Chinese Cremation: policy, society, and taboos

Abstract

The Communist Party of China has implemented large-scale funeral reforms for decades, with one notable goal being a 100% cremation rate. Critics noted the violation on Chinese traditions, particularly the practice of burial in the rural population. Death is not just a religious issue, it is a politically-and-socially-driven culture, involving various factors that often challenge one another. This study examines the development of cremation policies in imperial and Republican China, focusing on how foreign influences and local traditions challenge or favour these laws.

The literature review was organised according to key themes. For the practice of cremation in imperial China and the religious influence on death, due to the limited access of primary sources, I relied primarily on English secondary sources. I was able to locate primary sources from the Republican period, mostly essays published by intellects or gazettes from various regions. They showed the efforts by the government and scholars in promoting cremation. I also studied some accounts by foreign missionaries. They discussed the frequent sights of death in China, and their opinions on the Chinese way of handling the dead. I was able to create a timeline of the development of cremation policies in China and explain the many reasons behind their effectiveness.

Introduction

Death is just as important as life in China. Everything must be properly arranged when death comes: When should the funeral take place? How should the body be disposed of? What should be done with the soul in the afterlife? Asking people from different regions of China will yield varying answers considering the different subcultures. Even when they are from the same city, their answers can still differ significantly

depending on their family backgrounds. It is impossible to pinpoint the exact way to 'die Chinese' other than a few established ground rules.[1]

What one can do is examine the policies by the state on this matter and the reaction by the people. This essay will trace the development of cremation 火葬 policies in modern China, from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) to the republican era (1912-1949), and observe how the politics surrounding cremation interacts with foreign influences and local traditions.[2] In just the last two centuries, cremation went from being banned nationwide to becoming the most promoted method of body disposal. What were the driving forces behind this? How effective are political interventions on cultural shifts?

Ancient China

Cremation has had a longstanding history in what is now the People's Republic of China. Archaeologists found cremation evidence dating back to the Longshan period (*c.* 3000-2000 BC), in which burnt remains were found in mixed burials with no accompanying burial items. [3] It is unclear whether these cremations are proper burials or just randomly discarded bodies.[4] Though cremation was practiced in the ancient times, the Han Chinese regarded it as a revolting custom carried out by barbaric tribes.[5]

Tang dynasty: the religious factor

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) saw a rapid growth of cremation. This is partly caused by the spread of Buddhism. Buddha himself was said to be cremated, his remains divided and placed in different *stupas*.

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[1] For the main features of death rites in China, see James L. Watson et al., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (University of California Press, 1988).

[2] 火葬 directly translates to 'fire-burial,' though it has also been used in situations where someone dies by burning, especially when the full body cannot be recovered. Other translations for cremation include 火化 (fire-transformation) and 焚化 (burn-transformation).

[3] F.P. Lisowski, 'The Practice of Cremation in China', *Eastern Horizon* XIX, no. 6 (1980): 21–24.

[4] This essay uses the term 'cremation' to describe both the burning of a body in a funerary context and the disposal of a body by fire without any ritual. Some historians prefer to refer the latter as 'body burning'.

[5] J. M. M. De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, vol. 3 (1892): 1392.

Buddhists in China followed the tradition, contributing to the popularization of cremation in that period. Another reason was the integration of ethnic groups like the Tibetans and Turks. The Tang government allowed them to perform cremation. Some Han Chinese, particularly the ones in remote areas, adopted this practice.[6]

Sung Dynasty: challenging authority

The issue gets more complicated in the Sung Dynasty. With the revival of the Confucian School, authorities and intellectuals attempted to diminish cremation, a practice that goes against filial piety. Curiously, cremation continued to thrive until the Ming (1368-1644). It is evident that the rise and fall of cremation were not simply due to the influence of Buddhism or Confucianism. Other religions, namely the Chinese folk religion, also impacted burial practices.[7] Translated Chinese literature, including some from the Sung, indicates that cremated bones can still be properly buried.[8] Aside from the religious factor, increased interactions with Northern ethnic groups can also explain the increase in cremation during that time. The third reason is convenience: cremation saves time, money, and effort compared to traditional burial.[9]

In her article, Han raised a fourth reason: the impact of 'positive body burning.' This includes burning the body to prevent further mutilation by enemies and preventing the burial of family in a foreign land during wartime. These factors contributed to the Sung people's unconventional views on filial piety. The combination of cremation and burial was more flexible than the rigid traditional approach, while also allowing their own expressions of filial piety. The unique cultural and socio-economic scene in the Sung overrode government regulations.

