

Death – A part of life – Part one

By Russ Allison CEO, The Necropolis, Springvale

When Chinese delegations from Beijing and Tianjing visited The Necropolis, Springvale in 2001, it was apparent that whilst Delegates marvelled at our grounds and our facilities, they were somewhat perplexed by the amount of space allocated for memorialisation. Within the context of their own experiences, their perception that we waste space is entirely understandable. They were amazed that only 65 per cent of disposition is by cremation.

During our own visit to China last year, Brian Arnold (The Necropolis Trust Chairman) and I were equally amazed by the sheer magnitude and operational efficiency of our Chinese counterparts. Given the significant investment planned for our Asian burial ground at Springvale, we took up the opportunity of joining an official delegation from our municipality, the City of Greater Dandenong, on a visit to its sister city in Xuzhou. Travelling as official visitors with the administrative support of Chinese Foreign Affairs, we were privileged visitors. Doors were readily opened within local industrial establishments that are keen to establish better trade relationships with the West.

With the assistance of Xuzhou's Foreign Affairs department, we became the first foreign visitors ever allowed within the working area of their crematorium and funeral parlour complex. The crematorium and funeral facility houses eleven chapels, various merchandising display rooms, residential quarters for staff, arrangement rooms and administrative offices. Behind the scenes, a significant mortuary area provides for the preparation and preservation of over 100 bodies, each housed in individualised



Above: Official welcome to City of Dandenong Trade Delegation at Xuzhou

compartments within banks of stainless steel refrigeration units. The mortuary facilities are as well appointed and presented as any I have seen within Australia. What set them apart was their capacity – handling over 25,000 cases per year!

A number of procedures are markedly different from our usual operations. Death is very much a part of life. Transfer vans are specifically designed to enable family members to travel with the deceased to the funeral parlour. After suitable mortuary preparation and dressing, the body is taken to one of the eleven chapels. Whilst the chapels vary in size, they have a number of common elements. The name of the deceased and a welcome to mourners is prominently displayed electronically within the chapel itself. Extensive displays of artificial paper floral tributes are rented to families by the crematorium. During the committal service the body is displayed in a Perspex unit, and not necessarily within a casket. At the time of committal, the body is transferred to the crematorium, and it is quite common for family to

accompany the deceased to the crematorium area.

Built in China as part of a joint Sino Japanese business venture, the Xuzhou cremator units are modelled on a Japanese cremation system. Their unique operational difference is that each furnace has two removable hearths. Whilst one cremation is occurring, the other hearth automatically transfers



Chapel display cabinet



Above: Streetscape view of Xuzhou crematorium and funeral chapel



Transfer van – family seating alongside the deceased and the mortuary stretcher is stored underneath



Bone ash memorials

to a loading area where the family or crematorium staff can place the body directly onto the hearth ready for insertion into the cremator. As the loaded hearth mechanically transfers back into the cremator, the alternate hearth carrying the cremated remains of the previous incumbent rotates out of the cremator for cooling. Family members access the cooling hearth to select special bones and cremated remains fragments that they wish to inter within the cemetery. The residue is left behind and has little significance.

The “cemetery” is adjacent to the crematorium grounds. Whilst the term cemetery is used throughout China, it really means a bone ash repository. In China, everybody is cremated except when they are buried.

Given the pressures of population and space, burial is not usually allowed nor is it encouraged by the Government. Families are allowed up to two square metres of land for interment of remains and limited tenure appears to be the norm. A variable pricing structure operates to cater for individual

tastes, preferences and capacity to pay. In the past, some older cemeteries hindered residential development so a very pro-active approach to relocation has been implemented. The planning and foresight demonstrated at Xuzhou ensures that a large tract of land on the outskirts of the city was set aside for future development.

Most memorials there have been constructed from Chinese granite; a considerable range of memorials and urns was available for sale. The initial impression generated by the sight of this vast cemetery was not unlike the visual image Westerners conjure up in their mind when they think of the pottery horsemen figurines from the Ming tombs: hundreds upon hundreds of memorials laid out in a uniform pattern with military precision.

Quite clearly the attention to detail and the precise layout is a continuation of the tradition established within the construction of the ancient Han tomb at the western foot of Gui Hill at Xuzhou. The Han tomb itself, with its treasure rooms, coffin rooms, pottery figurines and myriad underground passages,

is now accessible to the public. Within the Xuzhou Museum, the jade burial suits are proudly displayed. Collections of historic artefacts demonstrate that some important archeological remains survived the Cultural Revolution and the Chinese now appear proud of their heritage.

Leaving the delegation, our amazement at the size and quality of the operation at Xuzhou was good preparation for our visit to Baoxing Funeral Home in Shanghai.

The second part of Death – A Part of Life will be featured in the June journal

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