

Understanding Asia: Living and Dying

Death Economy, Market Governance, and Market Subjects: An Ethnography of Funeral Professionals in Urban China



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16:15 – 17:45
Zoom-event

One of the most significant changes in death matters occurring in contemporary China has been the institutionalization and professionalization of death. In Shanghai, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has nationalized all funeral parlors since the 1950s. Since China adopted a market economy at the end of the 1970s, state funeral parlors were marketized while remaining a state monopoly. Against this change in political economy, this talk describes and compares two types of funeral professionals. The first was state funeral practitioners employed by funeral parlors and the second was newly emerged private funeral brokers who mediated between the bereaved and funeral parlors. By describing their quotidian business practices, this talk shows that grassroots state practitioners have become not the self-striving individuals desired by the state but self-conscious, working-class subjects despite the state having intended to transform those quasi-officials into risk-taking individuals who care about profits. Meanwhile, private funeral brokers have become entrepreneurs even though the state has tried to prevent them from working purely based on the logic of competition. Both were unintended consequences of the market governance of death in Shanghai. By comparing the conditions of becoming and not becoming market subjects, this paper tackles the often taken-for-granted connection between market governance and market subjectivity.

Dr. Huwy-min Lucia Liu is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at George Mason University. She is a cultural anthropologist. Dr. Liu is the author of *Governing Death, Making Persons: The New Chinese Way of Death*, published by Cornell University Press in 2022. Her research focuses on social change in authoritarian and socialist regimes through topics on subjectivity, governance, pluralism, ritual, death, nature, emotion, and gender. She has conducted research in China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan. Dr. Liu has also published articles in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Critique of Anthropology*, *Modern China*, and book chapters in *The New Death: Mortality and Death Care in the 21st Century*, *Charismatic Modernity: Popular Culture in Taiwan*, and *Research in Economic Anthropology: Economic Development, Integration, and Morality in Asia and Americas*.

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