

**Grave Visitation and Concepts of Life after Death:  
A Comparative Study in Frankfurt and Hong Kong**

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Cecilia Wing Sze Man

aus Hong Kong

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# ABSTRACT

Grave visitation is a tradition common to many cultures. Yet, this sensitive topic is rarely addressed in cross cultural comparisons. Why do people visit the graves of their parents? What do they do in the cemetery? Could there be a similar set of intentions behind the diverse customs? By examining the visiting patterns in Frankfurt and Hong Kong, this research is aimed at comparing the concepts of life after death that underlie the practice.

Phenomenologically oriented, this is an exploratory study based on qualitative interviews. Integrated with in-depth semi-structure interviewing and thematic analysis, the project covered twelve cases in each city. Research participants were purposefully selected. Data analysis was conducted according to the analytical framework approach. After identifying and clustering of themes, three central and interlocking issues were found: 1. the grave as a new home that connects the living and the dead; 2. death and the interpretation of hope; and 3. intergenerational reciprocity and continuing bonds.

Though the images of life after death were ambiguously depicted, grave tending reflected shared expectations of the world beyond. Most significantly, visits to the graves strengthened the ties between the living and the dead, revealing a longing for a continued bond regardless of the forms of burial. At the end, this research illustrated not only the meanings of death but also the notion of religiosity through evaluating the secularisation thesis. Emphasising the dynamics of tradition and personal experience, this contextual reading of current death rituals serves as an original source for religious dialogue and education.







# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Studying Grave Visitation

## 1.2 Research Design

## 1.3 The Cultural Contexts

Since childhood, I have visited the tiny shrine of my grandparents in a Daoist temple, participating in unexplained rituals such as burning paper gold. But when I joined the youth fellowship in a church I was told ancestor veneration is superstition, and offering incense, food and paper money was regarded as nonsense and irrelevant to our life.<sup>1</sup> Through studies in comparative religion, however, I have learned to appreciate my own culture in a reverse manner.

From unconsciousness to meaningful reconstruction, I find the exploration of peoples' inner world compelling, especially because my generation, the last of the colonial era, is searching for its own identity. From there I embarked on a journey to explore the stories of the often unacknowledged act of visiting the graves of family members.

## 1.1 Studying Grave Visitation

Every culture has its own stories about death, and which try to explain the mystery of transforming from a person to some kind of indefinable existence, if one is believed in. Remembering the dead has long been an integral part of human life. In almost every corner of the world, there are specific customs to celebrate one's life and their days on earth, reflecting different views on death and life after death. Nevertheless, while it cannot be assumed that the quest for

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<sup>1</sup> The nature of ancestral rituals was a key issue in the Chinese Rites Controversy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Although it has been re-evaluated in recent academic and pastoral discourse, some fundamental churches still label those rituals superstitious.

the continuity of life is universal, there seems to be a shared effort to associate or communicate with the departed though the customs vary.

Taking this into account, our primary goal is to examine resemblances and contrasts of ideas of death and afterlife as revealed by a particular lived experience in different cultural traditions. Because of its prevalence across cultures, grave visitation was chosen from among many domestic and communal ritual practices. By examining the underlying motivations for visiting the graves of family members, this study sets out to probe participants' hearts instead of resorting to ideological perspectives, and avoids making general claims. Why do people visit the graves of their departed parents? How do participants feel and think about the related activities? Could there be a similar set of intentions behind the diverse ritual practices in various cultural contexts? What are their views about the future of their family members and eventually their own? Integrated with qualitative interviewing and analysis, this project will identify and compare the network of meanings related to death reconstructed by the participants in two unrelated cultural settings, namely Hong Kong and Frankfurt.

The second goal of this study is to demonstrate how the chosen phenomenological approach helps to discern not only the meanings related to death and afterlife for individuals but also religion and religiosity as a whole. At this point, initial remarks on the methodological background of this study are necessary.

In the past, many researchers from the West have found the way departed family members are remembered in Chinese culture essentially elaborate yet incomprehensible. For historical reasons, many early and influential studies of Chinese death rituals were prepared by missionary workers or theologians. Although sometimes hampered by apologetic undertones, they were pioneers in providing detailed depiction of the rituals in Chinese communities. But their terming of customs related to the dead as ancestor worship was unquestionably confusing and often led to a dead end in interreligious encounters. Later on came foreign anthropologists and religious scientists who insisted on a pure descriptive style of writing. Following this line of thought, critical comments or interpretation cannot be expected in their works though they are indispensable for

comparative studies. There was a common pitfall in both approaches. In their attempts to interpret ideas about death and the afterlife, many of them had failed to address the difference between a prescribed religion and a practised religion. Such methodological inadequacy of comparing the doctrinal positions of a Western European Christian setting with the lived experiences in a Chinese cultural context should no longer be ignored.

This inadequacy cannot be overcome however by merely differentiating the actual practice from the rituals described or expected to be performed. No matter how tradition is related to practice, a ritual, as a set of living symbols, must not be studied in isolation from the actors.<sup>2</sup> To understand the ideas behind a certain practice, one must acknowledge both differences as well as interaction between personal experience and tradition.<sup>3</sup> And recognising such differences within a culture is only the first step to becoming aware of the problems involved in comparing similar experiences in different traditions.

For the purpose of this study, I do not intend to engage in discussion of isolating textual sources from the lived traditions, the relationship between official and popular religion or the beliefs or practices of the elites and the masses. Rather, our approach, with reference to the paradigm shift suggested by Daniel Overmyer, is to take up a more realistic model by putting aside the debate of those relationships and focusing on the lived experience and the common practices regardless of their gender and social status.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we are not searching for a historical prototype or an abstract ideal. In short, our response to the complexity of religious practices is not based on a rigid definition of religion or religious activities as such but a generally accepted understanding of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> In Cantwell Smith's terms, one has to distinguish the faith of individual believers and the cumulative traditions. See *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London: SPCK, 1978), 246, 254-5.

<sup>4</sup> “我認為較理想的作法是把一連串「平民與精英」關係的爭議性討論擱在一邊，而直接詳盡描寫地方社區居民實際所在所為。我們會發現幾乎社區的每一分子都共享一個共同的世界觀，並且被期望應當加入這些表現此世界觀的儀式中，沒有性別和社會地位的分別…地方傳統和區域或國家性的傳統之間的關係當然是重要的課題；但在此之前，我們需要對於民眾的實際行為，以及他們行為的意圖有更為詳盡和持之以恆的描述。” See Daniel L. Overmyer, “Shenming, xindu, lingmei he raojing: Cong Zhongguo wenhua guandian bijiao difang minjian xinjiang chuantong” (Gods, saints, spirit-mediums and processions: comparing local religious traditions from the point of view of Chinese culture) in *Religious Beliefs and Imagination*, ed. Cheng Pei-Kai (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2007), 8.

phenomenon, that is, the search for the meanings of life and death. It is not surprising to find fundamental differences in the conception of religion for people from different origins. The priority of explanation, therefore, should be given to the doers, who can speak for themselves. Though his use of the term “exclusively” is highly controversial, William Brede Kristensen’s following remark forces us to reorient ourselves in an attempt to interpret religious life in a given tradition:

Let us never forget that there exists no other religious reality than the faith of the believer. If we really want to understand religion, we must refer exclusively to the believer’s testimony.<sup>5</sup>

What must be decided next is how to meet the living, to help them unfold stories connected with the departed, and eventually with the meanings of death, and life. In the end, through a comparison of the two cities, we will be able to identify unfamiliar dimensions of religiosity.

## 1.2 Research Design

Given the sensitive nature of grave visitation and related death rituals, we had to select a dynamic research model focused on the individuality of human experiences. In fact, any attempt to understand any religious experience should not aim to reveal an ultimate meaning or structure. Rather, it must be acknowledged that interpretations of findings cannot be completely separated from a researcher’s own religious experience and understanding.<sup>6</sup> Because a phenomenological approach does not attempt to assess a value of various religious activities, nor aim to confirm theoretical hypotheses, it was chosen as the theoretical orientation for this study. Rather than try to formulate decontextualized and universally applicable theories, our goal is to elucidate the

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<sup>5</sup> William Brede Kristensen, *Religionshistorisk Studium* (1954), quoted in Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 228.

<sup>6</sup> See Lai Chi-tim, *Religious Studies and Hermeneutics* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press: 2003), 31.

similarities and differences of underlying motivations behind grave visitation in the two cultural settings.

To achieve this, in-depth interviewing was selected as the most suitable research method. Phenomenologically oriented, interviewing is an excellent way to understand sensitive personal experiences once clear and direct communication has been established.<sup>7</sup> With its emphasis on contemporary expressions, interviewing can help reveal a deeper layer of meanings which participants themselves may not be aware of and which research using ancient texts or pre-determined questionnaire responses can miss.

Moreover, while recognising the perspective nature of human experience, this approach repudiates the superiority of any religious culture being compared. Reciprocal illumination can thus be achieved through a context-sensitive comparative paradigm.

Incorporating qualitative research techniques, the interview was designed according to the interview guide approach. Participants were selected by purposeful sampling and maximum variation sampling. Due to the exploratory and collaborative nature of a phenomenological inquiry, participants in this study were considered “co-researchers” as opposed to “informants” or “interviewees”.<sup>8</sup> In the preparatory stage, a pilot study and other exploratory tasks were done to assess the contextual variants before sampling intense cases and to fine tune questions in the interview guide. The interviews were then conducted in Hong Kong and Frankfurt, tape-recorded, transcribed, translated and back-translated when necessary. Twelve interviews were selected for analysis from each cultural setting. Transcription and notes written during and after the interviews were analysed following the analytical framework approach, in which the central task is to locate and organise relevant themes throughout the immersion and reflection

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<sup>7</sup> See “Dialogue as Method: The Phenomenological Interview” in *The Phenomenology of Everyday Life: Empirical Investigations of Human Experience*, Howard R. Pollio, Tracy B. Henley & Craig J. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>8</sup> As suggested in Clark Moustakas in *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994). See also Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997.

process.<sup>9</sup> In Chapter Two, the theoretical orientation and research method will be explained further.

It has been argued that man is no longer homo religiosus. Yet permeating all interviews we found three central and interlocking themes which clearly indicated the need to re-assess the notion of religiosity:

1. The grave as a new home: Visitation patterns and reasons;
2. Imagining a new life: Ideas about life after death and the interpretation of hope;
3. Establishing a new relationship: Family and tradition, intergenerational reciprocity and continuing bonds.

Through the interpretation of hope, continuation and transformation, perhaps we may determine if there is an “unstated contract among members of cemetery-visiting families that each generation will not let those of the past die, but will remember them.”<sup>10</sup> Further, examining temporal and spatial dimensions of the visitation patterns essentially leads to more abstract questions such as the change in form and relationship, as well as the concepts of time and nature.

Regardless of whether death is considered a part of life or the end of life, no one escapes it. But uncertainties about death create many opportunities for interpretation. Is death foreseen as a cessation or suspension of this life, is life after death an infinite extension or a total transformation?

With insights gained from the themes discussed in Chapter Three, Four and Five, we will reflect on two theoretical issues in the concluding chapter: the applicability of the secularisation thesis and the concept of religiosity in comparative religion. Continued visits to graves is not just a matter related to the departed, but also, and perhaps foremost, to their survivors. In light of this, exploring the motivations of those who try to grasp the meaning of life and death by taking part in some form of death ritual, consciously or unconsciously, will

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<sup>9</sup> See Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002), Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Adventures in Theory and Method* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000) and Stuart Devenish, “An Applied Method for Undertaking Phenomenological Explication of Interview Transcripts”. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, April 2002(2):1-20, <http://www.ipjp.org>.

<sup>10</sup> Doris Francis, Leonie Kellaher & Georgina Neophytou, *The Secret Cemetery* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 214.

help evaluate the claim of a “secularised” world today. This attempt also aims to serve as a serious, contemporary example in the field of comparative religion. Before the next chapters describe how the phenomenological approach and research design help unveil an often unexposed dimension of the inner world, we will give a brief account of religious life and general burial and grave visitation practices in the two cultural contexts, first in Frankfurt and then in Hong Kong.

### 1.3 The Cultural Contexts

Frankfurt and Hong Kong, the two cities chosen for this study, share close resemblances in lifestyle though each is marked by distinct and deep cultural roots.

Frankfurt am Main, the home to international trade fairs and Continental European financial institutes, is a modern, multicultural city embedded in Western European culture in which Christian values and traditions are clearly observable in many aspects.

Hong Kong, an international financial and trading centre, is a Chinese society in a cultural as well as demographic sense. Populated now by descendents of immigrants from various parts of China, it is also widely exposed and receptive to foreign cultures because it was colonised for 150 years. Notwithstanding rapid economic growth and modernization, it is a site where traditional ritual practices could be preserved, whereas in mainland China they were to a large extent distorted by the Cultural Revolution.<sup>11</sup>

With respect to education levels and living standards, Hong Kong was ranked 21<sup>st</sup> in the 2007 United Nations Human Development Index while Germany was 22<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>12</sup> With high incomes and high prices due to economic growth in the last two decades, both have low birth and mortality rates thanks to medical

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, since the formation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Qingming was for the first time (May 2008) a public holiday in mainland China.

<sup>12</sup> The HDI is “a summary measure of human development. It measures the average achievement in a country in three basic dimensions of human development: A long and healthy life, as measured by life expectancy at birth; Knowledge, as measured by the adult literacy rate and the combined primary, secondary and tertiary gross enrolment ratio; A decent standard of living, as measured by GDP per capita in purchasing power parity terms in US dollars.” See Human Development Report 2007/2008 Technical Note 1: [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr\\_20072008\\_tech\\_note\\_1.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_20072008_tech_note_1.pdf).

and technological advances. In short, they share the characteristics of converging traditions and modern lifestyles marked by the preservation of respective cultural heritages along with and receptiveness to evolving global trends.

There is a clear distinction in figures of religious affiliation between the two cities. In Germany it has been said that almost 63-68% of the population belong to one of the Christian churches.<sup>13</sup> In Hong Kong, while Buddhist and Daoist influences are considered the strongest, there is no estimation regarding affiliation. According to a government report, “As a Chinese city, Hong Kong's dominant religions are, not surprisingly, Buddhism and Daoism. But other religions are also practised-Christians 660,000; Muslims 90,000; Hindus 40,000; Sikhs 8,000; Jews 3,000.”<sup>14</sup> Given the city's population of seven million, such an absence of figures for the primary religions reflects a fundamental difference in the concept of religion itself. This difference, from an organisational point of view, stems from the absence of an obligatory formal ties and professions of faith required by native Chinese religions. Laurence Thompson described the situation as follows:

In China laypeople did not usually belong to an institutionalized sect, nor did their religious life have anything to do with signing articles of faith. Except in the case of the professional religious living apart in monasteries, religion in China was so woven into the broad fabric of family and social life that there was not even a special word for it until modern times, when one was coined to match Western terms.<sup>15</sup>

Hence it is worth noting that the lack of a semantic equivalent to the concept of religion in a western sense may signal a different approach to religious life rather

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<sup>13</sup> As shown in “Christen in Deutschland 2007” published by the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland and in the CIA World Factbook.

<sup>14</sup> As shown in the Hong Kong Yearbook 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Laurence G. Thompson, introduction to *Chinese Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co, 1996).

than a lack of religious concern.<sup>16</sup> While Chinese religions did not revolve around a single or set of manuscripts recounting the belief system, or doctrines and values established by a dominant authority, historically speaking, boundaries between Confucian ideology and popular Daoist thought have been almost impossible to identify.<sup>17</sup> Over the course of time, Buddhist influences were also essentially interwoven with the two indigenous religions in daily life. In particular, one finds characteristics of all three traditions in death rituals, though no unified textual reference exists.

As for means of disposal, burial was the predominant method for Han Chinese. In the past, the body was usually interred in an individual site away from the place of the living and visits were often termed “grave sweeping” (掃墓) in literature. Due to rapid population growth and urbanization, the concept of modern cemeteries was introduced in the 19th century. In fact, the scenario in Hong Kong is rather peculiar, in large part because the population has increased from 300,000 in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to almost seven million today. As mentioned earlier, the shortage of land has made the prevalence of cremation in recent decades inevitable.<sup>18</sup> Instead of being interred in graves, human remains are now often kept in columbariums at public cemeteries managed by the government or by religious bodies, or in an ancestral hall at a temple. In other words, the place of visitation is no longer a remote site which needs to be tidied up by removing overgrown grass for example, but the building where the cinerary urn is placed.

