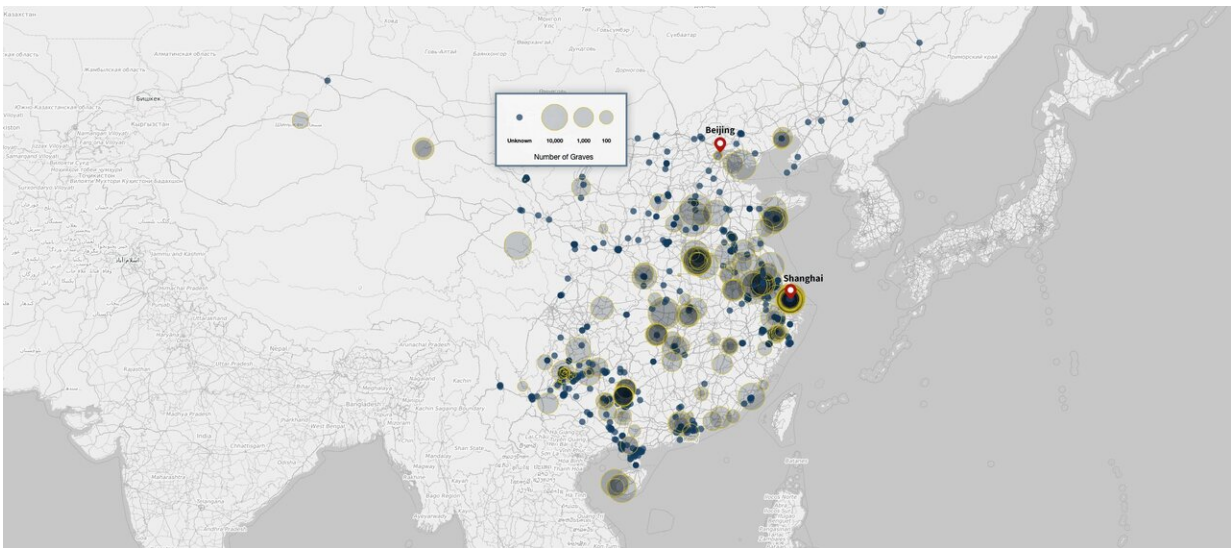


# Historian shows millions of relocated gravesites in China in new, interactive website

June 7 2019, by Alex Shashkevich

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Credit: Center for Interdisciplinary Digital Research and Stanford University Press

In what is considered to be the largest grave relocation in human history so far, more than 10 million corpses have been exhumed in China over the past two decades to make way for new development projects.

Now, a new digital collaboration led by Stanford historian Tom Mullaney, titled *The Chinese Deathscape: Grave Reform in Modern*

*China*, has documented the location of the affected gravesites throughout the country and explored what's driving this journey of the dead.

The project, which was published online this spring, consists of an [interactive website](#) that includes a map of China pinpointing the locations of thousands of gravesites that Mullaney and his collaborators compiled. The dataset is the most comprehensive, publicly available document on grave relocations that occurred in China over the past two decades, Mullaney said. The team's dataset also includes grave relocations that happened between 1644 and 1949.

[The website](#) also includes several essays written by Mullaney and other researchers that analyze the history of grave relocation and burial practices in China.

Here, Stanford News Service interviewed Mullaney about his project.

Mullaney is a professor of Chinese history in the School of Humanities and Sciences. He is the author of *The Chinese Typewriter: A History and Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China*. He also directs *Digital Humanities Asia*, a program at Stanford focused on East, South, Southeast and Inner/Central Asia.

## **What are the main takeaways from your research?**

Many other cities and countries across the world have relocated old [graves](#) in the past, but the magnitude of what has been taking place in China over the past two decades is unparalleled.

I found that the driving force behind these grave relocations has been the rapid development of third- and fourth-tier Chinese cities—cities that, unlike major metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai, few people outside of China have heard of. This development entails new highways,

railways, airports, hospitals and primary schools, among other things. But the relocations are also centrally important to the income of local governments across China, who make money from leasing their land. Because there is no private land ownership in China, a central part of local governments' budgets is money they make on renting their land.

## **The biggest part of the project has been creating the dataset of gravesites. Can you tell me more about this work?**

The dataset we compiled includes thousands of entries and can be downloaded by anyone in the public through the [website](#).

Its creation involved scouring hundreds of Chinese-language local newspapers for every possibly discernable notification about graves. These notifications described the location of the graves in detail. We then also examined news report and any government-issued data that describes completed grave relocations, which included how many graves were moved in order to build a certain structure.

The [dataset](#) has several limitations. For example, it is limited to Chinese-language newspaper reports only. We didn't have the capacity to examine newspapers that published in parts of China where people speak and read in other languages, such as Tibetan.

## **How are these grave relocations carried out?**

The state or a real estate company usually issues grave relocation notices in local newspapers. If no one turns up to claim the graves by a certain deadline, the state handles those graves as "untended—as if there are no next of kin.

Now, of course, no one showing up to claim a grave within a 30-or-so day deadline is a pretty low bar to set. The number of people who internally migrate in China is by some calculations larger than the entire population of the United States. People are often away from their hometowns, where their relatives are buried. Since the notices come out in local newspapers and are the size of small classified ads, they are easily missed. In some isolated cases, notices are not issued at all, according to my research. There are stories of people returning to their hometowns and finding that the gravesites of their relatives are gone.

The state provides a small stipend that families can use to offset the cost of the exhumation and [relocation](#). The family of the deceased has to pay out of pocket to undertake the process.

One legal option is then to cremate the remains and enter the ashes in a formally designated cemetery. Part of the purpose of the relocations is to prohibit land burial as a whole. And for newly deceased, the family is supposed to go directly to cremation. As with most policies, however, there are pockets of local resistance.

Through my research, I found that some people rebury their relatives' remains, which is illegal. In fact, there is a new economy that has emerged for people living in the rural countryside. They can make a little extra cash by leasing some part of the land they work on for gravesites. On top of that, they can collect fees to keep the site clean.

Provided by Stanford University

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