

Dead brought back to virtual life as cemeteries follow digital path

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With digital technologies gaining increasing popularity in quite a number of areas, a digital approach on trial in China's interment and funeral industry is bringing a healing comfort to those who have lost their loved ones and helping to ease their pain.

After Chen Yu, a Shanghai white-collar worker, lost her father last year, she resorted to an online database to express her grief and sorrow over the past months. The database has important memories of her father in photos and micro films, providing a virtual memorial for her.

It can even replicate the voice and looks of the deceased via artificial intelligence technology. "It heals my wounds psychologically to some extent and brings comfort," Chen said.

Recently, Fu Shou Yuan International Group, China's biggest cemetery and funeral service provider, announced it had started a digital transformation toward the goal of becoming the country's leading funeral and life culture science and technology service supplier and released a raft of plans.

It has already created a digital cemetery, Huixingu Valley in Shanghai themed on devising a "healing garden" for the families of the deceased with inspiration drawn from the works of Claude Monet.



People interact with the "digital figure" of Cao Jingxing. — Ti Gong

The virtual realms with tech such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality feature lush greenery, flying birds, murmuring streams and subtle changes of landscapes in different seasons.

In the virtual world, people can plant flowers in front of the gravestone of their late beloved, change the climate of the area, and even raise a pet to

accompany the departed souls.

In the future, digital technologies will be introduced into funerals with holographic projection, and digital genealogy and online memorial halls have already been launched.

Via digital technologies, even a "virtual rebirth" of a deceased can be achieved.

Recently, a digital replica of late Chinese commentator and TV host Cao Jingxing (1947-2022) was released by Fu Shou Yuan.

It took nearly two months to replicate the figure of Cao based on his image and voice recordings, and materials provided by his family.

On the screen, the digital replica chats with guests about his insights into work and life, as he had when alive.

Leading 3D production tools, physical simulation, simulation of facial expression, motion combination, character control, collision detection and physical feedback, AI and interaction technologies were applied to increase the sense of reality and the fidelity of the digital replica.

In the future, the digital replica would

have better communication ability through daily training of its "brain" and be more emotional during communication, according to Fu Shou Yuan.

The digital upgrade of the cemetery and funeral industry is also deemed a "green and ecological" approach.

In Beijing, five cemeteries jointly launched a "digital cemetery" trial early this year.

Each digital hall accommodates about 150 urns but only covers about 20 square meters to save land, according to Beijing Daily.

Unlike traditional cemeteries, there is an electronic screen above each grave that can play the image and voice of the deceased, and augmented reality and VR technologies have been introduced, enabling interaction for those paying tribute.

These "digital tombs" had accommodated the urns of about 200 families within three months of their launch.

"The inheritance of spiritual legacy is important, which is the core of digital tombs, and we are pleased about that," said a family member surnamed Wang, who selected the digital tomb service.



A digital memorial established by Fu Shou Yuan. — Ti Gong