

Columbarium policy

THE government is consulting the public about its columbarium policy. This is the first time in recent years it has tried to deal with the problem by increasing niche supply and regulating private columbaria's operations. However, it is not clear that the government has any new idea of dealing with districts' objections to building columbarium facilities. Furthermore, it seems sluggish in seeking to regulate private columbaria's operations. We wonder why it should take three years to get the legislation through. Such is the government's housing policy that new flats are in short supply and are so expensive that few can afford to buy their own homes. The supply of government niches falls even shorter of demand. Hong Kong citizens have to be worried about their "shelter" in this world and the next. Is this their fate?

Columbarium facilities are in short supply. Only if the government takes a multi-pronged approach will there be hope that this problem will be solved. The following suggestions are all worth taking up.

(1) Design and management. Because government niches are in short supply, private columbaria now abound. There are columbarium facilities in many temples in residential areas. Residents can live with them. Religious places in high-rise buildings in urban areas also offer niches. Columbarium facilities have long existed in residential areas, and people who live in those areas have no problem with that. This shows that, if columbarium facilities are well designed and properly managed, most people have no problem with living near them. (2) Priority. It has been suggested that residents should have priority for columbarium facilities in their respective districts. This may reduce resistance and is thus worth adopting.

(3) Time limit. The government's consultation document says it may consider changing the existing arrangement of providing permanent niches or urngrave spaces. For example, a niche may be leased, say, for twenty years, subject to regular renewal. The consultation document also says the government should consider imposing an annual management fee. If the management fee in respect of a niche is not paid for a number of years in a row and the relevant persons are out of contact, the niche may be vacated and the remains in it may be moved to a communal repository or scattered in a garden of remembrance. It is hard to meet unlimited demand with our limited resources. Aimed at increasing supply, these suggestions are worth considering.

Private columbaria have mushroomed. Many of them are poorly managed, and their operations are not properly regulated. There is already great confusion. Are niches sold to citizens legal? How can niche buyers' interests be protected? These questions must no longer be ignored. The government ought to carry out a shake-up to bring private columbaria onto the right track. Secretary for Food and Health Dr York Chow has said that the government will soon publish a list of approved private columbaria and that the operators of those that do not meet the statutory requirements should make improvements as soon as possible. However, as the legislation for regulating private columbaria may be controversial, he thinks it is necessary to consult the public. He has said he hopes the legislative process will be completed soon but it may take a couple of years.

Because of the government's misguided policy, private columbaria have emerged. Many problems have arisen, and they are indeed complicated. However, the longer they remain unsolved, the more unsolvable they will become. The government should not only try to increase niche supply but also seek to regulate private columbaria's operations by legislation. It must consider setting up a registration and licensing system. The administration should set the wheels in motion even though it may not be able to get the legislation through before its term expires (in two years) lest it should leave its successor an even bigger mess. It would be irresponsible of the Tsang administration to idle the next two years away and leave all the difficult problems to its successor.

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骨灰位10年缺40萬個「死無葬身之地」須各區配合解決

政府就骨灰龕政策諮詢公眾意見，這是數年來，政府首次計劃以增加供應和規管私營骨灰龕，解決問題。不過，在興建更多骨灰龕方面，看不到政府有何化解地方反對的新思維；在規管亂象紛呈的私營骨灰龕，政府則顯得拖拖拉拉，不知何故要3年後才立法。目前政府的房屋政策，新樓供應不足，導致樓價居高，市民置業困難；政府在骨灰位的供應，與現實需求更脫節。香港人生前死後，都要為「安居」而煩惱，難道這是港人的宿命？

骨灰龕短缺問題確實需要多管齊下綜合治理，才有望解決，以下幾項建議都是值得推動的：

(1) 設計與管理：由於政府供應的骨灰位不足，私營骨灰龕大行其道，不少與民居毗鄰的廟宇，內裏都設有骨灰位，但是居民對此並無太大抗拒；在市區高樓大廈，有人開設一些道場等場所，也經營骨灰位業務。類似骨灰龕場所與民居混雜的情況，存在已久，居民可以共存，顯示若管理得當和設計得宜，一般人會接受與骨灰龕毗鄰而居。

(2) 區內居民享有優先權：當區居民死後，可優先使用骨灰龕設施的建議，是減輕阻力的做法，值得研究推行。

(3) 設定年期：諮詢文件考慮改變現行提供永久骨灰龕位或金塔設施安排，定出放置骨灰的年期，例如以20年為限，期滿後家人要定期為龕位續期；文件又建議考慮收取骨灰位的管理年費，如果連續多年欠交管理費，當局又未能聯絡上相關人士，骨灰位可以騰空給他人使用，原先骨灰龕會移送到公共儲存庫，或撒放在紀念花園。這些建議，旨在解決有限資源難以滿足無限需求的問題，都是值得考慮的做法。

目前私營骨灰龕如雨後春筍般遍地開花，經營混亂，規管乏力，亂象紛呈，現在市民購買的私營骨灰位，到底合法與否、其利益如何得到保障，已是不能忽視的問題，需要政府大力整頓，盡量使之納入正軌。食物及衛生局長周一嶽表示，政府會盡快把現時認可的私營骨灰龕場所列出，給公眾參考，現階段違例的場所，則應盡快作出改善措施。但是他認為規管私營骨灰龕的法例具爭議，需要諮詢社會各界意見，期望能盡快完成，但可能須要兩、三年時間。

由於政策失誤，導致私營骨灰龕應運而生，引發諸多問題，性質確實複雜，但是問題再拖下去，更加積重難返，所以，政府在積極增加供應骨灰位的同時，應該積極研議立法規管私營骨灰龕的經營，包括設立註冊和發牌制度。就算這一屆政府餘下兩年任內未能完成立法，也應該啟動有關工作，以免再蹉跎兩年，留下更大的爛攤子給下屆政府。曾蔭權政府若把難題都推給下屆政府，虛度這兩年，那是不負責任的態度和做法。

G lossary

cremains /krɪ'meɪnz/

the ashes that remain after cremation of a corpse.

misguided /mɪs'gaɪdɪd/

mistaken.

set the wheels in motion

start the process

每周一音標

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