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[6] Lewis H. Mates and Douglas J. Davies, *Encyclopedia of Cremation* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2005): 185, 224; Christina Han, 'Cremation and Body Burning in Five Dynasties China', *Journal of Chinese Studies*, no. 55 (2012).
[7] Patricia Ebrey, 'Cremation in Sung China', *The American Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (1990): 406–28
[8] But no evidence suggests how common this opinion was or that cremation is preferred over traditional burial except under special circumstances, see De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, vol. 3: 847-854; Ebrey, 'Cremation in Sung China'.
[9] Han, 'Cremation and Body Burning in Five Dynasties China'.

Ming and Qing: the law

The decline of cremation occurred during the Ming Dynasty. From this point on the development of cremation became more politically driven, with interventions from the state or elites playing a much larger role.[10] According to the Great Ming Code, those who cremate the corpse of another person were punishable by 100 strokes of the heavy bamboo and exiled to 3000 *li* 里 (ancient Chinese distance unit), except under special circumstances, such as when the person died in a distant place. Even when cremation was carried out under the wishes of the person, it was still unlawful. The same statute was adopted in the Great Qing Code in the Qing Dynasty.[11] The regulations on cremation were much stricter than those in the Sung.

Throughout the 18th century, the Qing government further tightened the restrictions on cremation. Emperors forbade the cremation of bannermen, since bannermen were supposed to be buried at 'home' in Beijing.[12] Interestingly, as noted by Elliott, cremation was an ancient practice among the Manchus, the ethnic group ruling China at that time. He interpreted the ban on cremation as an attempt to 'conceal what [the emperor] considered a distasteful, and possibly embarrassing Manchu practice, left over from the days when they had been "barbarians."' One might view this as an effort to uphold the Confucian image of royalty, which strengthened their rule over the Han people.

The sick and the unburied

[10] Ebrey, 'Cremation in Sung China'.
[11] De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, vol. 3: 1411-1413; William C. Jones, *The Great Qing Code* (Clarendon Press Oxford, 1994).
[12] Joohee Suh, 'The Afterlife of Corpses: A Social History of Unburied Dead Bodies in Qing China (1644-1911)', *Arts & Sciences Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, no. 1951 (2019): 77-78; Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford University Press, 2001): 264-265.

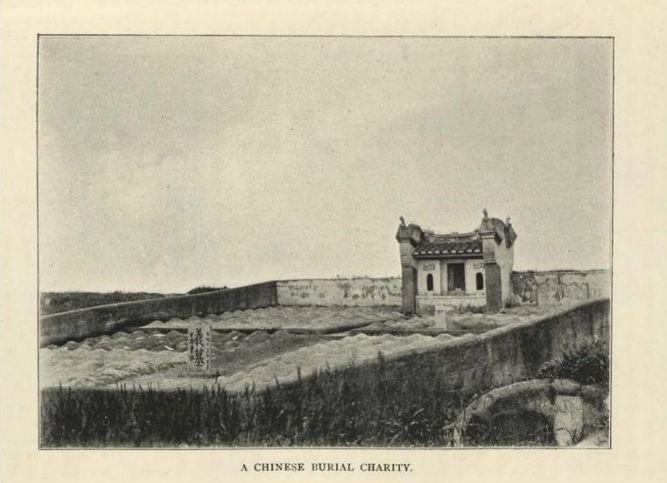

Figure 1: a Chinese burial charity.[13]

Many foreigners' accounts of late Qing China addressed the dead. The frequent sight of unburied coffins or bodies shocked many.[14] These were not only the remains of beggars or victims of wars; some were deliberately placed on the streets by their families, covered by random materials or half-buried.[15] Some charities or guilds aimed to bury unburied bodies or prevent the abandonment of corpses.[16] However, the exact number of unburied bodies remains unknown. The idea of using cremation to tackle this problem was not raised until the Republican era.

