

Pave the way to finale

by Julianna Or, Grace Yiu and Sarah Yu



Death is no longer a taboo to most elderly, who are now busy to attend lectures on death planning and to seize scarce residing places. Their rivals are the middle-aged, who started to plan their funerals even earlier in order to rest in peace.

To prepare for the departure, Chinese will buy niches for urns, which are narrow-necked container to store their ashes after cremation. Death is traditionally regarded as inauspicious, but old people become more willing to handle their own funerals.

Tang Tin-yu, 82, a village representative from Kam Tin decided to buy himself a niche in a temple in Yuen Long three years ago.

After fulfilling his personal goal of riding on the new transportation in town such as the West Rail and the cable car of Ngong Ping 360, he found that "it was time to buy a 'new home' soon, just in case."

"I don't want to do it in haste if anything happens to me or my spouse. It does not make a difference if buying (it) before or after (my death)," Mr Tang added after having heard it was hard to buy a place in columbarium, a place for storage of urns.

"I am 82, so it could be my time to go soon. For me, I don't mind talking about death because it will happen soon," he said.

“Death is like a light put out... If your day has come, that would be it, willing or not.”

Another 80-year-old granny who lives in an elderly home, Wong Wai-ping also regards death as an essential stage of life.

“Death is like a light put out. You will definitely switch off the light when you walk out of a room,” said Ms Wong, “If your day has come, that would be it, willing or not.”

“The thing really matters is whether I am granted a peaceful death and whether I have the last resting place,” said Ms Wong. She has bought herself an urn next to her deceased husband’s.

Most residents in her elderly home share her thought and do

not take death as a taboo, but in festivals like Lunar New Year, some remain sensitive.

Meanwhile, the middle-aged also starts to get prepared for death.

Wong Siu-lin, 48, started death planning after her husband’s death in January this year. To avoid queuing up a long time for public niches and to secure a good position, Ms Wong paid an extra HK\$2,000 to share her husband’s niche in the private columbarium in Fo Tan.

“Most of my friends are willing to discuss death issues,” said Ms

Wong, “People tend to be more open-minded nowadays.”

Ms Wong is just one of the middle-aged people who worry about their future residing places.

The curator of Wun Chuen Sin Koon, a Taoist temple in Fanling, Mr Ng said the scarce niches for urns have prompted more people to purchase theirs earlier nowadays. Mr Ng estimated the youngest buyer aged around 30s.

He said queuing up for public niches can take over a year. “The elderly choose private temples because they worry about the settlement of their cremated ashes after death.”

Varsity has interviewed the spokesmen from six other temples in Hong Kong and they said there are more reservations made for niches in private columbarium than the past. However, most of them did not elaborate on the exact increase in prices for niches.

The enterprise development manager of St. James’ Settlement, Gary Sham Chi-wing, said that it is not a new trend that Hong Kong people purchasing niches in advance either for themselves or their parents. But the age of purchasers is now lower than before, either because of (more) people catching

chronic illnesses or they don’t have children.

St James’ Settlement’s Funeral Navigation Service was established in 2004 to help homeless and childless aged people plan their funerals and burials. They conduct funerals according to their will and provide services for their family members on request.

Another charity group Caritas has established Ning An Scheme in 2005, meaning “peaceful” in Chinese, to help the elderly arrange their own funeral services. They organise talks and activities to target the childless elderly who live alone and to encourage them to understand death more. Caritas said the response has been promising as there are more enquiries from the old people and more users of their services.

The chairperson of the Association for the Right of the Elderly, Chan Kam-ming, said more old people initiated their own funeral and burial planning, some started their own in their 40s to 60s. There were also trips visiting columbariums in Hong Kong and cemeteries in the mainland China.

He explained that death was a taboo to those aged above 70, who received little education. These people believe the funeral services should be done by their descendants, since it is extremely inauspicious to prepare for their own funerals.

“Taboo on death still exists because Hong Kong is basically a Chinese society,” he said. Mr Chan urged the now insufficient “death education” should extend to all age groups, including teenagers.

Some aged members found death lectures useful. “These courses are quite interesting. I sometimes ask

others to join,” said Ng Man-fook, 85, a frequent attendant of the programme, “I know more about life and death after these activities. It opens my mind.”

“Most old people around me are interested in joining, they don’t mind talking about death matters,” said Tsui Kwun-tai, Mr Ng’s wife who aged at 80. She said she would share what she learnt with her family.

Meanwhile, Liu Yi, 81, who lives in an elderly home apartment in Tseung Kwan O, said: “Indeed! A lot of people have taboo on death... I sometimes have to be cautious of what I say and present it in a nicer way when necessary.”

She added that some old people avoid discussing death related topics for fear that they will be haunted by spirits.

Andy Cheng Po-leung, a registered social worker at an elderly home, Ho Shin Home For The Elderly, revealed that there are often lead-in sessions before the main content on death in their programmes, as some people still hold superstitious beliefs.

“To prepare them for the main part, we usually ask the elderly to fill in questionnaires before and after talks or activities,” Mr Cheng added.

The honorary secretary of the Society for Life and Death Education, Tao Kwok-cheung, who is also the instructor of the Department of Philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said taboo leads to many tragedies and disgrace.

“In reality, every one dies, but in the process, the more taboos or more superstitious beliefs yield greater fear.”

“Death education is not a discipline of knowledge, it is a matter of attitude, in which includes how one should face up to challenges when problems occur,” he said.

He added that death education, though not a must, could be a reference for people, especially for Chinese. “The feeling that death is a taboo is particularly strong among Chinese. It is necessary to counsel them to ease their pain,” he said.

Dr Tao said death education can stimulate discussion on death among people who avoid touching on the subject before. This may help shatter the taboo. “Acceptance is always better than escaping from the reality,” added Dr Tao.



Elderly centres hold talks for the elderly.

SARAH YU



Mr and Mrs Tsui share their views towards death with their family.

JULIANNA OR



Elderly and even middle-aged people buy themselves urns in private temples.

SARAH YU