

# Cyberspace haunts ancient tomb rituals



Tomb sweeping in Qinghua Festival [File Photo]

QR codes are part of daily life for most people. Short for “quick response” code, they are machine-readable labels that allow us to add new WeChat friends, pay bills with smartphones and order food in restaurants, among a myriad of other easy functions.

They have become so ubiquitous that some people joke QR codes will one day replace tombstones, allowing people to scan a code by mobile phone and access the names and achievements of ancestors that used to be engraved in granite.

Actually, it’s no longer a laughing matter.

The annual Qingming Festival, or traditional tomb-sweeping day, falls on Tuesday this year, and QR codes are appearing in graveyards across China.

The matrix bar codes come in various forms, such as stickers, bronze plates or plastic tags. They cost up to 3,000 yuan (US\$436). Scanning a code leads to a memorial page honoring the dead.

Many graveyard companies operate online memorial pages, where one can also give virtual flowers, burn virtual candles and buy virtual gifts for the dead, either for free or for a few cents. So far, the new trend hasn’t really caught on much.

Some companies are also offering live streaming services for those who cannot get to cemeteries for Qingming this year. Staff clean the tombstones, bow to them and place flowers on graves for absent clients who can watch the ritual via live streaming video on mobile phone apps.

Needless to say, all this digital intrusion into what is an old and revered festival in China is stirring up a bit of controversy. Some Chinese netizens say that the new practices are fitting substitutes for those who cannot make it to graveyards and that they promote a cleaner environment because less

traditional paper money is burned at tombs. Others say online tomb-sweeping services are crass and lack respect.

“The QR code service really ties in well with a more ecological approach to funerals because it is much smaller than the typical tombstone,” the Zhejiang Province Funeral Association said at a recent press conference, recommending the service.

The association staff said they are actively promoting alternative funeral services, like burying the ashes of loved ones under trees or in flower beds, or throwing them onto waterways or into a brisk wind.

Government subsidies of around 1,500 yuan are given to those who chose not to buy a plot of land to bury their dead. Land is becoming scarce.

All the newly fangled ideas don't sit well with traditional views about how the dead should be treated. Many people are afraid that alternative funeral services will mark them as disrespectful toward elders who have always been afforded a peaceful plot for their souls to rest in peace.

Many also worry that the absence of a large tombstone will rob them of a focal point for paying their respects and burning paper money to honor ancestors.

“The bronze QR code tag is small enough to fit in a flower bed, so people will know where their relatives are buried,” the funeral association staff explained. “We hope it will help some people consider alternative funeral options.”

China has traditionally been an agricultural economy, where the land long played a significant role in the lives and deaths of people. For many Chinese, the first thing to do after making some money is to return to their hometowns and build new houses.

Most still believe that the soul needs a piece of land to rest for eternity and for the others to visit and pay tribute.

“We Chinese always say, ‘You find peace after you are buried under the soil’,” says Peter Kuang, a 36-year-old software engineer who has been doing tomb-sweeping services every April for the past 10 years.

“I am not superstitious enough to believe that there is an afterlife or that the soul really needs a plot of land, but I don't think it's necessary to challenge old traditions that others in my family still believe in.”

He adds, “A piece of land and a tombstone are still considered necessities. Being there in person is also crucial. You go there, you burn your paper money, you kneel down and you say your prayers – not because ancestors really hear you but because you are showing them respect.

“We have lost so many traditions,” Kuang concludes. “The tomb-sweeping ceremony is almost the last sacred rite left. It feels ridiculous to just click a button and count that as respect paid.”

Indeed, modern development and the digital revolution have led many people to rue the passing of old traditions in Chinese holidays, especially Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Nowadays, many people think of the Mid-Autumn Festival only in terms of eating mooncakes and of Spring Festival as just a weeklong break to go on a holiday.

Qingming Festival valiantly clings to old traditions, like burning fake money and other paper gifts for the dead. But with pollution becoming a hot-button issue, some cities have banned such gift-burning at graveyards and are urging residents to forsake their cars to avoid huge traffic jams.

