

# In crowded Hong Kong, dead find no space to rest in peace

By Kelvin Chan  
AP Business Writer

**H**ONG KONG — In tightly packed Hong Kong, the dead are causing a problem for the living.

After Chui Yuen-sing's mother died in April, she was cremated and her ashes put in storage while he tried to find a final resting place. He was willing to wait up to 18 months for a pigeonhole-like "niche" in a memorial building. If none was available, he was considering putting them in mainland China, where his father's ashes are already stored, or taking an even more drastic step that conflicted with Chinese tradition.

"Maybe I would have scattered my mom's ashes in a public park," the retired university lecturer said. "But if I used this method, then in my heart, I probably wouldn't feel very good ... Chinese people think that you should be buried in the ground to find peace."

Chui's choices highlight the long-running struggle to find enough space to accommodate both the living and the dead in the cramped southern Chinese city of 7.2 million. Limited land to build on and soaring property prices are colliding with a tradition of visiting grave sites on "tomb sweeping" holidays to burn incense and pay respects to venerated dead ancestors.

Hong Kong's aging society means the problem will get worse. The number of senior citizens is expected to rise from 15 percent of the population in 2014 to nearly a quarter by 2024. The number of deaths each year will rise from 42,700 in 2010 to 50,300 by the end of the decade, according to government forecasts.

In the 1960s, administrators of Hong Kong, which was then a British colony, began encouraging cremation to ease the strain of a fast-growing population on space-starved cemeteries. Now, the cremation rate has risen to about 90 percent.

To store the ashes, the government builds large structures known as columbaria that have tens of thousands of niches for urns as well as furnaces to burn paper money and other offerings. But supply hasn't kept up with demand.

## Fans mourn death of reclusive star Setsuko Hara

**TOKYO (AP)** — Precisely in keeping with her zeal for privacy, news of actress Setsuko Hara's death on September 5 was kept quiet until recently. The star of director Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* and many other Japanese classics was 95 years old.

Japanese fans laid flowers and other memorials outside Hara's former studio after relatives disclosed news of her death, prompting an outpouring of affection for the reclusive actress dubbed the "eternal virgin."

Hara's poise and beauty endeared her to fans who viewed her as a role model for modern Japanese women in the years after the country's defeat in World War II.

She starred in many other Ozu films, such as *Early Summer* and *Late Spring*. Hara withdrew from public life after she retired at age 42, spending the next 53 years in the quiet seaside city of Kamakura, near her birthplace of Yokohama.

Her family told media



**PRIVATE PASSING.** In this photo taken in 1960, Japanese actress Setsuko Hara poses in Tokyo. In a last act precisely in keeping with her zeal for privacy, actress Hara, the star of director Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* and many other Japanese classics, died September 5, 2015, but kept the news quiet until recently. (Kyodo News via AP)

that Hara had not wanted a fuss, so they kept quiet for more than two months after her death.

Shunning public appearances and interviews, she chose to regain her private life after her last film in the early 1960s. Hara's early retirement meant her public image remained forever youthful.

Though she made dozens of films before beginning to work with Ozu, one of Japan's most revered directors, Hara is best remembered for Ozu's movies. She also appeared in Akira Kurosawa's interpretation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and in his *No Regrets for Our Youth*.

Hara was born Masae Aida on June 17, 1920.



"There's undoubtedly not enough," said Lam Wai-lung, chairman of the Funeral Business Association. Official attempts to encourage local councils to build more face fierce opposition, he said.

"When the government holds consultations, residents of every district oppose building it in their neighborhood. Every area says no," Lam said.

Part of the reason is that columbaria draw huge crowds of people during tomb sweeping holidays, causing big traffic jams and air pollution from the paper offerings burned.

Families face a waiting list of up to six years for a government-provided niche, so some turn to private providers, including more than 120 that have been deemed illegal.

But private niches can be too expensive for many families, with prices at one temple ranging from 73,000 Hong Kong dollars (\$9,500) to HK\$890,000 (\$115,000).

Since 2007, authorities have also promoted "green" burials by scattering ashes at sea or in 11 gardens of remembrance. But such practices conflict with Chinese traditions that hold that burying remains in an auspicious spot on a mountainside or near the sea are vital for a

family's fortunes.

The government has been trying to change attitudes with educational videos and seminars at retirement homes. It's even set up an electronic memorial website where families can post photos and videos of the deceased and send electronic offerings of plums or roast pork. Interest remains limited, with green burials rising from a few dozen in 2005 to 3,553 last year.

Some companies are offering more creative solutions.

Sage Funeral Services started offering a service three years ago through a South Korean laboratory that uses ultrahigh heat to turn ashes into memorial gems.

"In the first year everybody said I'm crazy," said Betsy Ma, Sage's sales director, who had her father's ashes made into gems that she wears in her earrings and necklace.

Many Chinese believe that carrying human remains as jewelry or storing them at home will attract ghosts, said Ma. Still, in the past year the procedure has gained popularity, she said.

Government auditors have said Hong Kong faces an "acute shortage" of niches over the next three years because of project delays and a government plan to regulate private operators.

The new law, expected to take force next year, is aimed at better managing private operators, which frequently violate land-use rules or safety codes. Some



**CROWDED COLUMBARIA.** A woman prays (left photo) while holding a package of paper money intended to be burned as an offering to her dead father with a wall of niches for cremated remains in the background at a private columbarium in Hong Kong. In tightly-packed Hong Kong, the dead are causing a problem for the living. Pictured at right are crystallized beads created from cremated ashes that can be used to make memorial gems. The beads are made at a South Korean laboratory that uses ultra-high heat to turn ashes into the gems. (AP Photos/Kin Cheung)

entrepreneurs spot an opportunity to modernize a market dominated by small, old-fashioned operators.

"There will be a new generation of high-class columbaria coming up," said Francis Neoton Cheung, an urban designer and chairman of Life Culture Group, which invests in columbarium projects.

One company he has worked with, Kerry Logistics, is proposing converting a 15-story waterfront warehouse into a modern columbarium.

The HK\$2 billion (\$260 million) project will have 82,000 niches opened by smartcards and videoscreens showing photos and movies of the deceased as well as high-tech air filtration to cut pollution from burning joss sticks and paper offerings. However, the company has yet to secure planning approval after local residents objected.

Chui, the retired lecturer, compared waiting times for public urn spaces to demand for public housing.

"There's never enough supply. For some people it causes great hardship," he said.

Chui was one of about 9,480 people who applied for 3,256 new niches offered in October from the Board of Management of Chinese Permanent Cemeteries, a private group.

He got lucky, winning a family niche. He plans to bring his father's ashes back from mainland China so his parents can be together.

Shan Shan Kao contributed to this report.

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