

Ancestor worship is not a dying business

Status-seekers are spending large amounts of money to ensure their forebears continue to be venerated

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Ancestor worship is becoming an expensive business, but spiralling prices are proving part of the attraction for status-conscious sons and daughters. Popular temples are charging higher fees for the privilege of depositing ancestral tablets, which guarantee worship for families who are emigrating, or who lack the space or time to pay daily respects.

One of Hong Kong's oldest temples, Man Mo in Western, charges between \$8,000 and \$180,000 for a prime spot in nearby Virtue Court.

A local historian, Dan Waters, said: "It is costly. Prices have gone up very rapidly."

Another popular temple is Ching Chung Koon in Tuen Mun, where prices have increased to \$30,000.

The Chinese temples committee assistant secretary, Chow Ping-shung, said prices were linked to prestige.

"They want to buy 'face' for themselves," he said. "If they buy a cheap place they would be scolded by relatives saying they are trying to save money from the dead."

The committee administers 24 temples of which only Hau Wong in Kowloon City offers an ancestor worship service.

Chow said the non-profit-making committee charges \$600, but the offer had not tempted many customers.

"Because of the very low price we offer, there are few

patrons trying to buy a place to deposit their ancestral tablets," he said.

A spokesman for the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, which administers the Man Mo temple, said the popularity of Virtue Court was surprising.

Of the 1,190 slots available for ancestral plaques, 478 have been bought since the premises opened in September 1993.

The unexpected demand has resulted in plans to expand the area.

The fees are donated to the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals.

Pressure on places is such that customers can reserve places in anticipation of their relatives' deaths.

Waters said ancestor worship was an important part of the cult of the dead in Chinese tradition.

Ancestor worship, he said, has been one of the driving forces for Chinese "for the last 4,000 years. It is still very very popular and shows no sign of dying out".

While there was less adherence to the tradition in urban homes, temples such as Man Mo and Ching Chung Koon were popular, he said.

"It is more public. People can see it - it advertises a little bit."

As well, reverence towards ancestors was showing signs of being revived on the mainland.

"People need something to hang on to - there is a bit of a comeback in China," Waters said.

He said this was not surprising since, until the beginning of the century in China, it has been a capital offence for a man to strike his father.

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