NONFICTION

# The Other Chinese Megacities

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ON THE BOUNDARIES OF CHINESE MEGACITIES lie cities visitors never see. Vast cities where people of different religions, or none at all, gather as equals. Cities with spacious, clean thoroughfares lined with Amur maple and cedar trees, serviced by street vendors selling hot food and fresh flowers. In front of temples, there are stalls selling firecrackers and sandalwood, and for those inclined to spend more, incense of rare agarwood, extracted from the resinous hearts of Vietnamese aquilaria trees.

On the boundaries of Chinese megacities lie cities of the dead. Mega-cemeteries beyond the outermost of the concentric ring-roads that are these megacities' planetary systems, each ring with its orbiting suburbs, cities in their own right.

At Christmas, I traveled to one of these cemeteries outside Shanghai for my mother-in-law's funeral. I had been living in China with my husband and two young children for the previous eight years and had grown close to her, even though our backgrounds could hardly have been more different. I come from a village in the west of Scotland; she brought up her family in the historic core of Shanghai when it was a city of low, pearl-gray shikumen lane houses with courtyard gardens. I met her son in America when we were both young international students caught between the allure of the new and disabling homesickness. We shared a giddy displacement. In time, we shared a home, got married, moved to the Upper Midwest for work, had children. Our first son was

born on the last clear day of fall before the temperature plunged. We named him Tian Bai 天白 Bright Heaven. His younger brother was born during the first rainstorm of spring, and in gratitude for the thaw, we called him Tian Yu 天雨 Rain from Heaven.

Once our children arrived, we hankered for home. We got tired of the snow and the holidays alone. We longed for warmth and a palette of bright colors. A work opportunity arose in Shanghai, and we sold our belongings and boarded a plane.

The Shanghai of my husband's childhood had changed so much in his absence, into a megacity of bristling skyscrapers, bullet trains, and glass towers that mutate at night into LED artworks. Only a few pockets of brick lane homes survived. At first, I was disappointed to move into a new high-rise apartment rather than into one of the achingly nostalgic shikumen dwellings with poor plumbing where my husband had grown up. But I quickly realized that "traditional" Shanghai was always unflagging in its appetite for the new and stylish. In the decades before the Second World War, the city was an experiment in what it meant to be an international metropolis. There was even a word for it: Haipai, Shanghai Style, a joyful fusion of peoples and cultures.

Moving to Shanghai gave our children the chance to grow up with their Chinese family, but being in this city where architecture, food, music, and fashion were all imprinted with the blending of cultures was itself invigorating. We honored our own traditions—we took the children to church and also to Buddhist temples—but in true Haipai fashion we sought out new ones. We celebrated Bloomsday at our local Irish pub, and Robert Burns Night at a Taiwanese nightclub famous for its selection of rare single malts. At Thanksgiving we ate turkey and pumpkin pie at the American sports bar where we danced most weekends to a Filipino band. We read Shanghai's eminent Modernist, Lu Xun, watched Korean soaps with Mandarin subtitles, and listened to K-pop. Each Christmas, our children took part in the nativity play at church. At first, we dressed them as angels with tinsel haloes from Shanghai IKEA. As they grew older, they chose to be horses or zebras or camels. Then kings. The trajectory of their early childhood could be traced beside the manger, handcrafted by a carpenter from a neighboring province.

My sons became fluent enough in Mandarin that they started dreaming in that language. They learned how to shift into Shanghainese to chat with their grandparents. Like many older people, my in-laws were most comfortable speaking that dialect. Shanghainese is "local language," a taproot of culture proudly preserved by several million people. When my in-laws joined us for dinner it was the only language spoken around the table. It is a dialect of soft vowels, a graceful blurring of Vs, a soft buzz of Zs. It has no hard edges or harsh consonants, nothing that clips or snags. Shanghainese might be the world's most companionable language. The sounds of its words are as comforting as a home-cooked meal.

Although my mother-in-law was the embodiment of a Shanghainese nai nai (grandma), lavishing her family with food and affection, she had struggled with ill health for the entirety of my marriage to her son. Her own mother was the first person I saw with bound feet. As a young woman during China's period of modernization, she unbound them. But bones crumpled in childhood can't regenerate, and this gracious woman always moved tentatively on stumps. Like many Chinese women before the Liberation of 1949, she had a large family. Of her ten children, seven survived, though her three daughters, including my mother-in-law, all suffered from diabetes, the public health scourge of China's recent economic development. During the 1980s, diabetes was a negligible problem; today, 11% of China's adult population suffers from the disease, and around a third of the world's adult diabetes cases lives in China.

There's nothing acute about diabetes, nothing mercifully swift. A death from this illness will never be shocking. Instead, decline is protracted. The surprise is rather that the body can survive so much decay. Periodically, my mother-in-law was admitted to the hospital, and during these times, the family-centric nature of illness in China was most fully apparent. In the West, one can survive a hospital stay without family. Skilled nursing ushers a patient through treatment, mediates pain, staves off infection, ensures that nutritional needs are met, and anxiety calmed. But in China, families play a much greater role in a patient's care. In my mother-in-law's busy hospital ward, my husband and his sister sat through long shifts of days and nights by her bed, beside countless other

families tending their loved ones. He and I joined cousins and aunts delivering home-cooked meals, tempting her with favorite snacks, rubbing lotions into her skin. My sons helped distract her through the vacuum of hours.

