

# A Discussion on Contemporary Chinese Cemetery Construction

In the Sight of Funeral Comparison between Chinese and Western Culture

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**Abstract**—The Chinese five thousand years history gave birth to a variety of doctrines, which collided, influence, change, compatible with each other and relatively independent, and ultimately formed a Confucianism-led, eclectic Taoist and Buddhism "birth and death" ideologies. After thousands of years of sedimentation and extraction, it has gradually become the Chinese nation's unique consciousness of life and death, moral culture and traditional habits standards subconsciously, and finally constitute characteristic funerary customs which is different from western countries. Therefore, it can contribute to the construction of our contemporary cemetery that research traditional Chinese funeral culture, views of life and death and make the comparative analysis with the West culture.

**Keywords**—*Chinese and western funeral culture; Chinese and western views of life and death; cemetery construction*

## I. INTRODUCTION

As the saying goes, no major events except life and death. Funeral culture has received much attention since ancient times and it is a very important part of Chinese traditional culture. The Chinese five thousand years history gave birth to a variety of doctrines, which collided, influence, change, compatible with each other and relatively independent, and ultimately formed a Confucianism-led, eclectic Taoist and Buddhism "birth and death" ideologies. After thousands of years of sedimentation and extraction, it has gradually become the Chinese nation's unique consciousness of life and death, moral culture and traditional habits standards

subconsciously, and finally constitute characteristic funerary customs which is different from western countries. Therefore, it can contribute to the construction of our contemporary cemetery that research traditional Chinese funeral culture, views of life and death and make the comparative analysis with the West culture.

## II. CHINESE FUNERAL CULTURE AND VIEWS OF LIFE AND DEATH

### A. *The Original Concept of Religious Funeral*

Humans began to have a religious belief since the slave society, it is an ideology that originated in the late Paleolithic. The establishment of the clan marked the formation of a relatively independent and stable human blood groups from the scattered human society. At that time, there is not fully evolved people live in nature, on the one hand they enjoy the benefits given by nature, on the other hand they can not make the correct explanation on the kinds of natural phenomena and that finally leading to the emergence of fear and awe. As a result, because of these two intertwined emotions, the ancient people misinterpret a lot of normal phenomena which in today's defined natural phenomena, the mystery of nature has always existed in people's hearts. As the ancient human can not change the natural phenomenon of the process, so they began to produce a strong psychological worship which formed the prototype of primitive religion.

Hominid believed that "consciousness is not a simple behavior, but a unique soul activities which can hidden in the body and left body after death<sup>1</sup>". The ancients trusted that the souls of the ancestors had a supernatural ability to protect their descendants, so people have a worship of ancestors. Tomb-sweeping, pay homage to the ancestral tomb and build ancestral hall, ancestral temple for ancestors is the components of traditional Chinese funeral customs.

China is a big agricultural country, the ancient myth of "Nu Wa made men" gave the Chinese people "soil" attribute, people "born" from the soil and should buried in soil after death. Interpretation of Chinese characters "funeral", you can feel the funeral core steps - after death into the soil, fill some branches below, sprinkle some soil above, planted on the grass<sup>2</sup>. However Han population adore yellow, Yellow is the ancient emperors used to show the color of wealth. Yellow have the same color with soil, "soil" in the yin and yang of the five elements in the median, is the most stable and most reliable basis<sup>3</sup>. As a result, ground-burial became Chinese most widely disseminated funeral.

The traditional primitive religious culture still has a positive meaning in many ways up to now. This is first manifested in the traditional concept that animals, plants, mountains, water, land, etc. are spiritual or dominated by the spirits, it educate people paying great attention to proper use of resource. This traditional primitive religious culture has a positive effect for today's ecological environment protection. we should not underestimate it. The essence of the thought ground-burial is "harmony between man and nature", that means human body and soul should return to the natural land. The contemporary Chinese cemetery construction should recognize the essence of the ground-burial and advocate the ecological burial mode of returning to nature.

### *B. The Funeral Concept of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism*

1) *Confucianism*: Confucianism, founded by Confucius, promote ethics. Around the core idea of "Benevolence" is "filial piety, loyalty, faith, ritual, justice, honesty, shame," the central idea of the eight characters. Confucianism was popularized by the rulers of the past for constraining thought and binding people. It played a milestone role in the development of Chinese culture. And in the deep of every Chinese heart were inscribed The Cultural Symbol of "Confucianism".

In the view of funeral and burial, Confucianism advocated in road of race multiplication, accomplish goals, pursue benevolence and righteousness building life of the monument<sup>4</sup>. Confucianism combine personal values and social ideals closely, it pursue spiritual immortality and value

of life. "Filial piety" and "Politeness" is also the core of Confucian thought, "three years of filial piety" is a rule set by Confucius, emphasizing people "to be filial death, salute after death". It has great historical meaning for breaking the feudal spirits<sup>5</sup>.