In 1910, a pneumonic plague broke out in northern Manchuria. Harbin was one of the hardest hit cities, with over 100 deaths per day.[17] People abandoned the dead on the streets to avoid police investigation and compulsory disinfection of their homes. Cambridge-trained doctor Wu Lien-tuh was instructed by the government to investigate the plague in December. He found that the anti-plague measures were ineffective, especially the body disposal procedures: initially, corpses collected would be placed in cheap coffins and buried, the government bearing the cost. As the death rate mounted, they buried bodies without

[13] Debbie Ireland, *Isabella Bird: A Photographic Journal of Travels through China 1894-1896* (Ammonite Press, 2015).
[14] Eric Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion* (University of California Press, 2004): 53-55.
[15] Suh, 'The Afterlife of Corpses: A Social History of Unburied Dead Bodies in Qing China (1644-1911)': 4-5.
[16] Christian Henriot, *Scythe and the City: A Social History of Death in Shanghai*, 1st ed. (Stanford University Press, 2016): 61-62.
[17] 'Obituary (Wu)', *The Lancet*, originally published as Volume 1, Issue 7119, vol. 275, no. 7119 (1960): 341–42.

coffins. In winter, no actual burial had been carried out for over six weeks, since it was impossible to dig that many graves in the cold weather. In late January 1911, Wu found over 2,000 unburied bodies, a serious menace to public health.[18]

Wu's solution to this problem was mass cremation. He recognised that the Chinese considered this act as sacrilegious, having embraced the Confucian culture or Chinese folk religion. He needed an imperial edict 詔書 from the emperor himself.[19] Wu invited local officials to Harbin and see the gruesome sight themselves. The leaders agreed to support his petition, which was then sanctioned by the emperor. On 31 January 1911, the first mass cremation in modern Chinese history began. 1,416 corpses were cremated in February, out of which 1,002 were dug up from graves.[20] A telegram was sent to other parts of the country, ordering local officials to follow Harbin's cremation policy.[21]

This plague is an example of the government's intervening role in cremation. The introduction of mass cremation was not well-received. There were theories that foreigners intentionally introduced epidemic prevention policies to kill the Chinese people and weaken Chinese traditions.[22] It is hard to determine whether the government was only temporarily allowing cremation or if it had become more open to it after learning its benefits, as the demise of the Qing came soon after in 1912. What can be concluded is that a major new reason for the development of cremation policies was introduced: public health, or *weisheng* 衛生.

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[18] Kam Hing Lee et al., 'Dr Wu Lien-Teh: Modernising Post-1911 China's Public Health Service', *Singapore Medical Journal* 55, no. 2 (2014): 99–102.
[19] Note that Puyi, the Xuantong Emperor, was only 4 years-old at that time. Much of the administration during the plague was done by the official Xiliang. See Roger V. Des Forges, *Hsi-Liang and the Chinese National Revolution* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1973): 178.
[20] Lien-teh Wu, *Plague Fighter; the Autobiography of a Modern Chinese Physician* (Heffer, 1959).
[21] '公牘：撫憲准督憲電轉外務部實行火葬通飭各屬遵辦文' (Official document: The Governor-General approves the implementation of cremation and instructs all departments to comply with the order), *Jilin Official Gazette*, 1911, 3rd Edition.
[22] Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2004): 247.

Before the 18th century, weisheng originally referred simply to the health-related practices of an individual. As China received more western influences, *weisheng* slowly shifted to align with the English definition of 'public health.'[23] This change would be carried forward by the Republic of China and even the People's Republic of China.

The Republic of China:

As the 3,000-year-long imperial rule came to an end in China, a new republican government formed. After the Warlord Era (1918-1928), the government was able to finally settle down and focus on urban problems, one of which is the issue of public health.

