game made about him. So I don't think it's the end of tradition by any means. Another thought I've had, though, about sadness is I think it's a good thing and a bad thing that people are living so much longer and living to an age where they lose their friends, they lose their cognitive and physical abilities. And I personally experienced the death of my parents, and my father died at a relatively young age when he was still very active. He had just retired. There was huge involvement of all his friends and people from his workplace at his funeral. My mother lived to a much older age. She had a gradual decline, I would say over a period of at least ten years, in which she lost many of her physical abilities and also many of her cognitive abilities. She had no friends at the time she died. She hadn't worked for 20 or 30 years. And for me, my father's death was sudden and unexpected and a huge emotional blow and very sad. The sadness that my mother was over a period of ten years or so, as I saw her decline, and her death itself was something different. It wasn't that sad. So I just think that part of the sort of very small funerals has to do with living longer and living many, many years in a state of perhaps not such great high levels of activity. So how do we look at that? Is it a good thing to live long, you know, till you're 90, 95, with 5 or 10 years of all your friends have died, you haven't worked, so on and so forth. You know, that has positives and negatives. I see that in the sadness too.

Sami Shah: Thank you very much for sharing that, Andrew.

Our guests have been Professor Andrew Kipnis of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Doctor Hannah Gould of the University of Melbourne. Thank you both.

Hannah Gould: Thank you.

Andrew Kipnis: Thank you.

Sami Shah: Just a note for listeners keen to hear more about the politics and society of Indonesia. The Talking Indonesia podcast goes behind the headlines with extended interviews with experts on Indonesian politics, foreign policy, culture, language and more. It's hosted by Indonesia watchers, Doctor Gemma Purdy, Doctor Jacqui Baker, Tito Ambo and Doctor Elizabeth Kramer. And there's a new episode every two weeks you can find Talking Indonesia wherever you get your podcasts, as well as on the Indonesia at Melbourne blog from the centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society at the Melbourne Law School.

Ear to Asia is brought to you by. Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Spotify, YouTube, or wherever you get your podcasts. If you like the show, please rate and review it. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show, and please help us by spreading the word on your socials. This episode was recorded on the 27th of August 2024. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is

licensed under Creative Commons. Copyright 2024. The University of Melbourne. I am Sami Shah. Thanks for your company.