Over the years, my mother-in-law's health slowly diminished, despite the interventions of Western medicine, traditional Chinese therapies, restricted diet, and her family's care. In China, the year is punctuated by festive family gatherings. It was a cruel irony that in this food-centric culture, diet removed her from the heart of the occasion. At Mid-Autumn Festival, while we gorged on rich crab, and larded pastries stuffed with candied melon, she ate platters of dragon fruit, reputed to stabilize glucose levels. Flaming coral pink with lime green crenellations, its skin looks enticingly baroque, but its gray-white flesh studded with black seeds is dishearteningly bland.

She became unable to walk the two blocks to the vegetable market, even in the soft slippers she wore to soothe the sores on her feet. Increasingly confined to bed, she became exhausted and depressed. My husband's last act of service to his mother was, through guanxi—the indispensable network of connections, relationships and dependencies that underpins Chinese social life—to secure her a hospital bed by a window, so she could die in the sunlight.

In-ground burial, the preference in China for thousands of years, is no longer legal in some provinces, as the living compete with the dead for real estate. In some cities, the price per square meter for a burial plot outstrips that of an apartment. "Can't afford to die" is a standard dark joke. In a tier-one city such as Shanghai, inner-city land is too precious for the 26 million residents to make room for even the cremated remains of the dead. Hence the sprawling mega-cemeteries on the margins.

In Shanghai, my mother-in-law, like most of the city's deceased, was brought first to one of the massive crematoria in the city's industrial hinterlands. During the winter peak, each of these facilities might handle 250 cremations per day. In other countries, we've attended our share of bleak memorial services at crematoria; my husband tells me that in China no family would choose to be so starkly confronted with the body's destruction. The soul's untethering happens elsewhere.

On the morning of my mother-in-law's funeral, we drove through the darkness to the crematorium. But it is not in these places of anonymous tiled buildings and car parks that we honor our dead, though the subdued young workers are respectful and kind. They seem aware of their role as messengers whose careful choice of words can soften a blow. The young man who gave my husband his mother's ashes consoled him in Shanghainese. It seemed a special kindness. In his perfectly tailored white cotton gloves, he offered the urn, telling us that the ashes were clean, fine, and white, without any charcoal or bone. He had a face that said this was true, and we had no desire to know otherwise.

We continued our journey to the cemetery in heavy traffic through the outer suburbs, past the remote subway stations at the limits of this city's vast circulation system. The freeways were as clogged as we'd seen them on any major holiday, but in China, this isn't the Christmas holiday season. It's Dongzhi, the Winter Solstice, a liminal time when the year rocks on its axis. A time for families to gather, eat together, and pay their respects to the dead. The Shanghai newspapers report that over this one day, a million residents visit city cemeteries to tidy graves and remember their loved ones. Before a late dawn, the new toll roads out to the mega-cemeteries jam with cars; traffic halts two miles in front of the toll booths, crawling forward at hearse-pace. At Dongzhi, the frequent arguments between impatient drivers and the toll booth operators cease, like a Christmas Day truce. Death, like disease, is communal. We suffer and remember together.

We crawled through flatlands stubbled with new high-rise apartments, past shopping malls and sprawling factory complexes that are themselves townships, with their own dormitory blocks and company stores. After two hours, we broke into the semi-rural borderlands gridded by canals and irrigation ditches glinting in low light. Past the small parcels of vegetable plots, sheathed in plastic to protect the winter greens from frost. Past the belching smokestacks of factories small enough to evade fines for turning the air sulfuric. The half-light of midwinter is the perpetual light of these margins, polluted by industry and by small-scale farmers burning fields after harvest.

We navigated this territory en masse, in procession, because Dongzhi is like

any other holiday—meaningful, even sacred, in the sharing. The local newspaper reported that over 15,000 urns had been buried in Shanghai cemeteries the previous day. We have so many fellow travelers on our journeys to these far-flung necropoli.

When we reached the cemetery after four hours of driving, its entrance reminded me of the flower market near my home in the city center, with baskets of chrysanthemums and palm fronds heaped on the pavement. The pathway was lined by vendors with plastic washbasins full of winter vegetables, fresh eggs, and tangerines. Tethered chickens pecked the gravel. Wearied from their drive, and knowing the next hours would require unusual stamina, mourners selected meats, winter spinach, noodles, and smoked tofu to be stirred into bowls of fortifying broth. Dongzhi is a time for tending the dead, but also for sustaining the living.

Inside the gates, phalanxes of gravestones stretched to vanishing points in all directions. Like the megacities of the living, which bristle with uniform housing blocks, this space was disorientating, telescoping outwards. I was reminded suddenly of Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel," with its endless universe of hexagonal rooms. Countless oil drums smoldered like the factory stacks we had passed on the route, and a fine mizzle of ash settled on our hair and clothes. When we first moved to Shanghai, I was often confused by what I saw or heard, though over the years, the strangeness had eased. Now, looking at these drums whose purpose I didn't understand, I felt a return of my earlier bafflement, but knew, if I waited, meaning would unfold.