Unburied coffins persisted and attracted government officials' attention.[24] In Nanjing, government officials collected these coffins and bodies to wait until the opening of first public cemetery. Aside from community burials, cremation was the obvious second choice. The government initially doubted it, recognising the public outrage it might cause. Nevertheless, it decided to proceed with it, kickstarting an extensive development of urban cremation.[25]

Crematoriums built by the Chinese republican government were not completed until the late 1920s. Those that came before were built by foreign governments in their concessions or by Buddhists.[26] However, the earliest official government approval of building crematoriums was in 1924, when Sun Yat-sen, the chairman of Kuomingtang and *dayuanshuai* 大元帥 (Generalissimo) of the National Pacification Army,

[23] For a more in-depth discussion on weisheng in modern China, see Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*.
[24] Niu Yongjian, '特別要件：清明節前舉行掩埋運動並提倡公墓' (Special requirements: To carry out a reburial campaign prior to the Qingming festival and also promote public cemeteries), *Jiangsu Provincial Government Gazette*, 1929, 91st ed.
[25] Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 322 (Harvard University Press, 2009): 255-256.
[26] Mates and Davies, *Encyclopedia of Cremation: 225*.

sanctioned the Minister of Construction Lin Sen's petition to build crematoriums.[27] In the petition, Lin praised late Minster of Foreign Affairs Wu Ting-fang:

> 'Dr. Wu, in an effort to remedy these drawbacks, had strongly advocated for sky burial, commonly known as cremation. Cremation was popular in China during the Song and Yuan dynasties and is now a common trend worldwide. It truly benefits the people and is quite feasible. At the time, those who understood the situation and valued public health supported it.'[28]

Sun permitted the redesign of an abandoned medical storehouse in Guangzhou into a crematorium and ordered the Guangdong Governor to proceed with it. Though, as mentioned, the completion of any crematoriums did not occur until the late 1920s, and there are no records proving that the Governor followed Sun's order after his death in 1925.

One of the earliest—and arguably the most successful—crematorium constructions took place in Hankou, a town which is now a part of Wuhan. In October 1929, construction was completed for the crematorium at Huanzi Lake.[29] In November of the same year, a Crematorium Management Committee was established under the District Weisheng Bureau, along with the draft crematorium regulations.[30]

The first operation of the cremator was on 18 November. 10 coffins were cremated. Figure 2 shows the total number of coffins burned each month from November 1929 to Sep 1930 (no data for October 1930 since the cremator was under maintenance). In total, 1412 bodies were cremated in the year. The operations of the crematorium were so successful that the Ministry of Weisheng sent a letter to all

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[27] Sun Yat-sen, '令大本營軍政部長程潛、廣東省長楊庶堪' (Command to the General Headquarters Military and Political Minister Cheng Qian and Guangdong Governor Yang Shukan), Generalissimo of the Army and Navy Gazette, 1924, 16th Edition.

[28] Lin Sen, '令大本營建設部長林森：呈請將永濟藥庫廢址撥爲天葬場所乞訓示祇遵由' (Lin Sen, the Minister of Construction of the Headquarters, requested that the abandoned Yongji Medicine Storehouse be designated as a sky burial site), *Generalissimo of the Army and Navy Gazette*, 1924, 16th Edition.

[29] '市民須知：一年來之火葬及掩埋工作' (Notice to Citizens: Cremation and Burial Activities Over the Past Year), *New Hankou: Hankou Municipal Gazette,* 1930, volume 2, 5th Edition.

[30] '火葬場管理委員會成立' (Crematorium Management Committee established), *New Hankou: Hankou Municipal Gazette*, 1929, volume 1, 5th Edition.

provincial governments and special municipal governments with the Hankou Health Bureau draft crematorium regulations attached, ordering government officials to use it for reference.