In Shanghai alone, it is estimated that more than 8 million people will travel to suburban graveyards over the three-day Qingming holiday.

“It has become almost as bad as Spring Festival,” says Zhang Yuan, a 27-year-old migrant from Anhui Province, who works in Shanghai. “It’s harder to get back home when there are only three days for Qingming. I would prefer not to go, but my parents worry that we will be criticized by other relatives if I don’t show up.”

When he suggested that he might participate in tomb-sweeping via digital technology, his parents were outraged.

“They were furious,” he says. “They would have killed me via mobile phone if that were possible.”

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## [Guangdong probes alleged white dolphin butchering](#)



Three photos posted by an internet user show that a Chinese white dolphin was killed, dismembered by two middle-aged men and then sold to customers in Nanshui Town, Zhuhai, Guangdong Province on March 30, 2017. [Photo/Weibo.com]

Investigations are underway after netizens reported the butchering of an aquatic animal alleged to be a baby Chinese white dolphin in Zhuhai, said Guangdong Ocean and Fishery Administration on Friday.

At 6:30 pm on Thursday, netizens reported that some people were butchering a dolphin near Nanshui in Zhuhai's Jinwan District.

After receiving the tip-off, law enforcement officers immediately headed to the spot.

They recovered and sealed the remains of the aquatic animal, which will be checked and verified by technical authorities, it was added.

A preliminary investigation by the local fishing bureau said a fisherman surnamed Zhong found a big fish floating in the sea near Gaolan Port. He saw the fish had been dead and dragged it to the wharf and let three other men

butcher it.

The three suspects are currently cooperating with police investigations, the administration said.

The Chinese white dolphin, nicknamed “mermaid” and “giant panda of the sea”, is mainly found in the western Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean. In China, it often appears in the East China Sea, and is guarded under first-class state protection.

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## **Chinese leadership urges greater poverty relief efforts**

The Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee held a meeting Friday, calling for greater efforts to push forward poverty alleviation.

Members of the Political Bureau heard reports on provincial Party committees and governments’ achievement and evaluation work on poverty relief in 2016 during the meeting, which was presided over by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee.

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## **Former senior Jilin official sentenced to 12 years for graft**

Gu Chunli, former vice governor of northeast China’s Jilin Province, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for taking bribes on Friday at a court in neighboring Heilongjiang Province.

Personal assets worth 2 million yuan (around 290,000 U.S. dollars) belonging to Gu were confiscated, and his illegal gains shall be recovered and turned over to the state treasury, according to a statement by the Harbin City Intermediate People’s Court in Heilongjiang.

Gu was found to have taken advantage of various official posts from 2002 to 2015 to help others with business operations, construction, loans, case handling and job promotions.

The court found that he accepted bribes worth 43.65 million yuan either personally or through his family.

The court showed leniency, taking into consideration the fact that he confessed, exposed the crimes of others, expressed remorse and voluntarily turned over all his proceeds.

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## [Air pollution to hit northern China during upcoming holiday](#)

A new round of air pollution is expected to hit the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region in north China during the upcoming Tomb-sweeping Day holiday, or Qingming, the environment ministry warned Friday.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) said the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region and its neighboring areas will experience medium to heavy air pollution from Monday to Wednesday, as weather conditions will turn unfavorable for the dispersion of pollutants.

Pollution levels are likely to peak between Tuesday evening and Wednesday, with the cities of Beijing, Langfang and Baoding facing heavy pollution.

The ministry expects the pollution to ease from April 6.

Chen Jining, head of the MEP, urged timely air quality forecast and pollution warning, as well as strict supervision and inspection on enterprises and automobiles with excessive emission.

Beijing and Tianjin, together with another 26 smaller cities in north China, have drawn up detailed action plans to address air pollution, vowing to cut coal consumption, close down polluting businesses and scale down steel production in winter.

China is targeting cutting emissions of both sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide by 3 percent this year, and markedly reducing PM2.5 density in key areas, according to this year's government work report.