Influenced by Confucianism, it advocated that no matter the life and death, yin and yang, the most important thing is the difference between men and women, monarch and minister of the ceremony, the order of young and old to emphasize the role of human relations order. This shows that in order to maintain the social order besides the law and the army, it also need such soft culture power like Confucianism to constraint people behavior, which also shows positive spirit of Confucianism.

2) *Buddhism*: Buddhism in the Western Han Dynasty spreading from India into China is one of the world's three major religions. Buddha's meaning is "the senses" which attention to the human mind's and moral's progress and consciousness. Buddhist "karma, reincarnation" concept has an important impact in Chinese funeral culture. People fear of death from not knowing where to go after death and the concept of Buddhist reincarnation just solved the problem. Buddhism thought that death is a way of reincarnation, death is to enter the next life cycle, which also formed people on the spirits of the admiration and fear. Furthermore, Buddhism had greatly influenced the formation of the custom of cremation, because of the impact of Buddhism, ground-burial gradually lost market.

Buddhist views of life and death focus on seeking rebirth. Because given the hope and comfort of the next generation can let people put down the fear of death and reality of regret to the end of life in a calm state of mind. The Buddhist funeral ritual has more practical operational significance, it conveys the comfort feeling through the whisper-like chanting form. "West Paradise" thought reduce the pain when face of death, "Reincarnation" can appease the sad feelings of the deceased's relatives, to reduce the pain of death and appease the role of sadness which in modern society is worth learning and use.

3) *Taoism*: Taoism, as the only native religion in China, originated from the Qin and Han Dynasties, and advocated "Taoism and Nature" as the main idea of "nature nonaction". Taoist simple dialectical thinking, prompting it to become a non-contemptible philosophical faction in numerous philosophers.

In the aspect of funeral, Taoism attaches importance to the pursuit of "Tao", holds the values of nature harmony and nonaction, and it believes that once the "Tao" is reached, life and death will be forgotten. All things are in accordance with the laws of nature, flowers bloom and fade is the part of nature. It represents a positive attitude that people can accept death calmly if they escape the normal activities in the human world in order to concentrate on becoming immortal. Taoist core concept of funeral is harmony with nature, so

<sup>1</sup> Qian Mu. An Introduction to the History of Chinese Culture [M]. Shanghai, Shanghai Commercial Press, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Zhao Qun, Li Guiwen. Sustainable Development of Public Cemetery [J]. Huazhong Architecture, 2008, 26 (2): 129-131.

<sup>3</sup> Si Zhen. On Traditional Funeral Culture and modern Cemetery Construction in China [J]. Chinese Landscape, 2009 (6): 23-25.

<sup>4</sup> Jin Fenglin. Research on Chinese death culture [M]. Beijing, Minzu University of China Press, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Liu Yue. Research on contemporary Chinese cemetery culture [D]. Wuhan, Wuhan University of Technology, 2009.

economic funeral become their choice, for example, Taoist priest in general buried in the cliff or on the mountain after death.

Taoist philosophers understand the nature of death psychologically and treat death correctly. The death embodied in Taoism is not the rest of the individual, but the end of the life cycle in which man is subordinate to nature. It is the understanding of death from the philosophical significance level that death can not be avoided, fear or evasion can not solve the problem.

### C. Feng Shui Theory

Feng Shui, also known as "geomancy", is recognized as from China. "Feng Shui" first appeared in Guo Pu's "burial": "Wind can let the air flow, but the water can make boundaries to block the passage of air, people gathered up gas and control it, this whole process called feng shui"<sup>6</sup>. Therefore Feng Shui is also the art of phase, feng shui culture is about the choice of living environment, culture, that is, people living or burial environment to choose to achieve the purpose of avoiding evil.

Wind is the strength and field energy, water is flowing and changing. Feng shui which is harmony between man and nature is the art of achieving peace and prosperity through the selection of the best space and time, the harmony of man and the earth, and the greatest benefit<sup>7</sup>. It showed layout form which focus on integration with nature through selecting tomb places in ancient times.

The location of burial sites in China has been affected by the concept of feng shui. Feng Shui is to guide people how to control, greet, guide, use of "air" for the benefit of mankind, to achieve the purpose of good luck. "Air" is energy, but it can not be seen or touched, only be perceived. From the environmental point of view, "air" is excellent environmental conditions which able to nourish all things, the light air rising become wind, heavy air falling become water, if wind and water harmony then all the things well, so it illuminate great weather conditions conducive to the survival of all things. Thus, the key to feng shui is i, to find the great location which can breed "air" in the vast expanse of nature. In ancient feng shui theory, group form of block formed between the landscape is the so-called "Dragons' Den" which is the air gathering place<sup>8</sup>. If there is no mountain around the tomb, then the water on the ground become dragon and the shape of curved water called dragon vein, so it can be seen where the water is air<sup>9</sup>. There are six standards to judge a location's feng shui: surrounded by mountains, curved water, south mountain incline to the location, clean water, exquisite soil, possession of the wind.

