DYING SOCIALIST IN CAPITALIST SHANGHAI:
RITUAL, GOVERNANCE, AND SUBJECT FORMATION IN
URBAN CHINA’S MODERN FUNERAL INDUSTRY
HUHY-MIN, LIU

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2014

Major Professor: Robert Weller, Professor of Anthropology

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explains why and how urban Shanghainese are primarily commemorated in death as model socialist citizens despite the rise of individualism, the resurgence of religion, and current government opposition to socialist civil funerals since market reforms initiated in 1978. The study draws evidence from archival materials, interviews, and participant observation fieldwork between June 2010 and January 2012 (including attendance at over 75 funerals). The Chinese Communist Party’s original funeral reforms, especially the promotion of socialist funerals, aimed at eliminating religious, affective, and relational ideas of self through the removal of “superstitious” elements, ritualized and externalized grief and mourning, and all horizontal ties among its citizens. The dead were thus envisioned as undifferentiated socialist subject-citizens directly tied to the party-state in socialist funerals.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the state began to discourage socialist funerals, while marketizing all state funeral parlors. Shanghai state funeral parlors thus started to pursue “personalized” funerals commemorating the deceased as individuals. However, despite such moves, the socialist funeral has become
the dominant form of commemoration. The dissertation argues that when death became a profit-making business, the government lost its moral capacity to dominate the subject formation of the dead. Shanghai people saw state parlors' effort to promote personalized funerals as simply another instance of profiteering. “Dying socialist” became a critique of the neoliberal regime, momentarily de-naturalizing the capitalist reality of Shanghai life.

Meanwhile, the rise of semi-legal private funeral brokers mediating between the bereaved and state funeral parlors further pushed death into a moral vacuum. Simultaneously, these brokers also provided a new platform for the inclusion of traditional and religious funeral elements within socialist civil funerals. The thesis ends by considering two forms of socialist funerals—popular religious/Buddhist and Protestant versions—and their respective subject formation. The former seeks to add new frames alongside the socialist frame, while the latter seeks to supplant the socialist frame with an entirely different narrative. The first is pluralist and accommodative. The second is revolutionary, striving for a singular Protestant subjectivity to supplant the old socialist one.