In academic discourse, Chinese death rituals for family members are usually coined collectively as “ancestor worship”, whereas the term “worship” does not necessarily imply the target is seen as a deity. Since the 1970s, ancestor worship has been regarded as the essence of Chinese religion and has regained growing global attention in the study of religion. As shown by Watson and

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<sup>16</sup> The Chinese term for “religion” (宗教 *zongjiao*) was probably borrowed from Japanese in the 19th century when scholars were translating Western texts into Chinese and found that there was no semantic equivalent.

<sup>17</sup> See Yu Ying-Shih, “O Soul, Come Back! A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 47.2 (1987): 363-395.

<sup>18</sup> A recent report showed that 86% of the people died in 2005 were cremated. (*Mingpao*, November 15, 2006)

Rawski, such rituals have undergone different stages of development and possess multiple layers of meanings.<sup>19</sup> Generally speaking, showing one's filial piety and upholding family welfare are considered the most important "functions" of ancestor worship by many scholars.<sup>20</sup>

In theological discourse in the West, religion used to refer mainly to the Christian religion instead of the different religions worldwide. For example, when speaking of religious education, many would associate the term with Christian education in church or school rather than the teaching of different religions. A realisation of the growing number of Muslims in recent years has changed the situation in Germany. But although it has been claimed that Christianity has lost its formative influence in Europe and even its impact on moral norms and behaviour, Wolfhart Pannenberg argues that

it would still be difficult to conceive of modern European culture without its Christian background and heritage. Visitors from other cultures are often more sensitive to this fact than Europeans are. In the prospect of a uniting Europe the Christian roots and background of its cultural life could become more important again, because Christianity is one of the few potentially unifying factors in the emerging consciousness of European culture.<sup>21</sup>

Christian rites for the dead did not fill a void in Europe. Long before the introduction of Christianity, recognized religious methods existed for the proper disposal of the dead.<sup>22</sup> In his study of ancient Christian communities, Ulrich Volp

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<sup>19</sup> See James L. Watson, "The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance" and Evelyn S. Rawski, "A Historian's Approach to Chinese Death Ritual." in *Death ritual in Late and Modern China*, ed. James L. Watson & Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> Classic examples include Maurice Freedman, "Ancestor Worship: Two Facets of the Chinese Case." in *The Study of Chinese Society: Essays of Maurice Freedman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), Li Yih-Yuan, "Chinese Geomancy and Ancestor Worship: A Further Discussion." in *Ancestors*, ed. William H. Newell (The Hague: Mouton Pub, 1976) and Poo Mu-chou, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Churches and the Emergence of European Unity". *Orthodoxy Today*,. <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/PannenbergEurope.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> See Frederick S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death: the Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990) and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, "Christian Ritual Surrounding Death" in *Life Cycles in Jewish and Christian Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw & Lawrence A. Hoffman. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

suggested that the death rituals were actually a matter of family following local customs rather than a novel institution of the Church.<sup>23</sup> Historical, archaeological and anthropological studies have played an important role in rediscovering the evolution of attitudes towards death in the ancient world. Artistic and literary representations also help us to understand the life and thinking of the people during that time.<sup>24</sup> The rituals are often re-interpreted by a new and deeper understanding of the nature of death through the death and resurrection of Jesus, especially in the writings of church fathers where the notion of “to be in communion with God and other human beings” is placed at core of eschatological thought.

Traditionally, family members are responsible for tending the grave (*Grabpflege*), including cleaning the gravestone and the site, watering, removing dead leaves from plants, planting new flowers, and lighting a candle. One study has shown that about 60 percent of the tending is currently done by family members.<sup>25</sup> This figure is likely to drop however, because more and more people employ professional gardeners to take care of graves owing to distance between the cemetery and place of work or living. While this could well be an indicator of a change in the mode of living or mobility in general, more importantly, it is logical to infer that resulting relatively infrequent visits may exhibit an altered relation between the living and the dead.<sup>26</sup>

This account of the cultural contexts is meant to underscore the sensitivity required in the analyses and comparisons that follow. For instance, it has been shown that *Allerseelen* seems to show certain parallel features to the spirit of

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<sup>23</sup> Ulrich Volp, *Tod und Ritual in den christlichen Gemeinden der Antike* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Detailed description can be found in Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (London: Allen Lane, 1981), Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) and Jon Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> From Centrale Marketinggesellschaft der deutsche Agrarwirtschaft Umfrage von 1999, quoted in Gerhard Schmied, *Friedhofsgespräche. Untersuchungen zum „Wohnort der Toten“* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2002), 18.

<sup>26</sup> Jürgen Bärsch expanded on the change and development in *Allerseelen: Studien zu Liturgie und Brauchtum eines Totengedenktages in der abendländischen Kirche* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2004), „Das Gedächtnis der Verstorbenen – Dienst der Kirche an Toten und Hinterbliebenen. Liturgietheologische und -pastorale Gesichtspunkte zum Totengedenken“ in *Trauer und Hoffnung feiern*, ed. Konrad Baumgartner (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2005), 33-53 and „Der Toten gedenken. Anmerkungen zu einem liturgischen Dienst der Kirche in Geschichte und Gegenwart“ in *Liturgie und Bestattungskultur*, ed. Ansgar Franz, Andreas Poschmann and Hans-Gerd Wirtz, Trier 2006: 141-158.

*Qing Ming* festival in Chinese culture.<sup>27</sup> Qualitative research on grave visitation by German sociologist Gerhard Schmied is another example. On one hand, Schmied underscored the concept of eternity, on the other he simply identified communication between the living and the dead as fictive:

Hier interessiert die Bewältigung der Trauer. Es bedarf auch hier nicht der Vorstellung von Ewigkeit. Nicht ewig, sondern nur eine Spanne bis zur Bewältigung des Todes soll der Verstorbene noch leben. Hier sind die Vorstellungen von Seelen und Geistern wichtig, als die man die Verstorbenen denkt, sieht und hört, mit denen man in eine fiktive Kommunikation tritt, auch und gerade auf dem Friedhof, wo sie in besonderer Weise ins Bewusstsein treten. Die Pflege des Grabes, die letztlich eine Pflege des Toten ist, wird mit der Zeit, wie wir noch detailliert aufweisen werden, oft nachlässiger. Je weniger Sorgfalt auf sie verwendet wird, desto mehr verliert der Tote an Bedeutung: er stirbt mehr und mehr, man lässt ihm – so die Redensart – „seine Ruhe“.<sup>28</sup>

In this manner he had already excluded the possibility that life after death might be perceived by the living as real. With the concept of eternity eliminated by the researcher instead of by the interviewee, one cannot explore an afterlife imagined and the religious dimension experienced by the living. Though one might argue that it was not the focus of his study, in order to explore the inner life of the bereaved, a more sympathetic position would have been preferred.

Last but not least, one must be ready to employ certain terms and concepts bearing specific cultural values. As suggested by Catherine Bell, terms “should not predetermine where we will end up”<sup>29</sup> but should “afford a useful focus on some things at the expense of other things.” Thus it is essential to acknowledge possible multiple interpretations. In our case, for example, we should not be hindered by different understandings of the key words or

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<sup>27</sup> See Bärsch 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Schmied, 83.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Bell, “Pragmatic Theory” in *Secular Theories on Religion: Current Perspectives*, ed. Tim Jensen & Mikael Rothstein (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001), 14.

expressions such as heaven and hell, or life after death. In short, we recognise all forms of existence imagined and described by co-researchers, since afterlife is not a static picture defined by a certain tradition. As commented by Ronald Grimes,

All primary terms in all theories in all languages carry their own linguistic and cultural baggage. It is useful to be reminded of this fact but pointless to talk or act as if culture- or history-free terminology were a possibility.<sup>30</sup>

This is the beauty of a phenomenological study.

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<sup>30</sup> Ronald L. Grimes, "Performance Theory and the Study of Ritual" in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion: Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches*, ed. Peter Antes & et al (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 128.



## 2 METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN

### 2.1 Theoretical Orientation

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- B. A Comparative Endeavour
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### 2.1 Theoretical Orientation

This study is orientated towards the field of phenomenology of religion. Phenomenology of religion is essentially a complex discipline encompassing various approaches influenced by phenomenology to different extents. In this section we will first briefly describe the differences between philosophical phenomenology and phenomenology of religion. For our focus is not the philosophical presuppositions behind but the incidental religious phenomena of grave visitation. We will then expound on the characteristics of the phenomenological approach employed in this study, followed by its significance for comparative research. Finally, we will illustrate how interviewing, the research tool of our study, fits effectively in this framework.

## A. A Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Religion

In its root as a discipline in philosophy, phenomenology was not used for empirical studies.<sup>31</sup> According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, phenomenology is “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view”.<sup>32</sup> With intentionality as the central notion, it concerns how one sees the world from their unique mental orientation. As a philosophical movement, according to prominent advocate Edmund Husserl, phenomenology involves a paradigm shift in how one sees the world by refusing the prevalent thought of the world as something “out there”:<sup>33</sup>

For me the world is nothing other than what I am aware of and what appears valid in my cognitions... I cannot live, experience, think, value, and in any world which is not in some sense in me, and derives its meaning and truth from me.<sup>34</sup>

Husserl’s advocacy reminds us that the very nature of human experience should not be distorted by the traditional division of subject and object. Take the case of seeing a flower in a garden as an example. In phenomenological reflection, it is not necessary to concern ourselves with whether such a flower exists. The

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<sup>31</sup> Hans-Günter Heimbrock commented that “Phenomenology in itself was not intended to serve as tool for empirical research in its contemporary meaning. Phenomenological reflection was founded by Edmund Husserl as a ‘descriptive psychology’, but it has been developed throughout the twentieth and early twenty first centuries in various movements, such as a transcendental philosophy of consciousness, an ontological analysis of existence, and even a phenomenology of religion (as in Gerardus van der Leeuw and Jacques Waardenburg).” See “From Data to Theory: Elements of Methodology in Empirical Phenomenological Research in Practical Theology”, *International Journal of Practical Theology* 9: 276.

<sup>32</sup> David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2005 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2005/entries/phenomenology/> (19 May 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Though he was not the first to employ the term phenomenology, Edmund Husserl is the one who laid down the foundation of phenomenology in modern philosophy. In the German tradition, the term was first employed by Johann Heinrich Lambert in 1764. See Richard Schmitt, “Phenomenology”, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company and Free Press, 1967).

<sup>34</sup> Originally from *Die Pariser Vorträge. Erste Doppelvorlesung am 23. Februar 1929*: „Die Welt ist für mich überhaupt gar nichts anderes als die in solchen cogitationes bewußt seiende und mir geltende. Ihren ganzen Sinn und ihre Seinsgeltung hat sie ausschließlich aus solchen cogitationes. In ihnen verläuft mein ganzes Weltleben. Ich kann in keine andere Welt hineinleben, hineinerfahren, hineindenken, hineinwerten und -handeln, die nicht in mir und aus mir selbst Sinn und Geltung hat.“ Quoted in Moustakas.

experience is of a flower whether the flower is there or not. What we concern ourselves with is the meaning of such experience viewed from a certain perspective. Since things are always being seen in perspective, the focus should shift to the study of meaning instead of resting on ontological arguments.

By phenomenology of religion, scholars usually refer to a family of approaches in the field of religious studies which bear a phenomenological orientation. The emergence of the term phenomenology of religion can be traced back to the use by P.D. Chantepie de la Sausaye in 1887,<sup>35</sup> almost two decades before Husserl's exposition.<sup>36</sup> Over the past century, phenomenology of religion has developed into a range of research styles based on different philosophical assumptions such as the nature of language or the nature of interpretation.<sup>37</sup> Among all, two basic orientations can be identified: The essentialist position searching for a universal core and the classification of types as represented by Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leeuw, and the contextualist position looking for uniqueness in different contexts as represented by Ninian Smart and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Today, generally speaking, phenomenology of religion can be viewed as the extension of the emphasis of phenomenological reflection such as bracketing and eidetic vision to the study of religious experience, either empirically or historically. In practice it is similar to the phenomenological framework used in the fields of psychology, health care science and education.<sup>38</sup> It would be beyond the scope of our study to discuss the different approaches in detail, but it is worth noting that the latest trend in phenomenological reflection has gradually shifted from metaphysics to the lived dimension of human existence. As Jacques Waardenburg commented, "phenomenological research is

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<sup>35</sup> From his *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 1887.

<sup>36</sup> George Alfred James, *Interpreting Religion: The Phenomenological Approaches of Pierre Daniel Chantepie De LA Saussaye, W. Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus Van Der Leeuw* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> For a concise analysis of the epistemological foundations of the phenomenology of religion, see Evan Zuesse. "The Role of Intentionality in the Phenomenology of Religion", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53.1(1985): 51-73.

<sup>38</sup> In the past few decades, phenomenological reflection and analysis have been applied to numerous research studies in social sciences and humanities. In the field of practical theology, for instance, the Australian phenomenologist Stuart Devenish has employed phenomenology in his recent investigation of conversion experience. Detailed discussion on the method can be found in his dissertation "The Mind of Christ? A Phenomenological Explication and Cosmic Revision in Christian Converts in Western Australia". PhD dissertation, Edith Cowan University, 2002.

developing from the search for timeless essences to a search for meanings inside time, including those meanings which have a religious quality for the people involved.”<sup>39</sup>

The present study adopts the stance that a phenomenological approach should be concerned with the experiences of human beings at a particular time and place instead of proposing abstract and general statements about the world. However, attention to what is unique in each context should not impede the discovery of shared cross-cultural meanings. As will be shown in the research design, we will first try to take a closer look at the distinctive lived experience of the bereaved in the two cultural contexts respectively in the hope that the similarities will emerge naturally at a later stage. Though some might assume there must be a kind of basic cognitive structure or universal mode of thought among human beings,<sup>40</sup> I prefer not to presuppose a universal underlying structure or expect the commonalities found to be instantiations of an absolute or universal essence. We are looking for resemblances among juxtaposed ideas. The quest for an absolute essence is not the primary concern of this study.

We now come to the foundational question of our enquiry. This study aims to determine the meanings of grave visits for the participants interviewed. Here two intertwined epistemological issues emerge: What is meaning? Can we determine meanings through their verbal expression? Echoing Husserl’s idea, it is not necessary to see meaning as an add-on to perception, or as an opposite to a reality which is independent of human thought. As Clark Moustaka said, “Self and world are inseparable components of meaning.”<sup>41</sup> Equally true, the accessibility of participants’ ideas must be assumed. Arvind Sharma has commented that “phenomenologists should not claim that their understanding can be substituted for the believer’s self-understanding, and believers need not claim that the phenomenologist has no access to their interiority just because he or she is not one of them.”<sup>42</sup> To what extent can we access the world of others then?

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<sup>39</sup> Jacques Waardenburg, *Reflections on the Study of Religion* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 87.

<sup>40</sup> For details of the essentialist view, see Zuesse.

<sup>41</sup> Moustakas, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Arvind Sharma, *To the Things Themselves: Essays on the Discourse and Practice of the Phenomenology of Religion* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 42.

Trying to explain the rationale behind phenomenology of religion, Gerardus van der Leeuw once pointed out that to “testify to what has been manifested to it” can only be done by indirect methods and experience, and through a careful reconstruction, while “to see face to face is denied us, but much can be observed even in a mirror; and it is possible to speak about things seen.”<sup>43</sup> Though it sounds convincing, his analogy of a mirror seems to suggest an ideal, an unchanging reality, which is not in congruence with our epistemological assumption. To this end I must stress that this study takes the essence of phenomenology as an anti-positivist endeavour. Acknowledging the inseparability of perception and reality, it also maintains an anti-dualistic position as the basis for our understanding. Otherwise the interviews and eventually the transcripts will always be seen as a distortion of reality rather than part of the reality.

More specifically, a phenomenological orientation helps to discern a deeper layer of meanings which the participants themselves may not be aware of. To achieve this goal, the concepts of epoché<sup>44</sup> and eidetic vision borrowed from philosophical phenomenology are of great value.<sup>45</sup> Though epoché, as explained by Douglas Allen, is regarded by some scholars as a means towards an absolutely presuppositionless science or philosophy,

most phenomenologists have interpreted such bracketing as the goal of freeing the phenomenologist from unexamined presuppositions, or of rendering explicit and clarifying such presuppositions, rather than completely denying their existence. The phenomenological epoché, whether as the technical Husserlian “transcendental reduction” or in its other variations, is not simply “performed” by phenomenologists; it must involve

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<sup>43</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans J.E. Turner (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), Vol II, 677-78.

<sup>44</sup> It is also commonly called phenomenological reduction or bracketing.