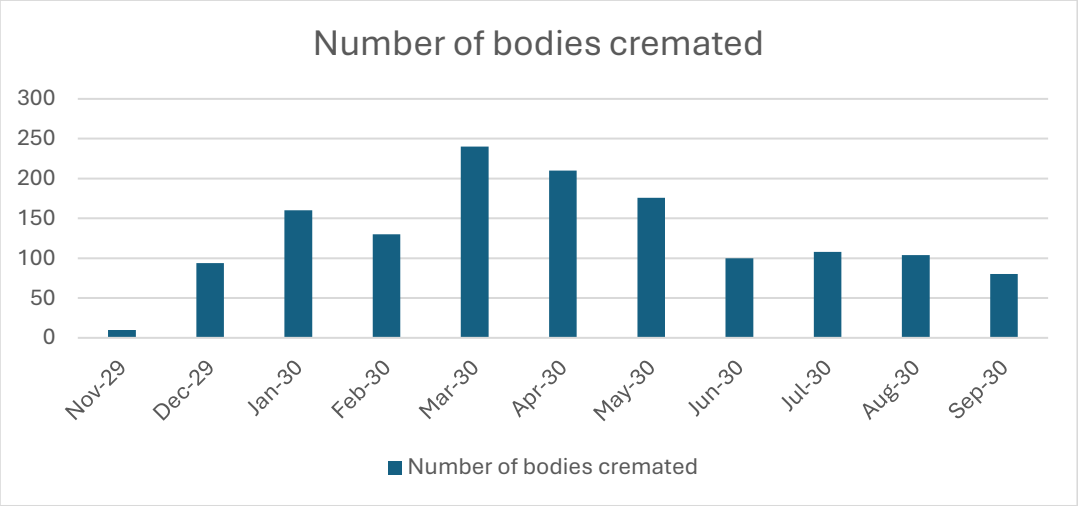

Figure 2: number of bodies cremated in the crematorium in Hankou[31]

Other cities soon followed suit, announcing the constructions of crematoriums one after another. The capital Nanjing, for example, tested its Dayingpan Crematorium in 1936, with its first cremation case being a German woman.[32]

Their efforts, however, was halted by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). Even in wartime, the practice of cremation still faced criticism. The problem of unburied bodies worsened in conflict, governments and charities alike sought ways to deal with the overwhelmingly large number of corpses. In 1938 the French Concession in Shanghai introduced the cremation of the body. The plan was protested by the charity *Tongren Fuyuantang* 同仁輔元堂, which handled the collection of abandoned bodies. The French Concession continued with their plans and did not lift the measure until 1940. The International

[31] New Hankou: Hankou Municipal Gazette, '市民須知：一年來之火葬及掩埋工作'.
[32] '大營盤公墓及火葬場不日開放' (Dayingpan Cemetery and Crematorium will be open soon), *Nanjing Health*, 1936, volume 1, 3rd Edition; '首都火葬場第一注生意：是位德國僑婦' (The first business at the capital's crematorium was a German immigrant woman), *Xinghua*, 1936, volume 1, 24th Edition.

Settlement of Shanghai also prevailed against the protests of Chinese charities, and continued cremation until the end of the war.[33]

Science and New Culture

A significant part of republican era is the New Culture Movement, a social revolt against traditional Chinese customs and ideas. Among the many Confucian traditions criticised, burial was one of them. Intellectuals and scholars attacked burial and praised cremation. Arguments against burial include the waste of money and land, 'corrupted' superstitions, etc.[34] Arguments for cremation include saving money and land, improving public health, and Buddhist idea of 'releasing the soul from the body.'[35]

This sociopolitical movement had limited outreach, especially in the rural population. Even today, many Han Chinese still believe in the traditional folk religion. Chinese geomancy, known as *feng shui* 風水, affects how people place their ancestors' bodies and graves. Researchers have debated over how feng shui connects the living and the dead. Social Anthropologist Maurice Freedman argued that, according to his findings in the New Territories of Hong Kong, the dead were passive agents, 'pawns in a kind of ritual game played by their descendants with the help of geomancers.' Others, however, suggested that the ancestor himself brings good fortune when spirit is pleased. [36] The regional and cultural variations are possible reasons for the different conclusions. Despite differing opinions, most can agree that the general idea is that the comfort of the dead leads to prosperity for the living.

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[33] C. Henriot, '"Invisible Deaths, Silent Deaths": "Bodies Without Masters" in Republican Shanghai', *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 2 (2009): 407–37.

[34] Han Sheng, '葬事改革之我見' (My Opinion on Funeral Reform), Nanliu Tide Monthly, 1926, 6th Edition; Xi Guang, '土葬和火葬' (Burial and cremation), *Zhi Xin* volume 6, no. 1 (1923): 22–27.

[35] '實行火葬之機運' (The opportunity to perform cremation), *Buddhist Semimonthly*, volume 79 (1934): 23.

[36] Rubie S. Watson, 'Remembering the Dead: Graves and Politics in Southeastern China', in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*; Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society* (Bloomsbury Academic, 1966): 126.

