

# Chinese Religions at the Grassroots

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Lecture 5: Religion and the Local Economy



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## Cemetery in China forced to bury controversial mortgages-for-graves plan after media backlash

- Cemetery announced the plan and within days was forced to cancel the scheme after overwhelming negative publicity
- Many were angered by what they saw as greed and profiteering on people's grief



Qin Chen in Beijing

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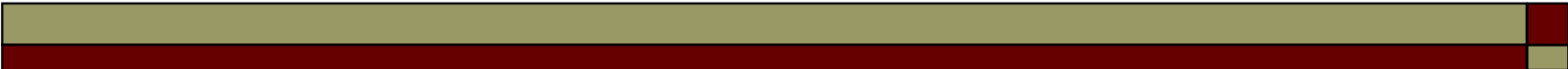


A plan to offer grave mortgages in China has backfired and forced a cemetery to cancel the plan. Photo: AFP

# Funeral expenditures

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- ❑ RMB 5,800 = average funeral expenditure between 2004-06
- ❑ → 58% higher than the numbers for 1996-2003
- ❑ Graveyard space is up to 1,000 times more expensive per square metre than the average flat
- ❑ “social spending” (positional/herding behaviour)

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- According to Bloomberg, citing data from Fu Shou Yuan International Group, China's largest publicly traded operator of cemeteries and funeral facilities, the cost of an average burial plot has soared 41% to \$14,800 since the middle of 2015, outpacing growth of 23% in home prices as measured by China's National Bureau of Statistics.
  - Per square metre, the average plot price stood at about \$16,540 in 2017, more than double the \$8,260 per square meter average it cost to buy an apartment in Shenzhen, China's most-expensive housing market.

(<https://www.businessinsider.com/graves-now-cost-more-than-high-end-property-in-china-2018-8?r=US&IR=T>)



# Questions

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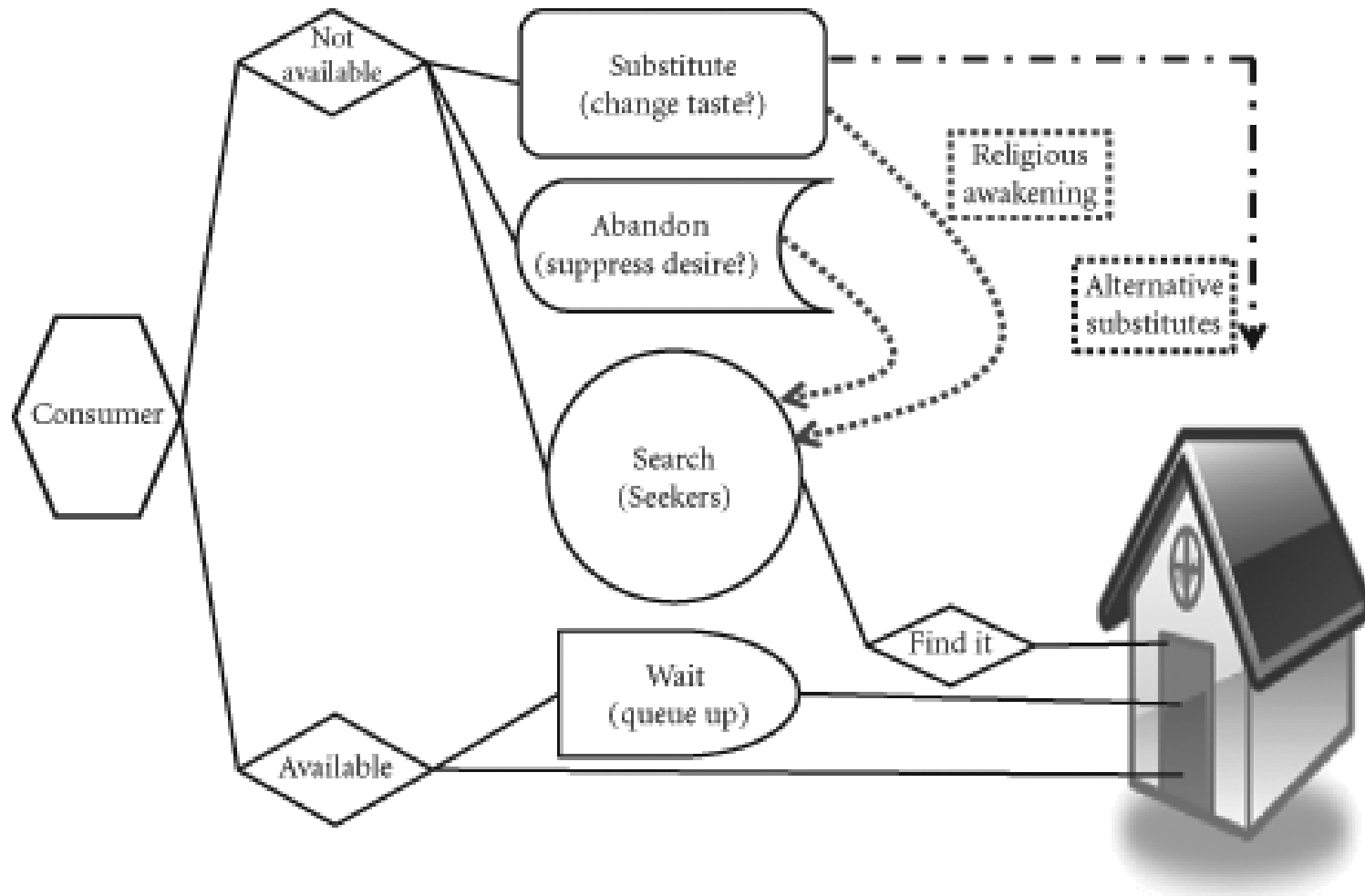
- How much of the revival of religions in the last few decades is fuelled by the economic transition? (Yang Fenggang) – assumption: transition to market economy has generated greater spiritual needs.