<sup>45</sup> For a concise explanation of the terms, see Sharpe 1986.

some method of self-criticism and intersubjective testing allowing insight into structures and meanings.<sup>46</sup>

Put simply, we must acknowledge the presuppositions, examine the possible influences, and try to make use of them rather than believing that all presuppositions can be removed. Beginning by delineating the areas of study and developing interview questions, epoché will not be fully realised till the researcher actually begins the dialogue with the interview partner. In the end it is the encounter, not the philosophical debates, which will open up a new horizon for both sides. And what we have to bracket out is not our knowledge, nor communication or analytic skills, but presuppositions.

In philosophical phenomenology, eidetic intuition or reduction refers to the identification of essences. The idea of essence or eidos in an applied phenomenological study, however, should not be confused with the universality or generalization about human life in an absolute sense. As Max van Manen explained it in an alternative way:

Eidetic reduction is not a simplification, fixation, or contraction of the world into a system of fully resolved concepts – rather it is the exact opposite: the eidetic reduction makes the world appear as it precedes every cognitive construction: in its full ambiguity, irreducibility, contingency, mystery, and ultimate indeterminacy.<sup>47</sup>

While bracketing is the principle for preparing the encounter with our research partners, eidetic intuition is the guideline for analysing the dialogue. In brief, both concepts were borrowed from the philosophical tradition and remain the essential attitudes in its application. Merleau-Ponty has pointed out that “the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.”<sup>48</sup> Yet upholding the principles of bracketing and eidetic vision is not tautological. According to William Brede Kristensen, a

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<sup>46</sup> “Phenomenology of Religion” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), Vol 11, 275.

<sup>47</sup> Max van Manen, “Inquiry: The Eidetic Reduction”, [www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/14.html](http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/14.html).

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), xiv.

phenomenological study should commit to “the ideal of integral objective knowledge and total understanding, however well he may know that the ideal is an unattainable one.”<sup>49</sup> To achieve this ideal, empathy, sensitivity and intuitive understanding are required. When limitations have been acknowledged, our task is to strive for the furthest extent one can achieve. Through bracketing and eidetic intuition, we will be able to “to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way”.<sup>50</sup>

With its emphasis on contemporary expressions and claims of perspectival knowledge, a phenomenological approach signifies a change from viewing truth as propositional to parabolic, from cherishing authoritarian statement to life story while rejecting the superiority of either of the religious cultures being compared.<sup>51</sup> Still, as Michael Pye has already warned, one must avoid presuming that “there is an essential inner unity of meanings or meaning, and to harness the comparative study of the data to the elucidation of that presumed meaning for human beings in general.”<sup>52</sup>

## B. A Comparative Endeavour

Because of its historical development, phenomenology of religion is often quickly associated with a comparative endeavour. Nevertheless, as stated by Brede Kristensen, phenomenology does not intend to compare different religions as a whole. By looking closely at specific aspects, the comparison should provide a deeper and more accurate insight into corresponding religious data than considering each in their own context.<sup>53</sup> In the present study, the specific aspect to be compared is the experience and the meaning of grave visits. Before engaging in any comparison, however, we must recognize the dynamic

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Sharpe 1986, 229.

<sup>50</sup> Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 39.

<sup>51</sup> See Peggy Morgan, “The Authority of Believers in the Study of Religion”, *DISKUS*, Vol. 4.1 (1996):1-10.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Pye, *Comparative Religion* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972), 20.

<sup>53</sup> William Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion: Lectures in the Phenomenology of Religion*, trans. John B. Carman (The Hague: Marinus Nijhoff, 1960), 2.

relationship between teachings and practice, as well as the prescribed and described without posing a dualistic view. It is worth mentioning that even in places where the influence of Christian teachings has been preeminent we can never assume that peoples' ideas and practices conform absolutely to the prescribed ideology. Commenting on the relationship between eschatology and death rituals, Caroline Bynum argued that even when there is an authoritative agent one can never assume the acts of an individual is a mirror image of what is prescribed:

There is much recent, cross-cultural work in both anthropology and history that suggests that we can never find a causal relationship between doctrine and burial practice. Scholars have not, to my knowledge, been able to adduce a single case where a change in eschatology dictates precise changes in death rituals or where changing practice immediately entails a new theory of the afterlife. This observation should not, however, lead us to argue that belief expresses merely the desire to identify with a privileged class or to conform to prevailing fashion. Nor should we conclude that the content of belief is arbitrary.<sup>54</sup>

In Chinese culture, there is neither an authoritative institution similar to the Christian Church in the West, nor a single sacred text recounting the belief and values similar to the canonical status of the Bible. In the past, a large number of comparative works failed to recognise those distinctions by mistaking Confucius as the head of the Chinese religion, and the Confucian classics the holy scripture dictating the religious expression of the people, while neglecting equally significant Daoist and Buddhist influences.<sup>55</sup> They not only muddled up the actual situation in the East, but also committed a double fault by comparing the findings with the prescriptive dimensions in the West.

This leads to a more basic question. If we try to name grave visitation in

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<sup>54</sup> Catherine Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 200-1336* (New York: Columbia Press, 1995), 51.

<sup>55</sup> See C.K. Yang's seminal work of differentiating "institutional" and "diffused" religions in *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley, LA, London: University of California Press, 1961).

two unrelated cultures as a religious phenomenon, are we imposing a foreign concept to either of them? Clive Erricker has noticed that the study of “religion” may involve “a category imposed on the phenomena studied by the researcher which may not be recognized by the communities he or she studies. What we might wish to call a religious practice may not be identified in such a discrete way by cultures and societies whom we wish to study.”<sup>56</sup> This is exactly the case when we look at rituals for the dead in Chinese culture. The phenomenon of observing rituals for the dead can never be separated from family life. When people are asked to describe the act of grave visiting, they immediately relate it to a traditional practice or custom instead of a religious activity.

At this point we have to stress that phenomenological study is not about religions, but religion. Alternatively, it can be said that it is about religiosity. When we look from a phenomenological perspective, religion, as Waardenburg stated, can be defined as a reality of meaning (*Sinnwirklichkeit*). “And what a specific expression means to the person concerned, and that the core of this meaning, phenomenologically speaking, is the intention which has given rise to the expression.”<sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup> Waardenburg’s idea facilitates dialogues between religion while we can “interpret such confrontations as a crossing of certain intentions of the different parties involved, and explain details of them accordingly. Such intentions contain essential aims and finalities in the life of the people and communities concerned.” The problem of definition and the rigid delineation

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<sup>56</sup> Clive Erricker, “Phenomenological Approaches” in *Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Peter Connolly (London: Cassell, 1999), 90.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 103. It is worth to note that Waardenburg’s use of intention may imply a dichotomy of intention and expression, which is not necessarily the case in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. For instance, Husserl says “Here, meaning is not something that is added on to perception as an afterthought; instead, perception is always intentional and therefore constitutive of experience itself. However, at the same time, transcendental phenomenology acknowledges that perception can be more or less infused with ideas and judgements. It identifies strategies that can help us to focus on ‘that which lies before on in phenomenological purity’” (Husserl 1931, 262) Due to the scope of this study, we will not delve into a philosophical discussion on the concept of intention, but acknowledge Waardenburg’s effort in relating a network of meaning to the concept of intention.

<sup>58</sup> The notion of intentionality in phenomenology, as explained by Robert Sokolowski, “applies primarily to the theory of knowledge, not to the theory of human action.... However, ‘intentionality’ and its cognates have become technical terms in phenomenology, and there is no way of avoiding them in a discussion of this philosophical tradition. We have to make the adjustment and understand the word to mean primarily mental or cognitive, and not practical, intentions. In phenomenology, ‘intending’ means the conscious relationship we have to an object.” *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.

between what is religious and non-religious can thus be overcome, since intentions can be adopted and qualified differently.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, the argument over a lack of separation between “ordinary” life and “religious” life in Chinese cultures becomes irrelevant. By rendering the notion of intention, the comparison will become meaningful.

We come then to the problem of how to delineate religion and culture, two interrelated conceptual categories. It has been suggested that religion is not a useful analytical category and should be abandoned.<sup>60</sup> Is religion simply a subdivision in the field of cultural studies? While this study has set out to understand religious experiences in different cultural settings, it is essential to point out potential confusion arising from the conceptual categorization. Although it denotes a geographically and historically identifiable root, the notion of culture could be as elusive as that of religion. On one hand, culture can be said to entail ethics and aesthetics besides religion. On the other hand, frustration often comes from the idea of regarding religion as simple “belief” or “faith”, a kind of cognitive activity, as opposed to a culture, a way of life. Central to the issue, as Catherine Bell suggested, is “a fresh awareness of human agents as active creators of both cultural continuity and change rather than passive inheritors of a system who are conditioned from birth to replicate it.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, we are both inheritors and makers of traditions.

Take the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane as an example. For some scholars, religion undoubtedly involves the concept of holiness or the

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<sup>59</sup> Waardenburg, 132-133.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Timothy Fitzgerald claimed that the study of religion is nothing more than the study of culture and should be replaced while “religion cannot be taken as a valid analytical category since it does not pick out any distinctive cross-cultural aspect of human life.” (*The Ideology of Religious Studies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4. In contrast, Jim Stone argued that: “There is a widespread human concern with a reality taken to surpass the ordinary world revealed by sense perception. It is thought to consist either of sentient supernatural beings (e.g. gods, Adonai, or Brahman) or of an insentient metaphysical principle underlying the universe (e.g. The Unconditioned, Sunyata, or the Tao). Either way, the supermundane reality is positioned to figure centrally in the satisfaction of substantial human needs. It is controversial whether ‘religion’ can be defined; however, systems of practices rationalized by beliefs according to which the practices place us in a relation-of-value to such a reality are paradigmatic religions. Religions have social and political dimensions, but they should also be studied qua religions, as practices, institutions, beliefs, scriptures that flow from this sort of concern.” See review of *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, *Religious Studies* 37.2, 242-246.

<sup>61</sup> Catherine Bell, “Performance” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 209.

sacred. Nathan Söderblom, for instance, has claimed that “Holiness is the great word in religion; it is even more essential than the notion of God. Real religion may exist without a definite conception of deity, but there is no real religion without a distinction between holy and profane.”<sup>62</sup> In the past, due to the Christian background of certain religious scientists, the formation of the meaning of religion was inextricably linked with the idea of separating the church-related and non church-related, the clean and the unclean, or the sacred and the profane. But looking at the East, such separation is a much debated issue. For those who emphasise the separation, the notion of pollution and purification in Chinese culture can be more easily explained. In this regard, the departed or the unclean is supposed to be removed from the living, or the clean. On the contrary, for those who maintain a more integrated notion, the omnipresence of Dao, the origin of life which can be found in everything, animate or inanimate, is the main concern. From this point of view every single person, dead or alive, is indistinguishable from the origin.<sup>63</sup> For the moment we will set aside the argument over separation. What I would like to emphasise is that the potentially fruitful fieldwork of a specific phenomenon should not be hindered by any theoretical delineation. Most important is to let the people involved in the phenomenon to speak for themselves and find out how the active creators themselves describe the religious experience in relation to their cultural identity. Thus a phenomenological approach emphasizing the status of the actors is selected, for it can provide a high level of methodological flexibility which is essential in dealing with death, a sensitive topic for many.

The beauty of phenomenology is that it frees the research process from the bondage of a rigid definition of the concepts under investigation. Through epoche and eidetic intuition, the essential contextual differences can be captured. Thus the process of comparison relies heavily on reflexivity. According to William Paden, this involves a “self-awareness of the role of the comparativist as

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<sup>62</sup> Nathan Söderblom, “Holiness” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: James Clarke and Co., 1973), 731.

<sup>63</sup> Dao is “the One, which is natural, eternal, spontaneous, nameless, and indescribable, It is at once the beginning of all things and the way in which all things pursue their course. When this Tao is possessed by individual things, it becomes its character or virtue.” Chan Wing-Tsit, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), 136

enculturated, classifying and purposive subject ... and an exploratory rather than hegemonic sense of the pursuit of knowledge.”<sup>64</sup> To this end, the Philosophy of Resemblances would serve as a useful underlying framework because:

It inspires us to select and order apperceived resemblances in things that we explicitly recognize to differ rather than translate similarities into identities and so eclipse differences. Under its aegis and with heightened sensitivity to the powerful roles of analogy in human cognizing, our comparisons will change in the direction of greater complexity and subtlety. They will take greater account of variations and differential weighting of elements and their associations than is mandated by the traditional Philosophy of Universals...<sup>65</sup>

By adopting the notion of family resemblance, we are ready to look for a functional equivalence of the topic, a common practice or understanding of the topic, instead of absolute universals, which might imply individual cases are instantiations of the same core or that there is a world “out there”. To sum up, no matter how fluid the concepts such as religion, culture or tradition may appear to be, our challenge is to explore the multiplicity of human experience with strategic and flexible means, and to this end interviewing, an interactive method by way of dialogue, is employed.

### C. Dialogue as Method

Through a dialogue between the researcher and the participant, an interview provides an occasion to reflect on our own experience in order to understand the experience of others. The interview participants should serve as co-researchers, not merely research subjects. That means the course of dialogue

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<sup>64</sup> William E. Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism” in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley Patton & Benjamin Ray (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000), 190.

<sup>65</sup> Benson Saler, “Comparison: Some Suggestions for Improving the Inevitable”, *NUMEN* 48 (2001), 273-274.

should not be strictly governed by a set of questions prepared according to the research framework in advance, but should be maintained like a natural conversation allowing spontaneous questions and unexpected illustrations. While one may use different words to describe similar experiences or similar words to describe different experiences, dialogue offers the opportunity to clarify their connotations. In effect, a participant not only needs to clarify the connotations to others, but, probably to themselves as well. Especially when one comes from a considerably different background, or speaks another language, does dialogue give a unique opportunity for immediate follow-up, which is hard to achieve by other research methods. Phrased differently, the interviewer should be the person who facilitates the dialogue by posing relevant questions, and by trying to integrate the participant's own register in the dialogue. In this vein, the wish to render neutral phrases and non-judgemental responses with a detached attitude is not as constructive as maintaining a natural dialogue with appropriate emotional involvement.

Unfortunately, interviewing is not always believed to be a promising venture. At times, the description collected is simply treated as distorted representation of an ideal world or of true knowledge. Behind this there seems to be a kind of Cartesian view that portrays a research participant as a subject who "contains" an inner representation of their experiences, and thus the researcher's goal is to extract such representations without distortions. Since the researcher's task is to objectively depict a person's internal subjective world, the former is likely to become an unavoidable, intrinsic source of error. Moreover, the accuracy of the self description could also be in doubt, for it has been claimed that participants cannot prevent the distortion of internal representations while translating them into linguistic representation. In addition to presumed translation errors, participants could also be deemed "incapable of accessing mental representations and, therefore, create 'fictional' accounts that at best bear only a vague resemblance to the 'true' internal representation."<sup>66</sup> Besides such a dualistic position, other theoretical concerns such as the extreme form of

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<sup>66</sup> Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 31.

Behaviorism which recognizes only quantifiable physical actions might also contribute to the skepticism of interviewing.

From a phenomenological point of view, knowledge can be seen as the product of social discourse. George Gusdorf has said that “speaking is not merely a means of expression, but a constitutive element of human reality”<sup>67</sup> And as Pollio et al added, “The description of an experience as it emerges in a particular context is the experience.”<sup>68</sup> Since the interview data is not considered a distorted form of the internal representation, when we are looking for the description of an experience, we are not looking for an abstract ideal. A decontextualized reality is nothing more than an illusion, for “the phenomenological real is to be found nowhere but in the ongoing, ever-changing context of the social and natural world; the real is that which is lived as it is lived.”<sup>69</sup> According to this argument, it is no longer necessary to engage in the insider/outsider debates or the emic/etic distinction. With its dialogic nature, the description that arises is constructed by the researcher and the participant collaboratively during the interview.

Phenomenology does not attempt to assess the value of various religious activities. Nor is it set to confirm theoretical hypotheses. Recognising the perspective nature of human experience, the phenomenological interview is simply a path to understanding sensitive experiences by way of communication.<sup>70</sup> The key to success is the mutual respect and common concern of both the researcher and the participant. If managed properly, the interview is one of the most valuable occasions to reflect on the participant’s perspective on their experiences as it emerges naturally. After all, as Gerardus van der Leeuw points out, we should be aware of the fact that “reality is too rich and too manifold to leave us even the slightest hope that we may ever be able to interpret it out of one single principle and by one single method.”<sup>71</sup> While each approach has its own advantages and limitations, it is never possible or desirable to grasp a complete understanding of a phenomenon by a single method. Most important is to find an

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<sup>67</sup> George Gusdorf, *Speaking*, trans Paul T. Brockelman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 116.