As a retired factory worker, my mother-in-law had lived frugally in a small apartment on a modest income. In death, though, she is affluent. Her impressive gravestone is bookended by stone lions and propitious dragons that twist up either side. Like almost every grave here, there is room for her spouse; an oval ceramic plaque bears her photograph, while his is blank, waiting, holding his space beside her. Whole genealogies are carved into these headstones in Chinese characters, painted yellow for the deceased and vital red for the living—a checkerboard of mortality in two primary colors. I spotted my own

name in Chinese plus those of my husband and two sons. With a start, I realized that while I continue my life in one city, my name will still be here in the other, and someone else's hands will in time paint it yellow. A short distance from this grave is the one belonging to my husband's grandparents. Our names are there too, except that of my youngest son, who was born after they died. His absence, though entirely explicable, was still unsettling, and recalled a question he had asked me several days earlier. Where was I before I existed? And I wondered, what color are we before we are born? Maybe blue, the other primary color, the color of water and sky, the color that precedes this landscape leached of light.

The ground around my mother-in-law's grave was heaped with bulging plastic bags. They spilled onto pathways and billowed mysterious contents around the feet of uncles, aunts, neighbors, and cousins. It was my husband's task as the eldest son to lower the box with his mother's ashes into place at the base of her stone. A helper, a cemetery employee, came to assist with the ritual, to ensure that the correct words were said at the right moments. "In the past, we'd know what to do, but these days we don't know," my husband commented. He grew up during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s, that seismic collapse of traditional culture. Decades later, its legacy means that even educated people need guides to explain the country's customs, to re-familiarize them with everything that had been familiar for centuries. It is only recently that traditional Chinese holidays are officially observed, that Dongzhi has become a time of mass pilgrimage.

The helper gently laid a red cloth over the box, scattered a handful of coins on top, then carefully sealed the lid shut with cement. On top of the stone slab, he placed the appointed objects retrieved from those mysterious bags—small trees and golden ornaments. He attached each to the slab with a disc of wet cement. Then he heaped the grave with lychees, cherries, apples, dates, candies, and the pearlescent rice she had to avoid eating while alive—the sweet nutrients of the afterlife.

Perhaps of all cultures, Chinese people have been most solicitous of the comfort of the dead. In museums around the world, little clay mingqi, or "bril-

liant artifacts," excavated from ancient graves, attest to the tenderness Chinese lavish on their departed. During the Tang Dynasty, figurines of singers, musicians, sleeve dancers, jesters, horses, polo players, and well-appointed villas accompanied people to their next lives. There are games of go, with black and white counters poised on the board. China's dead will never be lonely or bored or without shelter or comfort. Here in this cemetery, some of the more elaborate graves have stone tables and round stools. My young sons are quite satisfied that they are for their occupants to play chess while we aren't looking.

Mingqi are made of paper now instead of clay, but they are just as elaborate. My sons discovered a paper motorcycle, a little three-story house with a chicken coop, paper Rolex watches, and round dining tables surrounded by chairs, so no one is forgotten, no one excluded from the banquet. Someone had gifted my mother-in-law a paper Hermès handbag.

She was not particularly religious, but six Buddhist monks in saffron robes arrived to conduct a short ceremony with chanting, gongs, and cymbals. It seemed perfunctory, and the only contact they had with our family was to tell my husband to bow faster as we filed past the grave. But no one seemed dissatisfied.

Adjoining the cemetery is a large Buddhist temple, and I imagine the proper conveyancing of the dead is one of their principal duties. But this mega-cemetery is not exclusively Buddhist. Interspersed among the gravestones are some with Christian crosses. Given their ages, their owners perhaps attended one of Shanghai's Catholic schools, shuttered after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. For many years, especially during the darkness of the Cultural Revolution, to mark a stone with a Christian cross would have been unthinkable. Since China's re-opening, it is has become possible once more to be Haipai, even in death.

After the monks departed, there were many more rounds of filing past the grave, bowing, hands held forward holding lit incense. Then, one of the uncles rolled up one of the oil drums that had earlier perplexed me. The aunts carried over the billowing bags and started to tip waterfalls of silver paper into the drum. These sheets had been folded into the shape of ingots traditionally used as a store of wealth. An uncle lit a match, and the paper ingots ignited in a roiling cloud of black smoke. There were thousands of them, tipped into the flames in round after round, and the smoke rose and mixed with the smoke

from neighboring graves.

"Your mother made these at the end of her illness," an uncle reminded us. She had sat in bed surrounded by her family, all with busy fingers, folding and folding this wealth. As a young woman, she'd worked in an electronics factory. During China's failed economic experiments of the 1950s, she'd gone hungry with the rest. Doubtless, the Cultural Revolution had taken its toll. She knew what money cost and never spent what could be saved. After her death, we discovered that instead of spending the money we gave her each month for medicine and food, she'd saved most for our children.

Smoke and incense rose around us, ash fell, the air and sky were white. "Like heaven," said my eldest son.