



Two women stand before the plaque of their pets after placing offerings at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda, which means all lives are equal, a cemetery for pets in Hanoi.



A woman prays before the plaque of her dog at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda. — AFP photos

# Ghost month grub: Dead pets get earthly feast at Vietnam animal cemetery



A woman cleans the plaque of her dog at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda.

Sausages, grapes, milk and mooncakes are laid at the gravestones of beloved cats and dogs at Hanoi's pet cemetery—an earthly feast for the souls of dead animals believed to return from the afterlife for a meal to mark ghost month. Dozens of pet owners turned out for a solemn ceremony at the "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda—which means all lives are equal—where thousands of dogs and cats have been laid to rest in the burial grounds on site. It is a feasting ritual more often performed across Vietnam for dead ancestors whose souls are believed to wander the earth during ghost month and are honored with a large meal offering before it closes at the end of August.

But the charismatic dog-loving Buddhist who runs the pet graveyard believes animal souls should be treated with the same dignity as human ones. "We love dogs and cats not just in this life but in the next life as well," said Nguyen Bao Sinh, who opened the graveyard 50 years ago. He says he's cremated or buried around 10,000 animals—including the odd turtle, bird or fish—and charges \$45 to \$65 a year to pet owners to set up plaques and mini gravestones for their lost pets.

It's a small price to pay for those who want to make sure their beloved animals are comfortable in the afterlife. "Bon deserves to have a decent resting place permanently so that he can be at peace," Nguyen Anh Minh

told AFP after leaving milk, yoghurt and grapes for his husky who died earlier this year. For Nguyen Thi Xuan Trang, giving her dog Quoc—who she thought of as a son—a proper burial has brought her peace of mind.

"I bought him peanuts and a mooncake because those were his favorite foods," she said. Cemetery owner Sinh said people thought he was crazy when he opened the site in a country where dog and cat meat is sometimes offered as menu items for hungry diners. Though cats and dogs are more commonly kept as pets in Vietnam these days, it's not unusual to see guard dogs confined to cages or illicit animal parts like rhino horn or pangolin scales used in traditional medicine.

Sinh, a former soldier who's now deceased dog accompanied him to the battlefield during the Vietnam War, hopes the pet graveyard will help people see animals in a new light—and spread a message of kindness. "Animals and humans are equal," he said. "When you love an animal you will not be cruel to human beings." — AFP



Lighted candles and incense are placed before a plaque of a dog at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda.



Nguyen Bao Sinh, the owner of a cemetery for pets leads a prayer ceremony for dogs and cats at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda.



People burn votive offerings of paper money for dogs and cats at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda".



Nguyen Bao Sinh, the owner of a cemetery for pets, prepares for a prayer ceremony for dogs and cats at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda.



Nguyen Thi Xuan Trang touches the plaque of her dog while praying at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda.



A woman looks at the grave of dogs and cats at "Te Dong Vat Nga" pagoda.