<sup>68</sup> Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 31.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>71</sup> van der Leeuw, 339.

effective way to unfold the hidden aspects of culture, to acquire reliable results, and to represent the findings fairly. To achieve these goals we have designed the research according to the principles mentioned above and developed the methodological strategies which will be explained in the next section.

## 2.2 Design of the Study

With phenomenology of religion as the theoretical orientation, in-depth interviewing is employed as the research method to examine the phenomenon of grave visits in the two cultural settings. Incorporating qualitative research techniques, the empirical part of this study was based on first-hand in-depth interviewing with participants selected by purposeful sampling and maximum variation sampling. The participants were regarded as “co-researcher” instead of “informant” or “interviewee” to underscore the exploratory and collaborative nature of this inquiry.<sup>72</sup> A pilot study and other exploratory tasks were done to assess the variants in the contexts under study before sampling intense cases. The research question and interview questions were modified afterwards when necessary. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Translation and back translation were done if necessary. The transcription and the notes written during and after the interviews served as the basis of analysis.

### A. The Interview Guide Approach

Depending on the structure of the interview design and the types of questions specified, qualitative interviewing can be classified into three types.<sup>73</sup> At one end is the informal conversational interview, unstructured and without predetermined question. At the other is the standardized open-ended interview, with a predefined sequence of questions and wording. In between is the interview guide approach, which is also called in-depth semi-structured interviewing. It is a

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<sup>72</sup> As suggested in Moustakas and Pollio, Henley & Thompson.

<sup>73</sup> For a comparison of various interview types, see Patton, 349.

relatively flexible mode that enables the participant to talk about the aspects they regard as relevant and important in a relaxed atmosphere. Moreover, the use of open-end questions could certainly facilitate the expression of mixed feelings, allowing variations to appear naturally. For its flexibility and comprehensiveness, this approach is used as the basic interview strategy in our study.

In the interview guide the issues to be explored are listed in outline format with the questions written more for reference than for exact repetition.<sup>74</sup> The questions are designed to evoke personal descriptions rather than fixed responses, such as when one fills in a questionnaire. The participant is asked to recall specific episodes, situations, or events they experienced in related events. And we look for vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for them: their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours, as well as situations, events, places, and people connected with their experience. The interview might start with a sentence such as “try to remember one of the last times you were in the cemetery to visit your departed family members. Tell me about the situation, how you felt and what you said and did.” From the natural flow of conversation, the researcher is free to explore, and to ask spontaneous questions within a particular area according to the participant’s feedback. In addition to common sense and interaction, trust established through recommendations of their acquaintances, along with an honest self-introduction and genuine pre-interview communication establish a foundation to ensure all understand the topics and questions in the same way. Adhering to the ethical principles of human science research, structural and textural descriptions will be formulated into a synthesis of the experience as a whole to be presented in the next chapter.

## B. Recruitment, Interview Management & Pilot Study

Our recruitment strategy is based on the principles of purposeful sampling and maximum variation sampling. In contrast to random sampling from the

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<sup>74</sup> For details of the interview guide, see appendix II.

whole population under investigation, purposeful sampling aims at acquiring information-rich cases for comprehensive study. Information-rich cases are intensity samples that manifest the phenomenon intensely but not extremely. They provide substantial information on issues of central importance to the research.<sup>75</sup> Since the phenomenon under investigation is the engagement in a ritual practice for departed family members, the common experience of grave visits becomes the primary selection criterion. The secondary criteria include:

- share the common experience of regularly visiting the grave(s) of their departed father or mother or a close elderly family member who held a similar status as their parent
- must be of Chinese / German origin
- must reside in Hong Kong / Frankfurt am Main or the surroundings
- age: 30-70
- does not hold an official position in any religious body
- is able to express themselves clearly with words and is willing to take part in the interviews voluntarily

Acknowledging the complexity of Chinese religion and the growing religious diversity in Germany, ethnic origin instead of religious background is chosen as an operational strategy.<sup>76</sup> Considering the health condition and the emotional stability of the elderly when dealing with the topic of death, the participants need to be within an adult population excluding the middle old and the oldest old (aged 70 and above). In general, they faced the death of the parent in a normal phase of life and did not have a broken relationship with the departed. The samples should also be gender representative. Religious personnel are excluded to avoid the confusion of identity during the interview.

By maximum variation sampling, one can turn the seeming weakness of both intra-group and inter-group heterogeneity that emerged from a small sample into a strength by presuming that “any common patterns that emerge from great

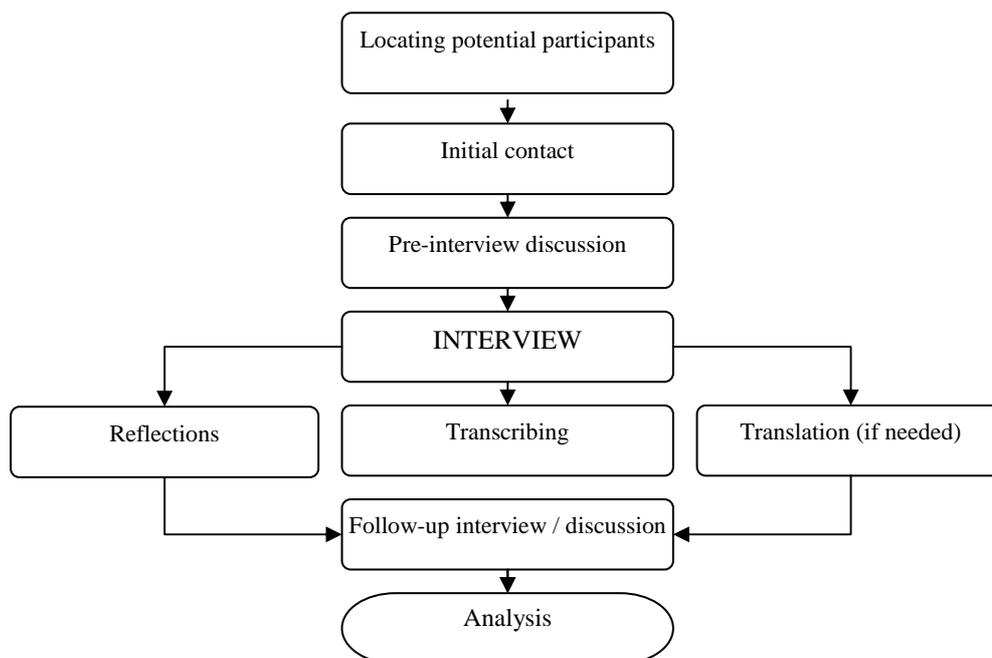
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<sup>75</sup> See Patton, 230.

<sup>76</sup> In the initial recruitment process of the pilot study in Frankfurt, Muslims or people from other faith communities were not deliberately excluded. As stated in Chapter 1.2, the research participants were mostly referred by acquaintances due to the sensitive nature of the topic. It is not surprising to find that the participants were more familiar with Christianity. It would be promising to further investigate how the different religions play a role in shaping their thoughts on life after death.

variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon.”<sup>77</sup> By integrating the dimensions of sharing a common experience and sharing a culture, and by deliberately choosing a wide range of variation from different social and economic backgrounds, a matrix of maximum variation and intensity samples could be formed. Thus both the uniqueness of each case and the shared themes can be captured and described. While carrying out the analysis, further contrastive cases with reference to religious affiliations or other factors such as gender may be identified.

An interview usually lasts less than two hours. But from locating a candidate to thanking them, the process may involve several months. The following flowchart shows how an individual case is established:



In order to test the questions and responses, we have to conduct pilot interviews with potential participants to gather information about fields that were not apparent at earlier stages. During the pilot study, I have had a number of formal and informal meetings with Chinese and German adults from different walks of life, covering a range of topics related to death, mourning and

<sup>77</sup> Patton, 235.

remembrance. This exercise has reminded me how delicate this issue could be. I treasured every opportunity to talk to those who were willing to share their life experiences with me while dealing with the death of their loved ones. The understanding gained through this preparatory stage is summarised as follows.

*Locating potential participants who share a common experience: Timing and willingness.* Unlike the phenomenological studies in health science or education in which the candidates can easily be located by checking the records of operations performed or training programmes joined, finding out potential participants who fit the criteria of the current study is not as simple as it first seemed. For young and old alike, talking about death in the family is rather sensitive, even unpleasant at times. While the basic question about whether parents or grandparents are still alive is sometimes regarded as a personal issue, it was essential to know whether further inquiry should be shunned or an interview of the potential candidates could actually take place.

A very enthusiastic friend of mine fell into an embarrassing situation as she was persuading some neighbours to take part in our research. The difficulties encountered during the recruitment process demonstrated that our inquiry requires not only persistence but also sensitivity.

Concerning the interview's timing, two aspects must be taken into account. First is the emotional status of the participant. Intensive grief would be experienced at the end of a normal parent-child relation, and if the death in the family is fairly recent, the interview may not be conducted effectively. Second, times should be selected to avoid the foreseeable conflicts and unpleasantness, and to facilitate the conversation if possible. For instance, in Chinese society, it would probably be inappropriate to conduct a survey related to death during certain festivals such as the Lunar New Year. On the other hand, for the German setting, it might be helpful to hold the interview around Allerheiligen or Totensonntag so that a conversation could start by mentioning the scenery change in a graveyard from one full of summer flowers to one marked by dried floral wreaths.

*Initial Contact and Discussion.* As mentioned above, it might sound impertinent or awkward to ask somebody's experience of attending funerals or

visiting graves when the researcher does not know the person well. Therefore, if the potential participant is not acquainted with the researcher, initial contact was usually made with the help of a mutual friend. An appointment could then be arranged by the researcher and the participant directly. In this way, participants usually expected that you knew something about them already. Thanks to the common friend, the researcher was not a complete stranger even though they were meeting for the first time. As pointed out by Banister et al. (1994), the effects of prior relationships arising from other than research contexts can be very positive: “it seems likely that this facilitated greater disclosure and reflexive commentary, as well as constituting the preconditions for some of the themes identified in the analysis.” Moreover, the pre-interview discussion was a good chance to learn about family status, practice and willingness, and to see if they were able to talk about their stories. At this stage, the participants should have received a letter of thanks and informed consent form.

*Securing consensus.* Securing the consent of participants in writing must be done before starting an interview. This was done either in a pre-interview discussion session or right before the interview. After this sort of formality, however, the researcher has to make a shift in position, that is, in Moustakas’ term, to maintain the relationship as co-researchers, instead of interviewer and interviewee. Or as put forward by Hollway & Jefferson: “Apparently simple, it required discipline and practice to transform ourselves from the highly visible asker of our questions to the almost invisible, facilitating catalyst of the interviewees’ stories.”<sup>78</sup>

*Languages.* According to the preference of the participants, the interviews were conducted either in Cantonese, German or English. In most cases, people used their mother tongue. When the interview was conducted in their native language, they would try their best to explain their views and really made me fully understand what they meant. As a result, according to feedback afterwards, they were reflecting and making their ideas clearer to themselves in the course of explanation. Though my German is far from fluent, the participants showed their

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<sup>78</sup> Wendy Hollway & Tony Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 36.

appreciation for my efforts rather than treating them as a hindrance. In fact, because this is not a study in the field of comparative linguistics or conversation analysis, the drawbacks does not seem significant. More importantly, the choice of languages was open for the participants and it was not necessary for them to stick to a single language during the conversation. For example, a German participant who had studied American Literature at university found it easier to express himself in English because he could reflect more fully on the topic that way.

*Interview venues.* The interviews were usually held at the participant's home. To have an opportunity to visit the participants' dwelling place was very helpful for the research. Since they did not have to get accustomed to a new environment, it was easier in general to maintain a warm atmosphere and to develop a close rapport. They could speak in a more relaxed manner, and had the possibility of showing pictures or articles related to the departed. For example, one participant moved about her house and showed me how she had deliberately hid her husband's photo behind the plants in the living room.

*Recording and note taking.* For future analysis, it is necessary to record the whole interview and take notes whenever possible. As shown in the example above, however, when the participant invited the researcher to move around, it was better to leave pens and recorder behind and try to see what was in front of one's eyes. Another time, a young man who was stress-free at the beginning of the interview gradually became anxious about the recorder's presence and tended to speak very systematically as if producing a thesis. At the end of the interview, he told me he did not feel at ease and was trying to stick to rational thinking rather than giving sensational remarks. He then started to speak in a more personal way and talked at length about his feelings towards the departed. The fruitful conversation therefore actually began when the recorder was off. Certainly it was not a time to do something that would make him feel he was being interviewed again. Yet all in sudden, he asked "Would you like to record what I've just said? Please use the recorder. I can tell you once more so you won't forget what I've said." And it worked. To be free of tools was a good exercise in learning to be sensitive to other sources of information and of ways to

obtain them. As suggested by Tim Booth and Wendy Booth, recording is a vital aid for verbatim narratives, but should not be treated as the goal of an interview.

...but there are times in compiling life stories when other means of data collection might be more appropriate or when recording is either not desirable or nor possible. An interview should not be regarded as lost or wasted if it cannot be recorded. It is always important to let the situation and the purpose of the interview determine whether or not a recorder is used rather than allow the recorder to determine the purpose or conduct of the interview.<sup>79</sup>

Equally true, taking notes during the interview could also be intrusive in certain circumstances. At the end, it is sensitivity that was indispensable to the interview and subsequent analysis.

### C. Analysis

Our analysis is based on the analytical framework approach. The central task is to locate and organise relevant themes throughout the immersion and reflection process.<sup>80</sup> Identification of themes is a challenging and complex dialectical process. The researcher would not be able to tell the number of themes to be identified in advance while the list of themes keeps changing through analysis. Neither is it a matching process with a predefined set of codes. In phenomenology, this is called eidetic reduction. Through the reduction, themes or patterns of meaning will emerge. Those themes or patterns, however, are not theoretical abstractions belonging to existing taxonomies. “Instead, phenomenological themes are the working material for phenomenological writing.”<sup>81</sup> In practice, we first have to analyse each case individually by locating themes with shared references, arranging them into clusters and identifying the hierarchical relationships. After cross-checking themes in all transcripts, clusters

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<sup>79</sup>Tim Booth & Wendy Booth, “Life Stories and Depth Interviewing” in *Parenting under Pressure: mothers and fathers with learning difficulties* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), 30.

<sup>80</sup> See Patton, Willig and Devenish.

<sup>81</sup> Max van Manen, “Inquiry: The Eidetic Reduction”.

of themes found in each case are integrated into a holistic picture. Finally, it comes the selection of themes for comparison based on analytical focus.

During the identification and clustering process, some seemingly contradictory expressions or motifs may emerge. Divergences in findings, however, are just a way getting a more thorough understanding of the topic. As mentioned earlier, our goal is not to determine which particular idea a participant believes in, but to focus on how they express the ideas in their own terms and to demonstrate the multiple layers of religious experience. In other words, by phenomenological explication, themes and clustering of themes are recognised as the result of interpretative emphasis rather than the inclusion or exclusion of ideas according to formal logic.

Moreover, it must be noted that findings from qualitative research are meant neither to represent a whole population or culture, nor to try to make general claims. Nor is the debate of subjectivity or objectivity relevant,<sup>82</sup> for “a discursive conception of truth goes beyond the polarization of subjective and objective-valid knowledge” and “the basic medium of this discourse is language, which is neither objective not subjective, but inter-subjective.”<sup>83</sup> The challenge is to collect a rich, wide-ranging and credible array of reflective materials by controlling the research process, through examining the availability of carefully chosen informants, and making fair and generally-accepted interpretations that are objective in a human sense.<sup>84</sup>

In brief, what a researcher should strive for is the creditability and reliability of the analysis, which is based on sensitivity to human values and contextuality of knowledge. A credible and reliable analysis will provide new

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<sup>82</sup> See James Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>83</sup> Steiner Kvale, *InterViews: Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 262-298.