To some, the incineration of the body is an unsettling idea even without the religious context. In 1930, a student from the Hubei Provincial No. 2 Girls' High School wrote:[37]

> 'Cremation? The thought of these two words conjures up a terrifying vision: a desolate square, with rows of dry firewood stacked high. A moment later, a blazing flame flared up like the tongue of a golden serpent, spitting everywhere. The remains of a human body, battered and scarred by the world's money, power, sorrow, disappointment... were placed in the flames. Immediately, thick plumes of smoke rose, swirling like tongues of flame, and the unpleasant stench of burning mingled with the air. It was like accidentally overcooking a fish in a pan, frying it with the intermittent crackle of firecrackers, like a burning corpse, unable to bear the pain, struggling for life, groaning in its final struggle. When the flames died down, nothing was left but a pile of ashes.'[38]

This creative work of course does not necessary reflect the author's true opinions on cremation. It is, however, a rare example of literature work from the Republic era that is critical of cremation. Many participants of the New Culture Movement received much higher education than most of the country. For those with less education, especially in rural villages, it is harder to understand their ideology and any potential influence of the movement on them, due to a lack of documentation. Many official documents claimed that over 80 percent of the Chinese population was illiterate. [39] So, while majority of the literature found from the era are pro-cremation, it is important to recognise that there is a historical gap in understanding the general population's opinions on this practice. In many villages, the preference for traditional burial practices over reformed customs survived even after the Cultural Revolution by the communists. Fung shui is still a common belief. While many people have adapted to government policies by bending the cultural and religious rules, others, especially the older generation, still prefer burials.

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[37] Today's Hubei Wuchang Experimental High School

[38] Shen Wei-de, '火葬場' (Crematorium), Hubei Provincial No. 2 Girls' High School Journal, 1930.

[39] For a comprehensive overview of illiteracy and literacy programs in modern China, see Di Luo, *Beyond Citizenship: Literacy and Personhood in Everyday China, 1900-1945* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2022).

Ultimately, it is undeniable that the literature and ideas from that era had a significant impact on modern Chinese ideology and culture. The promotion of cremation was continued by the communists, who implemented even tighter policies on it. While many people have adapted to government policies by bending the cultural and religious rules, others, especially the older generation, still prefer burials. This shows the simultaneously flexible and rigid nature of religions.

Reflecting on policy and other factors on cremation

The Communist Party of China's attempt to make cremation compulsory for all citizens is unlike any situations in China's history. It is much more aggressive than the approach the ROC took, but people still found ways to cheat their way around. Even after the Cultural Revolution and political campaigns targeting 'superstitious practitioners,' the profession of geomancers survived and many people, especially those living in rural areas, still believed in feng shui.[40] Most people living in urban cities follow state orders, finding ways in feng shui for cremation to be acceptable and that the soul persists.[41] In rural areas however, there were cases where people bribed officials to protect their burial plots or even suicided to avoid mandatory cremation laws that would be implemented in the future.[42] In other words, the government tried using cremation to consolidate cultural control, only for their strong religious ties to bounce back.

The issue of cremation, and many other death ritual traditions, is a complex matter involving politics, society, culture, and religion. As seen in the Sung Dynasty, with strong cultural and socio-economic influences, political interventions can have little effects on the prevalence of cremation. To an extent, the Qing and Republican governments were 'lucky' that the socio-economic conditions of their times were

[40]Vincent Goossaert, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, 2011): 230-231.
[41] Martin K. Whyte, 'Death in the People's Republic of China', in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*.
[42] Agence France-Presse, 'Six Elderly People in China Kill Themselves "before Burial Ban"', World News, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/28/anqing-china-six-elderly-people-kill-themselves-burial-ban.

to their advantage: majority of Chinese people in the Qing Dynasty followed Confucianism or Chinese folk religion which condemned cremation, while the New Culture Movement and increased awareness of public health regarding unburied bodies in the ROC fostered pro-cremation views among the educated population. In contrast, the current prevalence of folk religion in rural China does not help the CCP's spread of cremation. COVID-19 saw a jump in cremation numbers, but the people were still not convinced with the government's burial reform.[43] Combined with the fact that China is trying to revive neo-Confucianism, a full implementation of cremation may prove difficult, unless another strong cultural or social shift appears in the 21th century, one that convinces people digging up bodies from graves to burn them is justified.

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