Feng Shui Woods means to keep good feng shui and deliberately retained the woods, its initial significance lies in the cemetery shelter and asylum. By feng shui thought influence, in the eyes of the ancients, the feng shui tree's growth next to the tomb is related to the family's ups and downs. Therefore, the ancients are usually plant the family's feng shui tree around the tomb, placing the ancestral graves in a good feng shui environment. From the perspective of modern environment, the traditional feng shui view of the cemetery feng shui woods protection, in fact improve and protect the environment around tomb. Fengshui woods growth well in the careful cultivation, not only to maintain the stability of soil and water, but also to create a beautiful natural environment, such as Shandong Qufu "Konglin" and many generations of cemetery protection feng shui woods has become precious natural and cultural heritage.

From the perspective of modern research, the ancients have a certain scientific basis for the establishment of Fengshui woods. Fengshui forest according to its distribution status can be divided into three different roles: dangfeng woods, Longzuo woods and xiadian woods. dangfeng woods' effect is blocking the winter cold northwest wind and summer south winds; Longzuo woods located at north mountain, used to shade and adjust the micro-climate; xiadian woods which located opposite Longzuo woods, it can solid soil and protect the environment in the cemetery under the erosion of the mountains without the risks of landslides and collapse. These Fengshui woods have a certain degree of scientific and profound traditional cultural ideas at the same time, there are worth preserving the traditional culture in the modern cemetery planning and design "Fig. 1".

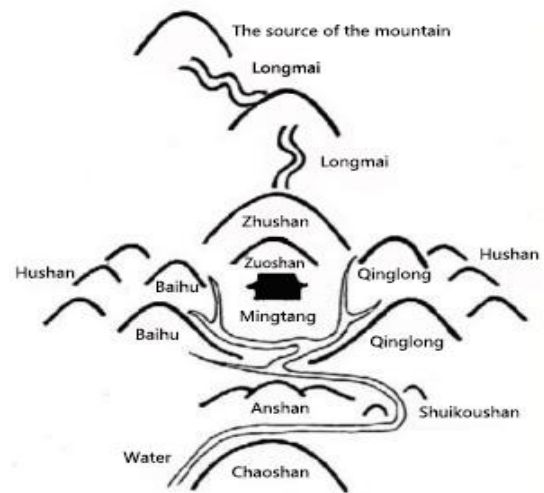


Fig. 1. Ideal Feng Shui Mode.

Putting aside the metaphysical elements and fatalism in fengshui, fengshui has its own certain scientifically. The main consideration of feng shui is the topography, surrounding environment, pollution, monsoon, lighting, geological stability, etc., and the purpose of feng shui is to allow residents to get the support and protection of nature

<sup>6</sup> Lin Xiaoqing. Modern cemetery planning and designing [D]. Hangzhou, Zhejiang University, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Yu Kongjian. Landscape: cultural, ecological and perception [M]. Beijing, Beijing Scientific Press, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Wang Qiheng. Fengshui theory research [M]. Tianjin, Tianjin University Press, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Li Huiyong. Exploration and Practice of Constructing Urban Cemetery Landscapes [J]. Journal of Anhui Agricultural Sciences, 2012, 40 (5): 2854-2856.

and enjoy the natural<sup>10</sup>. American famous city planner Kevin once point out in his book "The image of the city", Chinese feng shui theory is a boundless knowledge that experts are trying to explore, it is thus clear that feng shui has scientific connotation and actual meanings<sup>11</sup>.

### III. WESTERN FUNERAL CULTURE AND VIEWS OF LIFE AND DEATH

#### A. *The Influence of Religion*

Christianity, Buddhism and Islam are the three religions with the largest number of believers and the most far-reaching influence of human thought. In the influence of Western view of life and death, Christianity is more incomparable important than other religions.

In the fourth century, Christianity began to flourish and quickly developed into one of the main religions of the West, as monarchs needed theology to regulate the masses and to consolidate their dominance. Christian views of life and death mainly reflected in it that life is guilty, people live for their own life atonement. Christianity advocates the sublimation of the soul and the neglect of the flesh, the importance of the salvation of the soul, they believe that through resurrection from death to eternal life<sup>12</sup>. Christianity use simple religious rituals for the dead buried, to achieve the equality of the soul in front of God, to complete the life of atonement, hoping the soul can eventually be promoted to a better heaven.