<sup>84</sup> Max Weber has pointed out it would be naïve to believe that any researcher could build a theory which is free from value judgements: “There is no absolutely ‘objective’ scientific analysis of culture – or put perhaps more narrowly but certainly not essentially differently for our purposes – of ‘social phenomena’ independent of special and ‘one-sided’ viewpoints according to which – expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously – they are selected, analysed and organised for expository purposes. The reasons for this lie in the character of the cognitive goal of all research in social science which seeks to transcend the purely formal treatment of the legal or conventional norms regulating social life.” In “Objectivity in Social Science and Social Policy”, *The Methodology of Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1949), 72.

insights into the phenomenon, without falling into methodological debates built on a “dichotomized presupposition of the nature of knowledge as either true or false.”<sup>85</sup>

A phenomenological approach to religion is an exploratory task focused on the participant’s experience. Employing in-depth interviewing, it is certainly more realistic and rewarding to regard the interviewer as a person than to strive for the unnecessary ideal of an interviewer-free interview based on a mechanical conception. That suggests the researcher’s craftsmanship should be emphasised rather than rules. The analysis would thus lead to neither a relativity of interpretations, nor an absolute true claim, but to an understanding formed intersubjectively through dialogue. As Steiner Kvale suggests, “we exist in a conversational circle... This is not a vicious circle, but in a hermeneutical sense a *circuluous fructuosi*. The problem is not to get out of the conversational circle, but to get into it in the right way.”<sup>86</sup>

Through the framework explained above, we were able to cover 12 positive cases in each city for analysis despite the difficulties encountered in the recruitment process and the problems revealed in the pilot phase. In the following chapters, we will present and compare the findings according to three analytical focuses: 1. The grave as a new home: Visitation patterns and reasons. 2. Imagining a new life: Ideas about life after death and the interpretation of hope. 3. A new relationship: Family and tradition, and intergenerational reciprocity and continuing bond. These focuses are the end result of grouping and re-grouping of related clusters of themes identified from the transcripts. They are not meant to be exhaustive but echo the originality and the exploratory nature of this study.

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<sup>85</sup> As appeared in the social sciences: “in the 1960s, natural science versus the humanities; in the 1970s, quantitative versus qualitative; in the 1980s, objective versus subjective; and in the 1990s, universal versus local knowledge.” See Kvale, 290.

<sup>86</sup> Kvale, 296.

### 3 THE GRAVE AS A NEW HOME

#### 3.1 Visitation Patterns & Reasons

A. Hong Kong

B. Frankfurt

#### 3.2 The Grave as a Connecting Point

#### 3.1 Visitation Patterns & Reasons

A. Hong Kong

With no exceptions, all participants maintain the custom of visiting at or around Qingming, a traditional Chinese festival which usually falls on April 5 in the Gregorian calendar.<sup>87</sup> Chongyang, another festival which is also customary for grave visiting in the autumn, is often given a lower priority.<sup>88</sup> Generally speaking, the festival-based visitation is regarded as an annual or biannual essential function for members of both the core and the extended family. Like many others, Yung feels an urge to follow this routine:

When I couldn't venerate him on that day due to bad weather, I would feel terrible. It is the time to do so, we should go and venerate him. We had tried to postpone the date to suit all of my sisters and other family members, but it's difficult. I felt a twinge of uneasiness about that. I think I must go there during that festival.

It should be noted that participants tend to conform to the norm of visiting during Qingming or Chongyang festivals rather than on specific memorial dates

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<sup>87</sup> Marked the arrival of spring, Qingming falls on the 104<sup>th</sup> or 105<sup>th</sup> day after the winter solstice.

<sup>88</sup> In Hong Kong, both Qingming and Chongyang are public holidays. Historically speaking, Qingming combined and preserved the spirit of the Spring Ancestral Worship and the Cold Food Festival since ancient times while Chongyang, the Double Ninth or the Double Yang, was related to the custom of climbing a mountain in autumn.

including the departed's date of birth or death. Other occasions such as the Ghost Festival, which could also be an appropriate time to remember the dead, is no longer a popular option. For instance, both Yiu and Kelly recounted that they had once arranged some special rituals for their parents in a temple or on a podium in a public area set up for the purpose during that period. For financial reasons, however, they did not intend to make it a regular activity. As Yiu remarked:

The people at Ching Chung Koon<sup>89</sup> know how to make money. For example, during the Ghost Festival in the 7<sup>th</sup> month, they will invite you to place a temporary tablet for a couple of days for several hundreds to a thousand dollars. Then they will offer recitation and chanting. I have tried once, but it's not a favorable deal...

In contrast, the pattern of spontaneous visits varies widely. Since it is not unusual for Chinese to install a memorial tablet for the departed at home or in a temple close to their home, the bereaved may visit the spot which is easier to reach instead of where the remains are actually located. It is also not necessary to go to the cemetery frequently because rituals like burning joss sticks can be done domestically. That means spontaneous visits can be largely contingent upon the location of the grave or the niche. Some parents therefore like to establish the site of the urn or tablet while they are still alive, hoping that a more accessible location will enable more frequent visits afterwards. For example, Ying described how her mother had prepared for herself an extra niche in a Buddhist establishment in town so that her children would not have trouble travelling from their home to the cemetery. Now Ying can visit the niche whenever she feels like to: "If I happen to pass by, I will go inside. Her photo is there." In the case of Chi, it is a slightly different story. His father's remains were installed in a Daoist establishment close to his mother's house, and Chi is able to visit the niche frequently:

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<sup>89</sup> Ching Chung Koon is one of the Daoist establishments in Hong Kong.

When I go to my mum's place, I will pay a visit if I remember to do so. It's nothing special. I don't have to prepare anything. I'll just buy some joss sticks, clean the censer briefly, put the joss sticks there, then clean the tablet before I leave.

In most cases, the time spent at the graveside or niche-side is around 15-30 minutes. Cleaning the grave or the niche is usually the first step after reaching the site. Gifts may then be offered followed by a couple of words to say the visitors have come to present something. It is worth noticing that all participants bring some kind of gift, be it flowers, candles, joss sticks, joss money, mock gold bars, various traditional or trendy papier-mâché products, or food such as dim sum, roast pork and fruit. They also talk to the departed during their visit, no matter how brief it might be. Compared with description in other studies,<sup>90</sup> the procedures recounted by our participants are apparently less elaborate. Even so, we can classify their visitation activity into three groups based on the types of gifts offered.

The first group brings only flowers, emphasising their symbolic and aesthetic values. Amy, who is visiting the niche of her mother in a columbarium, said that because carnations represent motherly love she likes to put one in a little vase attached to the niche. Owing to the beauty of flowers, Joey tried to arrange different kinds of fresh flowers and plants at the graveside whenever possible.

The second group holds to a more traditional style. Depending on the occasion, Yiu brings various gifts ranging from food on ordinary days to paper goods on special ones. In addition, he regards others whose cremated remains are installed in the same ancestral hall as his father's neighbours and so offers them some joss sticks as a gift each time. He also pays tribute to the earth gods in the hall when entering and before leaving the hall.

The third group is mixed and flexible. Lo's and Lisa's accounts correspond to such a transitional style, which was dominant among out

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<sup>90</sup> See Patricia Ebrey, "The Liturgies for Sacrifices to Ancestors in Successive Versions of Family Rituals" in *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies*, ed. David Johnson (Berkeley, Calif., Chinese Popular Culture Project: Distributed by IEAS Publications, University of California, 1995) and James L. Watson & Rubie S. Watson, *Village Life in Hong Kong: Politics, Gender, and Ritual in the New Territories* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004).

participants. Lo and his family usually bring some fruit, drinks and a lunch box. He mentioned that in the future two hamburgers might even be an option. Lisa recounted that in the past she would also bring cooked chicken and would eat there after performing the rituals. Now, only a little pack of paper goods, some fruit, joss sticks and candles are offered. She is aware of the change, and regrets the simplification somewhat, yet keeps adopting and adjusting.

Most intriguing among all practices is the burning of papier-mâché products. Concerning the efficacy of such offerings, most participants remain skeptical however. Cheung admitted that nobody knew if the dead could indeed receive the offerings:

As you go there you need to burn something for them although it doesn't mean that they can receive them in the underworld. No one can tell. Of course I hope that they can get that stuff. But the point is once I fulfilled this obligation, I feel relieved.

Common papier-mâché products are usually readily available. Otherwise one can select from an array of exclusive items designed to meet individual needs, or make use of a "you name it, they make it" service. Sandy was once attracted by mobile phones and DVD players when she was looking for a gift for her father in a paper craft store. But she realized her father would probably not know how to use those items and decided it might be better to burn a teahouse for him because he had enjoyed going there very much. On another occasion she wanted to send a servant to him:

Maybe it is just a kind of consolation or make-believe. But if we believe that he will receive them, it will put our mind at ease. It is important that both the living and the dead assume that his life didn't end there. He has left us to live in another world. In this way we can keep talking about what to burn for him. For example, when thinking about burning a servant, we realized that we couldn't burn a Philipino for he doesn't understand English. It's like joking in a way. If you ask me whether I really believe that he will get them, I would say I don't think so.

Apart from the focusing on preferences or capabilities of the departed, it is sometimes necessary to pay attention to other rules as well. Ben cited the following story:

If you burn an aeroplane for the departed, they will go away. You can only burn a house, a car, a toy or a computer for them. Somebody told me that since the parents burnt an aeroplane for their deceased little girl, the soul of the girl has never come back again. They could never hear her laughter anymore. I don't know if it's true or not. But we do things according to the way we feel comfortable with.

Despite the uncertainties, the practice is sustained by a kind of perceived cost-effectiveness. "I don't know if he would get the paper gold but it doesn't cost much. Around 20 dollars will do," suggested Lisa. "He can then use the paper gold as money to buy food and other stuff he wants."

When asked to talk about their feelings when standing in front of the grave or the niche, participants usually hesitated for quite a while and could only give a brief response like "it's a just duty, that's nothing special". Expressions like "feeling closer" and "having a sense of intimacy" did not come up until they were ready to broach the subject again in a later stage during the interview. Kelly spoke of feeling contented when she found the departed was laid to rest in a proper place. "When I see him there, I know he won't be wondering around. He has a place to stay." For some, like Ying, the proximity at the graveside or niche-side is different: "A lot of memories would come up... and it seems that she is really there, so close." Eric also felt much closer to his departed father when gazing at the picture on the niche. From time to time, he would let his father know what was happening in the family though he was not sure if his father could hear his murmurs:

The ashes are just behind the photo. It becomes more intimate here. When my son Henry was going to get married I told him about that. It's like informing him of the event, maybe he could not hear me, or receive my message.

Participants shared a feeling of being comfortable and safe when talking to the departed in the cemetery. Important events in life, notably graduation, marriage and giving birth to a child were often given the highest priority. Sam recounted that,

Before our baby was born, I went there and stood in front of the picture of my father. Unlike my mother, I would not say a lot. But I said in my heart, “now I have established my own family, I am very thankful to you.” I want him to know this. It is not very important if he really can hear my voice, but for sure I would like to tell him.

Sometimes they just inform the departed about their daily activities. At the graveside Joey would tell her mother how her grandchildren are doing, and how she is missed. Sandy reported the recent quarrels in the family to her father and asked him to give blessings to the whole family. In addition, she also invited her father to let her know what he needed by appearing in her dreams.

The eagerness to maintain a bond with the departed thus stands out as one of the main reasons for visitation. As Amy sentimentally recalled her time at the graveside:

Oh, I would like to see her, I miss her. And so I go there and take a look. In the very beginning I felt very upset when I went there, but it has been eight years already. I still feel that she is there. She is present. So I go there and see her, and clean the photo. This is a kind of intimate contact. The person is not there anymore, but my mum is still there, with me.

In this sense, the cemetery becomes a connecting point for the living and the dead. “The feeling at home is never the same. We cannot venerate him at home. We must go there,” explained Yung. It was also suggested by Ben that because the environment is entirely different, performing a small scale ritual at home could not be compared with visiting the cemetery:

At home you can only do something simple and individual, maybe on the 1<sup>st</sup> or the 15<sup>th</sup> day of a month according to the lunar calendar, the date of birth or the date of death. It only involves placing a joss stick. It is not a kind of worship. At the graveside you can really do something more elaborate. And the atmosphere there is much stronger. Although the ancestor has passed away, I hope he would know, if there is a soul, and many descendents are there visiting him. And let him feel more comfortable.

The atmosphere of a cemetery allows the visitors to focus on the departed, no matter what they perceive the current situation of the departed to be. Joey said she was so overwhelmed by the solemnity that she was confused but not really bothered by the philosophical arguments or religious views on posthumous existence:

The atmosphere there is just totally different. It gives you an exceptionally intense feeling... According to my religious belief, the soul is not bounded to the body anymore, but sometimes I found it contradictory, am I talking to the body under the soil or to the soul?

Beyond the emotional side, grave visitation is also perceived as an obligation of offspring in the Chinese culture. Phrases such as “we just have to be there”, “it’s a Chinese custom”, and “we want to let him know we are all there” are often heard from most of the participants. Some parents had spoken of their wish to be visited after death explicitly. Others had expressed it by acting as a role model and bringing their children to visit the graves of other departed family members. For example, Chi and his sister were told by his father that after his death he would like his niche to be attended on a regular basis. As a mother of three adult children, Lisa believes that it is her duty to let the children know their departed grandparents are still there, in the cemetery, so that they will know what to do after her own departure.

## B. Frankfurt

Similar to their Chinese counterparts, the visitation pattern of our participants in Frankfurt also depends largely on the location of the cemetery. As a result, two types of visitation pattern could be identified. The first type includes those who are living close to the cemetery where the departed parent is buried. For them, the frequencies range from once or twice a week to once a month, while spontaneous visits were also reported. As described by Diane:

Und ab und zu gehe ich auch mal hin, wenn ich halt so gerade das Gefühl habe. Ja? Also, ja, ich sag jetzt mal dem Papa Hallo. Ja? Das ist auch so.

For those living relatively far from where the graves are located, the grave visit is more likely to be combined with a visit to family members living close to the gravesite. For this group, due to the distance, spontaneous visits were rare. For example, Kuno's parents were buried in a cemetery 150 km from Frankfurt:

Äh, immer wenn ich meine Schwestern besuche. Immer nur mit Besuch. Ist immer verknüpft mit Besuch. Da fahr ich da hin und dann gehe ich noch mal aufs Grab.

Similarly, for his father's grave is located in northern Germany where the rest of his family reside, John explained:

Whenever I'm around in that area where he lived, I plan to go to the cemetery. Although – you know, sometimes I didn't have enough time, – because of the things there and so and so.

However, religious festivals and personal anniversaries are not the major motive for their visits. Depending on their religious backgrounds, visits at religious festivals such as All Saints' day or All Souls' day are observed occasionally. Personal anniversaries such as the date of birth and the date of death are also not frequently marked as a date for visitation. Emile said:

Und es ist auch so, wenn, äh, mein Vater, meine Mutter Geburtstag hat, dann kommt immer ein Blumenstrauß extra aufs

Grab. Das – ja, einfach so. Oder an Muttertag. Für meine Mutter an Muttertag – äh, es ist auch hier sehr verbreitet. Mag nicht überall vielleicht sein. Die, die Grabkultur.

In this sense, the pattern is more likely to be affected by the individual persistence of the bereaved and family changes such as the death of other family members. In the case of Maria, frequent initial visits decreased gradually over time:

Ja, das hat sich im Moment so ein bisschen verändert. Also, am Anfang – oder, oder, eigentlich ändert es sich, immer wieder. Also manchmal gehe ich ganz oft, so, da gehe ich, äh, da gehe ich, jedes Wochenende einmal dorthin zum Grab. Das ist für mich halt immer auch ein bisschen, ähm, weit entfernt, ja?

Helga reported that since her husband passed away and was buried in the same cemetery as her mother, she visits her mother's grave more often:

Ja, meine Mutter liegt auch hier oben in D.A. auf dem Friedhof, hat auch ihr Grab da. Ja, das ist jetzt – da gehe ich auch immer hin, nicht sehr oft, aber – jetzt, nachdem das Grab von meinem Mann auch da oben ist, da gehe ich halt auch öfter an das Grab meiner Mutter. Immer auch dann, so jede Woche eins-, zweimal.

For most, visiting the grave is considered a task for individuals instead of an event involving the whole family. As Diane described,

Nein. Na, ganz selten mal, dass wir eben mal nach dem Gottesdienst, vielleicht jetzt beim Grab der Schwiegereltern, dann gehen wir schon mal, aber eigentlich ist das eine sehr individuelle Sache. Also, es ist, unsere Familie ist auch nicht, dass wir jetzt am Todestag, also, da geht jeder hin, am Todestag vom Vater, sieht man schon, dass alle da waren, ja, aber wir gehen nicht gemeinsam. Ja? Weil jeder eine ganz persönliche, individuelle Beziehung hatte und auch diese persönliche, individuelle

Beziehung ausleben möchte. Und das bedeutet nicht, dass ich einen Kult mache und gemeinsam zum Grab pilger.