# Yang Fenggang

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- ❑ In an emerging market economy people are driven to seek supernatural intervention ← getting rich by virtue of one's own efforts is difficult
- ❑ People try to 'manipulate' supernatural forces for better fortunes (p. 214)
- ❑ Religion as solace for those who struggle, and as confirmation of success for those who are successful
- ❑ Search for 'meaning'

# Demand-Dynamics Model in a Religious Shortage Economy



# Three Markets of Religion

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- ❑ Definition 1: A red market of religion consists of all legal (officially permitted) religious organizations, believers, and religious activities.
- ❑ Definition 2: A black market of religion consists of all illegal (officially banned) religious organizations, believers, and religious activities.
- ❑ Definition 3: A gray market of religion consists of all religious and spiritual organizations, practitioners, and activities with ambiguous legal status.

# Mayfair Yang

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- ❑ Channeling of wealth into the ritual economy—“squandering” wealth on ritual expenditures:
- ❑ people construct a higher cosmic order
- ❑ Keep in check the predatory capitalist economy through contributions to community welfare; reconstitution of community and promotion of public good

# Loan or Permanent loss

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- *Renqing* seen as a loan that will be repaid → strengthening of social bonds
- Donations and offering cannot be recouped  
“you don’t see that money again” *qian jiu jian bu dao le* 錢就見不到了

# Overlap between religious and economic language

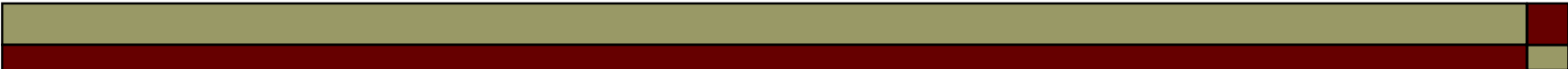
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- Dotted paper records, “cash” *chaopiao* 鈔票
- “Currency” *huobi* 貨幣
- “Giving human feelings” *song renqing* 送人情 equivalent to “making an investment” *touzi* 投資
- → concept of life as a “financial loan”

# Wenzhou model

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- ❑ Ritual economy and market economy interpenetrate each other, extend each other
- ❑ Complementary rather than oppositional relationship
- ❑ Ritual economy drives market economy as much as market economical success fuels the ritual economy with cash
- ❑ Reversal of Max Weber's Protestant Ethic – not destroying the commercial ethos but acting as “check on socially destructive impetus” (Yang 2021: 311)



# Questions for discussion

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- ❑ Are Chinese gods like capitalists, bent on creating profit?
- ❑ Is “giving away” wealth Chinese style better than Marxist redistribution of wealth?
- ❑ Is religious revival result of economic revival or did the return of the gods stimulate economic recovery?