The church is a place where Christians pray for prayer and hold religious services such as Mass. Everyone have sacred worship for church, because they think that God can hear their wishes. Therefore, they all hope that the dead can be buried in the church or monastery, so as to be closer to God, to get the rest of the soul and sublimation.

#### B. *The Influence of Western Philosophy*

1) *The Influence of Ancient Philosophy*: Western philosophy from the very beginning to focus on the issue of life and death considerations, many Western ancient philosophers have their own unique insights on the issue of life and death, one of the most representative philosophers are Socrates and Epicurus.

Socrates is a famous ancient Greece philosopher, He lived in the ancient Greek civilization from the heyday of the gradual decline of the historical period. At that time, because of people's own fear of death, people escape to talk about death, people blind pursuit of material satisfaction and neglect of their inner spiritual exploration. In this case, Socrates published his unique view of the issue of life and death, he believes that there are two possible death process, one is like a dream without sleep, the soul and the body at

the same time die; the second is the body is death, but the soul was able to survive in the world. However, in fact, no matter what kind of situation, people do not feel pain so they do not need to fear it. Socrates' view of life and death has a profound influence on the burial tradition of later "economic funeral".

There is also a great philosopher in ancient Greece called Epicurus, he succeeded in combining human hedonism and materialism atom theory together. Epicurus explains the principle of life and death of all things in the world by using "atom theory". He believes that the atom is the basic component of everything which included human body sense and internal soul. Death is the loss of human physical senses, the dissolution of the atoms that make up human beings, so that people need not to fear death. Later, the "quality of life theory" gradually accepted by the people, this argument has also become the West to implement "euthanasia" core basis.

2) *The Influence of Modern Philosophy*: Arthur Schopenhauer is a famous modern philosopher in Germany. His personal outlook on life is influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism. He advocates "abstinence and ecstasy" and embodies a pessimistic attitude towards life. Schopenhauer consider that the most important feature of human is the attachment of life and a strong desire to survive. He believes that death is an inescapable objective fact, but it does not affect the will of human life and this will continue to exist and be protected by nature. Therefore, if people should face death, they need to abandon the strong desire for life persistence and abandon fear of death. His understanding of life and death is more objective. He denies the Christian superstition of God, soul, heaven and other words so he impact most people's religious beliefs at that time.

Another famous German philosopher is Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, he opened up a new world of modern Western philosophy. Nietzsche advocates the importance of personal life value in the study of life and death. He believes that we must focus on our own development and promotion in the process of real life so as to realize the value and meaning of life. Nietzsche believes that there is no eternal soul in this world and there is also no God Almighty in heaven. He become the first philosopher who dares to challenge religious authority, openly declared "God died" and criticize profoundly.

Therefore, under the influence of Western religion and philosophy, the Western funeral rites tend to "economic funeral" which pay attention to the solemn atmosphere and the silent memorial way. It makes the cemetery peace and quiet that western calm attitude towards the death. This is worthy of reference in our contemporary cemetery construction.

### IV. CONCLUSION

The development of traditional funeral culture in China through thousands of years. It contains a profound ideological content, and form a unique system which provide a wealth of in-depth excavation of modern cemetery

<sup>10</sup> Harrison. In *Large-Scale Ecology and Conservation Biology* [J], P. J. Edwards, R. M. May, N. R. Webb, Eds. Blackwell Scientific, Boston. 1994: 111-128.

<sup>11</sup> Wang Ming. Chinese traditional Feng shui theory and landscape [D]. Xian, Xi'an University of Architecture and Technology, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Zhou Hui. Comparison of Chinese and Western Views [J]. philosophy research, 2009 (8): 56-60.



construction in China<sup>13</sup>. However, like other traditional culture, the traditional funeral culture in our country has both its reasonable composition and backward aspect. Throughout any reform and development, it all shows that only if we stand on our own solid cultural foundation can we learn other's advanced ideas better. Therefore, we need to inherit Chinese traditional funeral culture critically, absorb Confucianism "filial piety", Buddhist "economic burial", Taoist "harmony with nature" and scientific composition in Feng shui theory, abandon the superstitious thinking of reincarnation, feudal thought and traditional burial mode which lack of environmental protection. We should learn from the Western advanced planning and design ideas, explore how to combine the traditional culture and modern technique approaches. We can make urban planners, landscape architects and other professional fields scholars participate in the modern cemetery construction together, to create a modern functional cemetery.

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<sup>13</sup> Zhang Sheng, Deng Xi. Research on Chinese Funeral Culture and Landscape Layout of Modern Cemetery [J]. *Huazhong Architecture*, 2007 (6): 99-102.