Only in certain cases are other family members or children expected to be present and the process is generally short and simple. Martha summarised it as “Einfach einen Moment stehen bleiben und bisschen Gedanken noch mal sammeln und oft auch nur gucken sind die Blumen noch schön.” Most often, visitors arrange flowers and plants, reflect on the life of the departed, and talk with them. Occasionally, candles are lit and a prayer is said. As described by John:

then we – whenever we go there we took – we take our gardening-things and then we look at the garden with all the graves, and do whatever is next, so we maybe plant some flowers or, actually in autumn sometimes, around the time, all things we would actually burn a candle and light it there. Ah, when I'm there usually I say a prayer.

Likewise, what Gisela planned for her next visit includes the routine step of tidying up the gravesite and saying a prayer:

Das nächste Mal wird sein am Samstag. Ich werde nach dem Grab schauen, ob das noch in Ordnung ist. Werde Blumen zurechtzupfen oder Blätter wegnehmen. Und eventuell den Stein wischen. Ja, und werde natürlich dann noch beten.

For some, like Kuno, a kind of reflective silence at the graveside instead of a prayer was observed:

Ich stelle mich hin und bleibe, denke eine Minute, oder zwei Minuten bleibe ich einfach stehen. Was mir kommt. Weiß ich nicht. Also, einfach so Gefühle. So stehe ich da, ganz ruhig und einfach Kontemplation.

Others tried to update the departed on recent events in their life in what was usually seen as a private one-to-one communication. Maria said she would feel uneasy if somebody was around for she could not enjoy the tranquillity and

sacredness, a special aura she shared with her mother:

ein ganz ruhiger Zustand. Der, also, ähm, also schon fast ein meditativer Zustand. Also, man steht da, sie ist da oder zumindest die – ein Teil von ihr ist da und, ähm, ja, das ist so, also, das ist sozusagen ein ganz – wie soll ich sagen, vielleicht heiliger Zustand sozusagen, ja?

Besides the environmental factor, the duration of bereavement and the personality of the bereaved also contribute to the emotions invoked. Different emotions such as grief and sadness, loss and fear, loneliness and anger, acceptance and relief might be felt at different times or during the same visit for they need not be mutually exclusive. However, we found that whether a visit would invoke a strong and distinct emotional state such as feeling sad or feeling closer to the departed seems to depend mostly on the participant's relationship with their parent when they were still alive. For instance, John, who had close ties with his father and the family, said:

I feel a kind of melancholy. A little bit sad, yes. A kind, feel of loving as well for the respect for my father. Because I have a good relationship with him, very close emotionally, so it's a kind of melancholic, I mean because it was fourteen years ago that he had passed away, so, it was not on a everyday basis that we come closely but it's a melancholic feeling in particular I can't be sad about the fact that he can't be there when my children were born.

For Konrad, who had a more complicated relationship with his father, going to the cemetery is more a duty than a time for feeling and expression:

Until a year's ago and then my brother and I decided to use the gardening service. To be honest this is basic or more or less the only reason to go to the graveyard at all ... well, in this case I would choose the gardening service for the first moment on. Just like, I don't know, like you are free to go to the graveyard whenever you want to, but I don't think so, it's just the place

where the corpses are lying, that has nothing to do with the soul. So why should there be a special moment when I go to the graveyard? I don't know.

With the aesthetic appreciation of nature, we refer to the wish to keep the garden of the grave corresponding to times of year. Knowing the plants for different seasons, Diane prepared the grave accordingly:

Ähm, gehe ich nun regelmäßig, im Sommer, Frühjahr, Sommer, Herbst mehr – aber ich gehe dorthin, um das Grab herzurichten, also, nach den Jahreszeiten... Ich denke jetzt so, ja, im Winter ist es mal alle zwei Wochen und im Sommer ist es manchmal täglich, aber dann ist es auch nur, um die Blumen zu gießen. Ja? Ganz praktisch. Oder jetzt im Winter, um eine Kerze anzuzünden. Weil es, weil es halt so ist.

For nature lovers like Helga, it is believed the grave is a kind of extension of her own garden which also has to be taken care of:

Ich habe halt gerne Garten und Natur. Und deshalb dachte ich, na ja, wenn ich so ein großes Grab habe, dann kann ich ein bißchen mehr, so, halt ein bißchen Garten drauf machen.

This pressure is perceived by all participants regardless of age and sex, and is not unique to small villages in which everybody knows each other and thus social pressure seems to be more obvious. It is alike for those with family members buried in the large cemeteries in town. Interestingly, it was never regarded as a religious duty, but as an obligation to meet expectations of others. For example, Helga, who lives in a village, admitted that the care of the grave is a social norm that needs to be respected:

Es ist in Deutschland sehr wichtig, dass, hier in D.A. besonders, dass das Grab sehr ordentlich ist, verstehen Sie? In Ordnung. Dass keine verwelkten Blumen und – ja – dass es ordentlich aussieht. Mein Grab ist sowieso nicht so ganz, wie hier im Dorf ganz wichtig, immer zur gleichen Jahreszeit die gleichen Blumen. Und

jetzt war Winter und ich habe noch von Weihnachten einen Blumenstrauß hingelegt und der war jetzt verschneit und den hab ich jetzt weggeräumt.

While some mentioned the notion of social control directly, others, like Konrad, acknowledged the presence of a kind of comparison or evaluation between his father's grave and that of others:

Well, because he sees more like the grave should look the way it should, the appearance, like for the neighbours. And because my brother as well was a teacher and was known, that's why.

According to Gerhard, leaving the grave untended would certainly be criticised:

Because it's also a social expectation. If they have all the flowers very nicely maintained and watered. And the next grave weed is growing and is completely dried down in summer time. And then they will say, oh, look at their living in poor condition and they're not even care for the grave their mother or father or sisters.

Besides the gardening work, emotional needs such as to remember and to maintain a connection with the dead were also acknowledged. Yet it is worth noting that those remarks usually came out at a later stage in the interviews, implying that more time was taken to reflect on the issue or an unconscious reluctance to discuss the relation between their work and their thoughts. At any rate we found that ideas of remembrance and continuing bonds are linked with the physical place in a multi-sided manner.

On one hand, the cemetery is viewed as a point to focus grief or a wish to communicate with the dead including talking with them, feeling their presence, praying for them and reflecting on life events. As Diane puts it,

Und, ja, wir sprechen, wir nehmen, dort ist dann Ruhe, dort sind große Bäume, es ist Ruhe, Stille. Alle sagen, auch meine Brüder sagen, es ist nicht das, dass er dort ist. Also, wir haben nicht das Gefühl, dass er dort liegt. Also, diesen, das ist halt einfach nur der Ort, oder sagen wir mal die Andockstelle, um in Kontakt zu treten.

However, the cemetery was not seen as the sole place to have such values. Many said that they could reflect at home or elsewhere. Yet when asked about the difference between remembering at home and at the graveside, they were unable to describe it clearly and would also find it difficult to conceive of an absence of a grave for one's parent in normal circumstances. It happened that the grave of Gerhard's father has to be removed the day after the interview took place. He began to lament the absence of a place of remembrance in the future:

It could be, could show in the future, I feel a little bit homeless because I still remember that place, but there's nothing there, there is another person being buried and then it becomes strange. You need to go there, it could be, but I have just to face the fact after 30 years according to the rules and regulations of that graveyard administration that has to be removed.

### 3.2 The Grave as a Connecting Point

In both cities, spontaneous visits are basically determined by the location of the grave or niche. Scheduled visits, however, seem to be motivated by quite different factors. For the Frankfurters, a scheduled visit is usually associated with the need to tend the grave. Few participants would go to the cemetery just because it is *Allerseelen* or *Totensonntag*, the traditional days to remember the dead in Christian culture. Conversely, the annual or biannual visit at *Qingming* or *Chongyang* is a deeply felt responsibility in Hong Kong. To come to the graveside at that special moment of the year is considered a familial obligation, while the everyday tending of the grave is not a must nor even necessary nowadays. In her attempt to interpret this visiting pattern according to festival times, Elizabeth Teather has made use of Mircea Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane:<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Based on the sociologist Anthony Giddens' notion of time and space, Teather drew an analogy between the grave and Eliade's *axis mundi* as presented in his work *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1959)

Qingming and Chongyang are “time out” from clock time and from industrial periodicities of the modern era, in that they reflect cosmic periodicities and a suspension of workplace commitments. What is more, they invite an integration of the past and the future with the present.<sup>92</sup>

Thus to see deserted cemeteries within or on the fringe of bustling Hong Kong does not imply that they are insignificant places. Quite the contrary. Because they are powerful, and, in a complex sense, polluted, spaces, they are avoided, except at the appropriate ritual times, when they will be thronged. Indeed, they also occupy a different world of time from that dictated by the Greenwich meridian: in Eliade’s (1959) terms, they occupy sacred time, which is infinitely repeatable, an ontological structure that is comforting because of its predictability.<sup>93</sup>

Within the framework of “time out” and “worlds apart”, connections to the dead especially during Qingming and Chongyang could be accentuated. As responses by our Chinese participants show, those festivals do have a specific meaning for the bereaved as the visit at that special time of the year are entirely separated from other activities in daily life. Because of the dead, paradoxically, they felt a sense of sacredness for the continuation of life at the graveside. As Ben described:

We are Chinese, we go there in order to offer sacrifices and remember the ancestors. That means when our parents have passed away, we have to go there to venerate them at Qingming.

It’s a very different from the domestic rituals. The scale of the domestic rituals is small. For example, offering a simple joss stick on the 1st or 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month in the lunar calendar, or on the date of birth or the date of death. It’s not a kind of proper

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<sup>92</sup> Elizabeth Teather, “Time Out and Worlds Apart: Tradition and Modernity Meet in the Time-space of the Gravesweeping Festivals of Hong Kong.” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 22.2(2001): 161.

<sup>93</sup> Teather, Elizabeth. “Themes from Complex Landscapes: Chinese Cemeteries and Columbaria in Urban Hong Kong.”, *Australian Geographical Studies* 36.1(1998): 34.

veneration. But in the cemetery it is another story. We can make it big, and the atmosphere there is intense. And we feel that although they have passed away, if their souls still exist, we want to let them see their children, a large crowd of us, are visiting them so that they would feel contented.

Therefore, it would be unfair to simply call cemeteries polluted spaces. Teather claimed that people are afraid of going to the cemetery and try to avoid contact with the departed family members except when crowds are around at festival times. Yet none of our participants in this study directly referred to a cemetery as polluted. Because a cemetery is the place where the remains of departed love ones are kept, during a grave visit the living and the dead are not seen as two opposing forces, be they yin and yang, or light and darkness. Furthermore, if the notion of liminality defined by Arnold van Gennep is considered, we find Teather's explanation less satisfactory. Pollution is a kind of danger associated with the move from "order to disorder, form to formlessness, life to death."<sup>94</sup> Danger, in Mary Douglas' terms, "lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable".<sup>95</sup> When a person suddenly becomes a motionless body or a pile of ashes, human remains are substance yet no longer the same substance as before. They are transformed, mysterious and tenuous. From death to burial it is a liminal phase in which the once lived is waiting to be totally transformed to the deceased. From this point of view, the danger of pollution would be more likely to occur during a funeral or a burial, rather than during a grave visit when everything has been settled. That means that if the concept of pollution must be employed, it would be more plausible to involve the movement of uninterred human remains, rather than the site where the remains are interred. There is a Chinese saying referring to interment to "be laid to rest" (入土為安).<sup>96</sup> This aptly reveals the significance of ending the liminal state.

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<sup>94</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 6.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>96</sup> It is similar to the German saying "Zur letzten Ruhe tragen" or "laid to rest" in English.

A cemetery need not to be considered dangerous or polluted during grave visits therefore. In effect, it may bear a neutral or even positive value for it can facilitate the connection of the living and the dead in the post-liminal state. Moreover, a cemetery in Hong Kong is usually well-located in view of Fengshui, an art involving the selection of auspicious places for the dead as well as for the living.<sup>97</sup> For a site to be auspicious it should be located in a valley or on a mountain side, and have a view of water. These are also criteria for the homes many seek. In Hong Kong space is so limited, it is not unusual for some of the most luxurious houses to overlook a cemetery. The cemeteries and adjacent residential towers and villas in the Pokfulam area are a good example. Thus we must distinguish values of the place itself from the values associated with different activities, and be aware that attributing the notion of pollution as a cause of visiting patterns according to festival times may be a premature conclusion.

In Germany, as mentioned before, scheduled visits are more likely to be linked with other commitments than with festival times. *Allerseelen* and *Totensonntag*, compared with their Chinese counterparts, seem to play a far less significant role in grave visits. Rather, it is the grave-tending which stands out as the strongest motivation. For example, Martha, who is now visiting her father's grave once or twice a month, expects that once her mother has passed away she will have to take over the duty now done by her mother and visit the grave more frequently. "Wenn meine Mutter weg ist, dann muss ich gucken." And taking care of the grave is a duty which cannot be avoided:

Pflege vom Grab. Ist in Deutschland sehr – das wird sehr intensiv in den kleinen Dörfern – hier, klein – wird da sehr genau geguckt auch, dass die Blumen schön sind. Es gibt eine soziale Kontrolle wie ah, wie schön und ah, wie schön, so.

Thus one can say the frequency of visits depends largely upon the

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<sup>97</sup> The art of Feng-shui (wind and water) is used to select the location of the dwelling places for both the living and the dead. By using *Lo-Ching* and *Almanac*, the ideal site and time for moving in could be found. With these divinational tools the locations in which positive *qi* is gathered can be identified and the path of the *sha-chi* (destructive energy) can be avoided. This is a means to adjust to the order of nature and to ensure the well-being of family members.

readiness of the bereaved to keep the grave up to the expectations of the departed, as well as that of the neighbourhood. Burying the departed in a cemetery close to their next of kin is generally preferred. In fact, it has been proposed that cemeteries be built in a place near the community instead of in isolated areas to facilitate regular visits by the family members, especially the elderly who are responsible for the grave.<sup>98</sup> From this perspective, a cemetery is both separated from the place of the living on one hand and incorporated into life of the living on the other. This idea, explained Gerhard Schmied, can be exemplified by the construction of the cemetery:

Der Umgang mit dem Tod und mit dem Toten, dem stets das Außergewöhnliche und Ungewöhnliche anhält, ist untrennbar außeralltäglichen Welten verbunden. Hier lässt sich eine Brücke zu einem Detail vieler Friedhöfe schlagen. Es fallen oft die sorgfältig gestalteten Eingänge zu Friedhöfen auf. Es sind in der Regel große Tore. Falls Gitter vorhanden sind, sind sie kunsthandwerklich ausgearbeitet. Auf jeden Fall stellen sie einen eigenen, meist imposanten Baukörper dar. Das signalisiert auch den Besuchern: Du kommst jetzt in eine spezielle Welt, in eine Wirklichkeit, in der eigene Maßstäbe gelten.<sup>99</sup>

As discussed earlier, the paradox of experiencing both connectedness and distinction in a separated space is central to cemetery visits. Walter described his experience as follows:

Ja, und dann hab ich das Grab eben von meiner Urgroßmutter besucht und – das hab ich so zum Anlass genommen, über viele Dinge nachzudenken, die es einfach nicht mehr gibt. Also, so diese ganze familiäre Situation.

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<sup>98</sup> „Bei neu anzulegenden Friedhöfen sollte darauf geachtet werden, dass sie nicht zu weit außerhalb der Ortschaft liegen. Dies hat auch ganz praktische Gründe: Gerade ältere Menschen sollten nach Möglichkeit den Friedhof zu Fuß erreichen können.“ In Die deutschen Bischöfe Nr. 81. *Tote begraben und Trauernde trösten: Bestattungskultur im Wandel aus katholischer Sicht* (Bonn: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz, 2005), 54.

<sup>99</sup> Schmied, 97.

Returning to the framework of “time out” and “worlds apart”, we find that although the participants in Frankfurt are not scheduling visits according to festival times, visits can still be seen as a break from ordinary time, just as in the Chinese examples. Furthermore, while there is a great difference in the prevailing method of disposal in each city, we find few discrepancies between the feelings related to visiting a grave and a niche in general. Our study shows the feelings recounted by participants are quite similar, whether they are standing by a columbarium or at a gravesite.

Intriguingly, both sides maintain a strong sense of appropriateness related to decorations and gifts. For the West, the concept of a garden, or the ideal of having a house with a decent garden, as commented by Gerhard Schmied and Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou, is of utmost concern.<sup>100</sup> Yet this ideal is often economically conditioned. Konrad adds:

Also because it shows not flowers but just the very simple green plants and the stone, a nice stone, a natural stone, I wanted it, and because like this polished, I think they are awful, so ugly, I don't know. We've chosen natural stone, and it was very nice, just carved make it half of the stone to make it quiet nice. It was an easy way. And we chose this, green plant to cover everything. And we go there to give some water and in really hot summer that's it. That's it was not totally perfect, so because when it happened I was still a student I didn't have too much money.

For participants in Hong Kong, similar financial concerns are found when they prepare the gifts for offering. Yung said,

Paper gold can be purchased in a ready-made package. But that can be very costly. Paper money and candles can be costly too. Instead, we can buy a pile of paper gold in sheet form and fold

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<sup>100</sup> Schmied said: „Die Verrichtungen am Grab sind an Standards der Haus-Gartenflege orientiert... So sind die Grabanlagen wohl gepflegte Häuser der Toten mit ihren Vorgärten, die den Verstorbenen zu deren Lebzeiten angemessen erschienen waeren“ (87). See also “The Grave as Home and Garden” in Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou, 81-104.

them by ourselves, though it would be very time-consuming. For other tailor-made packages, they are arranged according to different price categories. One has to know beforehand how much one would like to pay, say, 200 or 300 dollars.

The offering is thus often the balance between the ideal and practical considerations. Calculation does not necessarily mean selfishness or indifference, we cannot judge the attitude of participants simply based on the elaborateness of rituals or decoration. When alternative ways of remembrance are available, a simple gravesite or a simplified set of rituals may signal a change of the method of remembrance rather than that the dead have been forgotten. That means a review of changes or variations from recognised forms must not focus only on things that have been left out. Central to the discussion should be the newly added, which may have identical effects on the participants. We will return to this topic in relation to secularisation, globalisation and trends in chapter six.

All told, we find a key distinction between motivations behind the visitation patterns. In Germany, to keep a grave in good shape would probably be the primary concern while the arrangement of a gravesite appears to imply the ideal of home and garden. With this ideal in mind, the Frankfurters would feel uneasy if they cannot keep the grave in accordance with the socially-accepted standard. Therefore scheduled visits are required to ensure the grave is adorned with seasonal flowers. Mostly, this responsibility falls upon one or two members of the family rather than professional gardeners. In Hong Kong, however, a garden is a luxurious idea even for the living. With space at a premium,<sup>101</sup> we rarely find decorated gravesites like those common in Frankfurt. Thus the obligation is not to embellish the tiny niche or grave, but to come at the right moment. The Chinese may feel guilty if they could not be present at the gravesite

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<sup>101</sup> During the colonial era, as stated by Teather, the British “had to cope with the disposal of the dead in a limited area of just over 1000 square kilometres during a period in which the Territory’s population has risen from 1.8 million (1947) to a little over six million in 1997. Managing the task of providing for the dead has involved not only overturning traditional practice — persuading the Hong Kong Chinese to adopt cremation rather than coffin burial —but also accepting pragmatically the southern Chinese practice of second burial (exhumation after six to seven years, a period long enough to allow the flesh to decay), followed either by cremation or by storage of the cleaned bones in a pottery urn (*jinta*). Both of these practices are space-saving options.” (1998, 22).

during festivals. While the cemetery is seen as the focal point of remembrance, would this distinction in the acknowledged distinction imply a different perception of life after death? Or are they just different manifestations of comparable ideas?

Clearly, as stated in Philip Bachelor's investigation of how people give meaning to and draw value from this observance, grave visits are essentially a "high-participatory value-laden expressive activity."<sup>102</sup> While a grave tends to mean much more than a spot for the disposal of human remains for the visitors, a visit may be driven by a combination of complex motivations. Above all, visits and changing patterns of visits are able to tell us more about the ideas of posthumous existence, for the grave signals not only the end of one's life, but also the expectation of those who are still alive. Hence the grave could be viewed as a place for the dead as well a place for the living. And there is always a deeper dimension linked with visits. A clear example is the wish to talk to the departed. This wish may indicate a longing for a continued bond with the dead and reveal the visitor's imagination of another world. On the other hand, as Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou have suggested, "although the tending of the grave plot has its roots in cultural expectations and practices, its meanings, experiences and interpretations are variable over time and from individual to individual."<sup>103</sup> Beyond the aesthetic appreciation of nature and the social pressure concerning family responsibility, it is certain the act of grave-tending says more. Perhaps tending a grave is a way of showing that visitors want to carry on or to start taking care of the departed? Otherwise, who would care about the appearance of the grave or the beauty of the site?

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<sup>102</sup> Philip Bachelor, *Sorrow and Solace: The Social World of the Cemetery* (Amityville, N.Y.: Baywood, 2004), 170.

<sup>103</sup> Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou, 62.



## 4 IMAGINING A NEW LIFE

### 4.1 Ideas about Life after Death

A. Hong Kong

B. Frankfurt

### 4.2 The Interpretation of Hope

What comes after death? The Swiss theologian Kurt Marti has given us some clues in his poem:

*was kommt nach dem tod?  
nach dem tod  
kommen die rechnungen  
für sarg begräbnis und grab  
was kommt nach dem tod?  
nach dem tod  
kommen die wohnungssucher  
und fragen ob die wohnung erhältlich  
was kommt nach dem tod?  
nach dem tod  
kommen die grabsteingeschäfte  
und bewerben sich um den auftrag  
was kommt nach dem tod?  
nach dem tod  
kommt die lebensversicherung  
und zahlt die versicherungssumme  
was kommt nach dem tod?*<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> From *Leichenreden* (Zürich: Nagel & Kimche, 2001).

Following the death of a loved one, we are caught in bureaucratic hassles rather than reminiscences. Is that all? In the end, the question is left open. But we should not forget that the practicalities such as the selection of a disposal method may mirror the views on death and life after death. To many of the participants, our conversations were the first time they had ever been asked to think about grave-related matters and speak on the topic of death. It is clear that if a direct question on ideas about an afterlife were posed, then “ah, no, I have no idea” was very likely to be the answer. Through the discussions on what they did and are doing for the dead, however, they were able to elaborate their ideas and give some hints about the underlying motivations. Instead of presenting a systematically formulated view, they usually tried to tentatively describe what their imagination saw. But lack of a clear vision does not mean they do not have some ideas about what happens after death. Perhaps seemingly contradictory comments simply reveal different layers of thought. So what does come after death?

#### 4.1 Ideas about Life after Death

##### A. Hong Kong

Many participants said they go to the cemetery because they have to see their departed parents. This is really a semi-figurative way of speaking however. Their parents are not believed to be bound to the cemetery, which is just where their physical remains are located. The existence in the next world is projected by and large as a continuation of this life, partly connected with and partly free from the grave. In broad term, one could say a cemetery is a connecting point between the living and the spirit of the dead intermediated by the presence of remains in the grave or niche. This idea was exhibited by attitudes regarding offerings during the visits.

It is fairly common for participants to offer commodities they believe the dead can make use of in the new dwelling place. Besides joss money and joss sticks, which are deemed the basics for sustaining one’s living in the afterlife,

papier-mâché food and drink, houses and cars are also popular offerings. One participant described the details as follows:

We have to admit that as Chinese we have to carry things out in a Chinese way, that is, to offer joss sticks, burning joss money and mock gold bars, and clothes. In those packages there are some summer and winter clothes, suits, shoes, combs and telephones, to name but a few. Everything's there. You don't even need to open and examine the items. But of course, you can add some extra gold bars to it.

The provision of both summer and winter clothing, as shown in the above example, indicates that death is not regarded as entering a static state. The other world is not a formless void. The departed still have to undergo different time and seasons as we do, with unchanged needs. As illustrated earlier in Sandy's choice of a gift for his father, the personal preferences of the departed and their previous undertakings are also taken into consideration when making a decision. Nonetheless, even visitors who are caring and attentive do not believe they can control the outcome, or the efficacy of the offering. Lisa added:

Frankly speaking, I always tell my kids, if you do not respect your parents and provide good food for them when they are still alive, what's the point of bringing a whole roast pig over there when they have died? They would not be able appreciate it. Therefore my visit is relatively simple for I have gone through all these and I am already in another stage of life.

Sharing the same position, Ben said:

Before she passed away, my mom often said, what we did for the ancestors was actually a show for the people still alive. Can the dead really obtain what we give them? We have no idea at all. A pompous funeral is nothing more than an ostentatious show. Would a coffin that costs several million dollars be of help to the dead?

Intriguingly, doubt about the efficacy of the rituals does not preclude the hope for a better life in the next world. On one hand, survivors are not sure if the rituals will help the deceased to settle down or ease possible hardships in the underworld. They must ask the departed to “come up” and receive the offerings burnt, though the packages are already addressed properly. On the other hand, they would very much like to portray the new dwelling place as a paradise free from burdens and danger, with the likelihood of reunion with family and friends, and the continuity of personal relationship. Perhaps the popular phrase “to have peace of mind” (但求心安) would be an appropriate annotation for this paradox. Kelly said, “I’d try my best to make myself feel comfortable with the situation, for example, to prepare as many joss money and gold bars as possible, and to make offerings regularly.” In other words, they prefer to do it even though they cannot give any explanation. As Lam explained:

I am not inclined to believe the usefulness of those liberating rituals. But I think they will let the living have peace in mind. I find it normal and I won’t challenge them. I won’t tell my mom that this is not useful. I won’t. Probably it makes no difference for doing or not doing. Most important is to remember and to care for the dead. If you just forget them after making those offerings, it’d be better not to do anything. It will be a waste of time. If you remember them always, it really would make you feel at ease after doing so.

And if visitors decide to perform certain rituals and make offerings, they will try to stick as closely to convention as they can. “I will let them know how to do that properly. You have to do everything the best you can. Follow the rules of the game. Otherwise don’t do that at all”, Chi affirmed. “It is the proper performance of the rites” as James Watson, a leading scholar in Chinese death rituals, put aptly, “that matters most to everyone concerned.” Spontaneously, “they knew when something was performed incorrectly, but they could not provide ready explanations (in words), for what was being expressed,

communicated, or symbolized.”<sup>105</sup> That even means that no codified practice or generally accepted norms exist. Thus one can assess the appropriateness of rituals, despite variations in interpretation and expectation. As another ritual expert, Gilbert Lewis, concluded: “The value of ritual lies partly in this ambiguity of the active and passive for creator, performer and beholder.”<sup>106</sup> This ambiguity, probably, is also the source of the transformation, at least for the mourners.

It may be true that participants are not keen on searching for the meanings or origin of the practices. What they can control is only the proper performance. One might call this a pragmatic, result-oriented approach. Yet Watson’s later claim suggesting that “the internal state of the participants, their personal beliefs and predispositions, are largely irrelevant” must be read with caution.<sup>107</sup> What he wanted to emphasise might only be the irrelevance of the search for a set of correct or orthodox beliefs in the case of practising death rituals in a Chinese context. However, we should never ignore the deeper layers of meanings for the participants themselves which could possibly involve inclinations such as a longing for transformation. From my observation and discussions, I am convinced there is a prevalent mentality of “rather believe it to be true than not” (寧可信其有, 不可信其無) as opposed to an intrinsic ambiguity of the ritual. And the recognition of this mentality may help us understand the phenomenon of practising without inquiring. Nevertheless, it must be added this mentality is not connected with the idea of manipulation of the bones, which has been identified by previous studies, notably Maurice Freedman’s.

But the ambiguity of the buried ancestor (as distinct from the ancestor in his tablet) enters at this point: he is not only a soul. Discarnate and awesome, but also a corpse – yin. As a set of bones, an ancestor is no longer in command of his descendants; he is at

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<sup>105</sup> Watson, 5-6.

<sup>106</sup> Gilbert Lewis, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Rituals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 38.

<sup>107</sup> Watson, 6.

their disposal. They no longer worship him; he serves their purpose.<sup>108</sup>

He suggested that the bodily remains of the dead are used for the sake of well-being of the offspring through Fengshui. Visits and offerings are merely a means to acquire benefits. This kind of logic, however, was not found among our respondents.

Returning to the question of the whereabouts of the dead, we found most responses are rather ambiguous. As Lisa said, “I’ve never thought seriously about where he is. I suppose he is in another world. But where is he now actually? I really don’t know.” While talking about the nature of existence she commented, “In fact, there is nothing left when one died. I wonder if he will really meet his ancestors again. Well, I don’t think so.” Similarly, Lam said,

I think I can’t tell what a soul is, neither is there evidence to reject the existence of the soul. Though I have never seen it, maybe it is around us. But my mom has no doubt about it. She believes that the soul of my dad is still in our realm. She has tried to talk to my dad through a medium. Not only once, but several times. Perhaps she has a lot to ask or to tell him.

Later on he made a remark on his doubt. “Dead is dead. Yes, it’s cruel. When one died he would not exist anymore, isn’t it?” Others would try to clarify their ideas by referring to psychological needs. “Actually I’ve never really contemplated on it. Even if I said that I believe he is now living in another place, it is only an idea to make myself happy,” explained Sandy. Besides demonstrating a sense of helplessness to find a clue to that mystery, Amy provided an alternative view: “I believe in Jesus Christ. That means we will go to heaven.” Yet she remarked later: “Actually it doesn’t matter, I just want to be with my mum.”

It is worth noting since cases of abnormal death are deliberately excluded from this study, that elaborate rituals performed at or after the funeral to liberate the deceased from a bad death were not reported. In spite of this, as some

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<sup>108</sup> Freedman, 87.

recounted during the interview, the departed had to be led to a resting place, be that a grave or niche, by proper rituals so that they could enjoy their afterlife comfortably.<sup>109</sup> As far as Chi remembered, the spirit of his father, which is somehow impersonated in a butterfly, would still be around the house until all the related rituals were performed:

Yes, I felt that he was there. Maybe he cannot see me, but I think he is there. Sometimes you just cannot explain the situation. For example, after he had passed away there came a butterfly staying in our place. No matter in what kind of circumstances, it would never fly away. We cannot understand why. But once the funeral had been done, and all the related rituals completed, the butterfly was gone.

Kelly claimed the state of death is more of a memory, but she also emphasised the importance of quickly finding a place for her departed father:

My mum called one of the masters immediately and told him that my dad has just passed away. He said that we have to organize the things quickly, go to the Yuen Yuen Institute<sup>110</sup> and set up a site for my dad so that he would have a place to rest. In this way he didn't have to wander around, while in that period he couldn't come home and didn't have a permanent place to stay.

In a sense, their comments tend to support the interpretation of Mircea Eliade. Through death rituals, he inferred, a new identity of the departed was created at the beginning of a new existence. "The soul must be guided to the new abode and be virtually integrated into the community of the inhabitants," which is

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<sup>109</sup> It has to be added that the rituals intended to direct a normal spirit to attain a proper and peaceful state is not the same as those for pacifying the malevolent spirits. For example, "Passing the golden or silver bridge" mentioned by Kelly is a general ritual for all deceased aiming at leading the spirit to the underworld properly. It is not performed as a means to pacify malevolent spirits.

<sup>110</sup> The Yuen Yuen Institute is the only temple in Hong Kong dedicated to all of the three religions, Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

in effect “a new modality of being”.<sup>111</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, we could not find definite answers on the topic of existence after death while broadly speaking, most participants were actually shifting between two seemingly paradoxical ideas, namely the continued existence of the dead and the total extinguishment of a person after death during their interviews. Although they are not concerned about the ontological aspect of the nature of soul or other possible form of non-material existence after death, they are aware of the inconsistency. Admitted Amy,

Oh, yes, it sounds self-contradictory. If you say there is nothing called a soul, it seems unconvincing. It must be another world for the dead people. But, I don't know how to say, for me, if one died, actually there will be nothing left. That's why I mentioned earlier: it is of no use to perform the rituals, he doesn't exist anymore, there's nothing. When there's nothing, the rituals are meaningless.

Imagining a transformed existence, Joey hopes that she will be able to travel around freely after death,

Perhaps my soul will be flying around, that means I can be anywhere, in different space. I can still care about my friends and family. It is not well founded. But I will project a beautiful new world, rather than a hell with fire burning all the time. It's unbearable.

Conversely, life after death may also be regarded as space-sensitive. Lisa continued that she prefers an individual niche to a family niche while she would like to have a better living condition in the cemetery:

Oh, a niche is damn cheap, why do I have to share it with another person? I would rather enjoy the whole place myself comfortably. Two urns placed together in one niche would be too crowded. Both he and I would live more comfortably. Anyway, we are all in

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<sup>111</sup> Mircea Eliade, “Mythologies of Death: An Introduction” in *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions. Essays in Comparative Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 35-36.

Tseung Kwan O... and there should be nothing in front of the niche to hinder the view of the departed. The best position includes the view of sea and mountain... And the higher the location is the better.

In addition, the topic of reward and punishment, a key notion in traditional Chinese culture, was also touched upon. Ben said:

This concept should be promoted, no matter whether you'd call it superstition or not. In Buddhism, the cycle of cause and effect is underscored. What you did in this world is the effect of the life before. You can enjoy a good life because your previous life is good. This is the effect.

Kelly described herself as a "rather traditional Chinese". "But I am not afraid of going to hell after death. I believe either my dad would not be there since he had done so many good works." More often, however, reward and punishment was interpreted in a this-worldly manner without involving a repetitive cycle of rebirth or suffering. As Sandy pointed out, "I'd not look at punishment in a postmortal sense. I believe that if there is retribution, it should come in this life. It's not something like be reincarnated into a pig in the next life." Similarly, Lam described his opposition to the traditional view of retribution:

Those concepts were pounded into me by my parents when I was young. "Don't do bad things, or you will go to hell when you die." This is just in me. But I think, as mentioned before, it is more important to let my children know you have to be good to others, then everybody will be happier. Perhaps you will still go to hell when you die, but we don't know. It's out of our control.

In short, most participants tend to orientate themselves towards a good and beautiful afterlife regardless of their religious backgrounds. A relatively strong hope for the continued well-being of an individual is often maintained. Such conception appears to reflect some traces of Pure Land Buddhism in which a "Western Paradise" is anticipated. Otherwise, phrases like "to enter heaven" or

“to be with the heavenly father” were uttered explicitly only by participants of the Christian faith.

Re-examining seemingly contradictory positions such as switching between claiming one enters a void and desiring a continuing bond, we should first distinguish two possible meanings of the word “nothing.” Do they mean “non-existence” or just “not to be there”? Or, what will still be there and what will not? This will then lead us to the question of nature of soul. It has been suggested that every individual is thought to possess more than one soul, numbering from two to ten according to different interpretations. But how are they distributed in the eyes of participants of rituals? The fact is that participants had hardly ever tried to formulate the idea of souls in a systematic or conscious way. This finding coincides with the distinction between the analytic perspective and the action perspective made by Stevan Harrell. Harrell noticed that the Chinese term *ling-hun* carries an array of meanings that does not entirely correspond to the usual meanings of ‘soul’. For ordinary people, however, the number or the nature of soul is of little importance:

So while it is undeniably true that some Chinese folk believers know about the distinction between *hun* and *po* on a theoretical level, it seems to fit badly, if at all, with the way they think about ‘souls’ acting or behaving. So we must reject the idea of two ‘souls’ as a basically analytical construct which has little bearing on the behaviour of folk believers.<sup>112</sup>

In other words, ritual participants are not concerned about whether there are multiple souls or a state of multilocation of one soul. Alternatively, the essence of rituals appears to adhere to the relationship with the dead rather than an ontological existence after death. On the conception of paradoxical multilocation, Mircea Eliade has made a succinct remark:

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<sup>112</sup> Stevan Harrell, “The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 38.3 (1979), 522.

This paradoxical process discloses a nostalgia and perhaps a secret hope of attaining a level of meaning where life and death, body and spirit, reveal themselves as aspects or dialectical stages of one ultimate reality. Indirectly, this implies a depreciation of the condition of a pure spirit”<sup>113</sup>

## B. Frankfurt

Unanimously, none of the participants claimed that the dead were confined to the grave. The grave is not seen as a cage or actual dwelling place. For example, Martha emphasised that the body is like an empty shell and the grave is just the site accommodate the shell.

Für mich ist es so, das Grab, mein Vater, als der gestorben war, dann war das nur mehr eine Hülle, der Körper war, da war keine Seele mehr drin.

Diese, diese Hülle wird in die Erde und ich hab jetzt nicht so dieses Gefühl, ich muss da hin, weil so, nicht die Emotionen dort irgendwie für mich so wichtig sind, sondern einfach mal gucken.

In a similar vein, Diane denied that her father is now living in the grave. She suggested that the grave is not for him, but for her mother to have a place to talk him, while their relationship was not interrupted by death:

Also nicht so, dass er dort bleibt. Das wäre ja a kostengünstiger oder billiger oder so, nein, er musste hierher, weil meine Mutter einen Ort braucht, und das ist das Grab, also für sie, sie braucht das Grab, um in Zwiesprache zu treten mit meinem Vater.

The dilemma is, if the grave is not for the dead, why embellish it? What are flowers for? As mentioned in the previous chapter, they have ascribed the act of tending and embellishing to the fulfillment of social norm. Here we notice other

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<sup>113</sup> Eliade 1976, 42.

implications on interpersonal relationship. Offering flowers, as Kuno interpreted, is similar to presenting a gift to a friend. „Wie, wie Lebenden, man schenkt jemand als Freude. Ja, einfach für die Schönheit. Für die Ästhetik.“ His analogy indicates that a continued relationship with the dead is cherished, though they may not be able to appreciate them. „Nein Es ist nur – Respekt für die Toten. Aber die können die nicht nehmen.“ The presentation of bouquets on special occasions would be a vivid example to illustrate this position. As Emile recounted,

Und es ist auch so, wenn, mein Vater, meine Mutter Geburtstag hat, dann kommt immer ein Blumenstrauß extra aufs Grab. Das – ja, einfach so. Oder an Muttertag. Für meine Mutter an Muttertag, es ist auch hier sehr verbreitet. Mag nicht überall vielleicht sein. Die, die Grabkultur.

Although she is not so sure whether the departed can enjoy the beauty, Emile believed they would not simply disappear into thin air as long as they are remembered:

Schauen vielleicht. Ja. Obwohl – weiß ich, also, da will ich jetzt gar nichts dazu sagen ob sie die noch sehen, aber – ich denke halt, es gibt ja bei uns in Deutschland, so ein Sprichwort, das heißt: Tot ist nur der, der vergessen wird. Also endgültig tot, ja? So – einfach weg.

Nevertheless, the dead are not only seen as a subject of remembrance. The relationship could be mutual. For Paul, a loving response from his father is expected. “I mean I don't know whether it is quite believable. But I wish him to be comfortable and looking down at me with pleasure. Not with agony, but with pleasure.”

Since none of our participants is a theologian or a religious expert, it is not surprising to find their answers were not given in a theological or systematic manner. They all grew up and currently reside in Germany, nevertheless, their Christian background is noticeable when they referred to life after death as

entering the Kingdom of God or being together with God. Emile explained

Ja. Gut, also, ich denke dann in der Liturgie vom, von der Trauerliturgie, ist auch drin, dass wir beten, Herrgott, nimm den Verstorbenen auf in Dein Reich. Das, ja, das kann ich beten. Ja, das ist dann, sagen wir mal, das kann ich dann nachvollziehen, dass wir auch das nachbeten. Nimm den Verstorbenen auf in Deine Herrlichkeit, in Dein Reich oder was.

Those who maintain a closer tie with the church are more likely to depict their ideas within the framework of Christian teachings explicitly. But traces are still visible among those who are no longer church-goers or church members. At any rate, most of them acknowledged their helplessness to comprehend what comes after death. The image of the next world was far from concrete. Knowing it is impossible to give a definite answer about how it is like in the world to come, Helga admitted,

Ja, die Christen meinen natürlich auch, es gibt ein Leben nach dem Tode und ich glaub, also, das glaube ich auch in mir. Das hab ich halt von Kind auf auch gelernt im christlichen Glauben: Es gibt ein Leben nach dem Tod. Aber ich weiß es nicht, ich weiß es nicht.

Ich kann mir nur was vorstellen, ich kann was fühlen, ich kann was denken, aber ich weiß nichts.

Others realised our imagination may be limited by the conceptualization of this world and that earthly conceptions may not be applicable in the unknown realm. Gisela explained,

Ich denke mal, man kann sich das nicht vorstellen, weil das alles irdische Begriffe sind. Und diese irdischen Begriffe, die möchte ich nicht übersetzen. Ich kann nicht für die Zukunft, für die Ewigkeit kann ich die irdischen Begriffe nicht anwenden. Das ist für mich, ich kann's nicht. Der Priester spricht von einem schönen Leben nach dem Tod. Ja, ein schönes Leben nach dem Tod, vielleicht kann man es vergleichen, mit viel Licht, viel Sonne, ein

Wohlgefühl – wohl fühlen – Zufriedenheit. Das sind aber Begriffe, man kann dieses Leben hier nicht übertragen für später, ja? Das ist alles nur gefühlsmäßig übertragbar.

Though some are rather skeptical about the possibility of any form of afterlife, almost all were inclined to believe it would be better to have some kind of existence after death rather than simply vanishing. Konrad, after explaining how unrealistic it is to believe in a life after death, said finally: “but I hope that there's something.”

Then if I think about this too much, I'm afraid that there's nothing. No life after death whatsoever. But even that wouldn't be too scary. That's what we have and that's our life. Because we don't even know. But I hope that there's something. So it's not so kind of sad, it's good to have your life afterwards, to be individual, to take decision, so it would be nice extent or to go on somehow.

Similarly, deep in her heart, Martha does not want to believe death is the end of everything. Something has to be there to make life meaningful:

Aber ich würde es mir wünschen, ich könnte daran glauben, dass mit dem Tod nicht alles zu Ende ist, das finde ich eigentlich schön.

Ja, ja, auf jeden Fall. Das finde ich schön, wenn man das glauben kann, dass zwar der Körper stirbt, aber dass dann die Seele irgendwo hin schwindet und das ist doch sehr wunderbar.

Gerhard, who seemed very cynical in the beginning, also expressed hope for a posthumous existence:

I myself I am very suspicious, or very doubtful whether there is an existence after death, but all the time I am on the funeral I get more I become more convinced, was sure yes if you look back on the person's life and how it were, and now the ceremony holds there must be there must be something after. There is I think a

belief that I as a person that will be very strongly, explained and also believed at funerals.

So, to your question what I might thinking what will happen after my worldly existence I hope there is something, but it's just a hope. And that hope sometimes is very weak, and sometimes that hope is a little bit more strong.

That is not the end. That is a kind of ending of worldly existence and a pass to another existence which is not very sure but it is made believed and I think if you would ask any participant of a funeral gathering if you believe on existence after death, 80% will say yes. If you ask the people on the road the same question, only 10% nowadays will answer yes, I assume, or I believe or I am sure on an existence after the funeral the existence after the death.

But there is one exception, Walter, who maintained an agnostic attitude throughout:

Also, ich habe keine konkrete Vorstellung was das ist. Ich glaube nicht an ein Leben nach dem Tod. Ich würde es aber auch nicht bestreiten, dass es so ist. Also, ich bin, man nennt so was glaube ich einen Agnostiker.

Ich glaube also nicht, dass wenn ich gestorben bin, ich dann mit meinen Angehörigen da sozusagen so eine Art Wiedersehen feiern könnte. Also, dass glaube ich eigentlich nicht.

Taken as a whole, they were unsure about what life after death might be like and at times uncertain if there even was an afterlife. Is it possible they reject certain outmoded portrayals about life after death, but not the hope for an existence thereafter? If so, what is their expectation?

Generally speaking, heaven is regarded as a place better than here and now. As expressed by many others, Helga assumed heaven is flawless:

Ein perfekter Ort? Ja, das glaube ich schon, dass das perfekt da ist. Also, ich stelle mir diesen Himmel als guten Ort her. Und denke dass, also, ich bin, mir kommt überhaupt nicht die Idee, dass das da oben in diesem Himmel schlecht zugehen könnte.

While God is believed to be in charge of the world to come, she assumed that who is most merciful and omnipotent would not let the dead fall into the hands of the devil:

ich denk halt, dass dieser Gott ein sehr großzügiger, für mich, also, für mich ist ja Gott, das ist nicht unbedingt der, der in der Kirche ist, sondern den ich mir vorstelle einfach ein, hier in der Natur, überall, ein, denke ich, ein großzügiger – großzügiger, liebevoller Gott, der viel verzeiht. Und deshalb glaube ich nicht, dass ein Mensch nach seinem Tod zu irgendwelchen bösen Teufeln kommt, das glaube ich nicht.

For some, like Kuno, the presence of God is not at the core in their conception. Rather, he treated the reunion of friends as the main attribute in the next world. „Ich weiß, in Zukunft werde ich auch einmal sterben. Das macht mich traurig, aber ich weiß, ich habe schon Freunde im Tod. Habe ich schon Freunde. Oder Bekannte. Ich werde erwartet.“ More often, the divine and the human co-exist, though the transferrability of different aspects of life may cause some frustration. John revealed his bewilderment:

It's really hard to define, maybe that, that's just the relation of thing. But I do believe in eternal life. I do believe in, meeting God face to face, And I believe in, in the Kingdom of God. That starts here, that certainly goes beyond our lives and which I hope to be a part. I don't think that, now there's all kind of doctrines in the tradition but it also means something emotionally. And what I am not sure about is actually that I believe its consequences, identity after death. You know, I don't know exactly whether it's going to be me would be around. Ja, I mean it's said in the Bible for

example that, you know you marry in your life. You don't marry, you are not known about to the other person and afterlife, if our identity will continue to be the same as it was before. Let's say we'd supposed still be married. Or we would still have your opportunity to marry after death which we didn't. There's certainly a great degree of fuzziness and uncertainty about this whole thing, and that's makes one of this few answers and make it of, but I certainly believe that, that life in one way or in another will continue or that will go, ja, that we will somehow one before the other be around afterwards.

Regardless of their degree of emphasis on God, the representations of judgement, reward and punishment was generally excluded from the portrayals of heaven. Despite their familiarity with the images depicted in arts and literature, the concept of hell and purgatory was interpreted in an abstract way by most of them. „Wenn Du mich fragst, hab ich an so was wie die Hölle oder Fegefeuer, glaube ich, dass die Menschen, so was wie sich selbst in einen Zustand bringen, der es verhindert, in diesem liebevollen Reich zu sein,“ explained Maria. In Gisela's terms, it is a state being separated from God:

Daran glaube ich nicht. Ich denke, Fegefeuer bedeutet eine Entfernung von Gott. Dieses, Dasein, diese Zufriedenheit bei Gott zu sein, ist nicht so vollkommen, wie wenn sie direkt bei Gott wären. Und eine Hölle bedeutet, äh, Wegsein von Gott. Eine schmerzliche, eine schmerzhaft empfindung zu haben, nicht bei Gott sein zu können. Getrennt. Für mich ist das nur so ein Spiel – ein Beispiel, ein Bild. Weil die Menschen früher konnten ja – meistens nicht lesen und bekamen das übermittelt, ja, mit Bildern oder Beschreibungen.

Emile shared a similar argument:

Ich denke einfach, dieses – ich bin also ganz streng katholisch. Schon immer – von Kindheit, mein Mann auch genauso. Und ich

denke, Fegefeuer ist nicht so, wie wir das vermittelt bekamen, sondern das ist ein Zustand, ein bisschen weg von Gott. Zum Beispiel Menschen, die – was man immer früher gesagt hat, Hölle – ich weiß es nicht, also, ich denke, das ist einfach ein Zustand, der Gottferne. Von Gott weg.

Neither did Gerhard believe in the existence of an intermediate state. “Fegefeuer means a period of being cleaned from sins. That I cannot believe in at all. If there is a kind of need of forgiving my ill-doings in that world then it must be done or it will be done by the mercy of God if there is such a God.”

At this point, we find that forgiveness is usually regarded as a crucial element in life after death. Thus in Gisela’s understanding, petition for the dead may be useless:

Wissen Sie, manchmal denke ich, wenn die Verstorbenen, also wenn unsere Toten vor das Angesicht Gottes treten, dann bekommen die – dann, im Angesicht Gottes – Vergebung für das, was sie vielleicht falsch gemacht haben, und haben schon die ewige Seligkeit erreicht. Das heißt also, sie brauchen unsere Gebete nicht mehr. So denke ich manchmal.

Most accepted that theoretically even the most wicked could be forgiven. For Walter, it is inconceivable that one has to be punished after death:

Also, wenn, aber ich hab selbst das Gefühl, ich, also, nehmen wir einen bestimmten Verbrecher, nehmen wir Hitler oder so irgendjemand. Wenn der tot ist, der ist doch also, wofür soll der dann noch bestraft werden, der ist doch tot. Also, ich kann mir das irgendwie vorstellen, dass jetzt der da irgendwie so in so einem Extrakämmerchen sitzt und schmoren muss. Für seine ganzen Untaten. Das kann ich mir nicht vorstellen. Also, ich glaub das einfach nicht.

Also using Hitler as an example, Emile admitted her struggles to believe in this idea:

Obwohl – also, einen, das denke ich immer, das habe ich schon ein paar mal auch bei unserem Pfarrer mal so im Gespräch erwähnt, – Sie, Ihnen ist bekannt, wer Hitler war? Oder noch so, da waren ja noch so welche, die so da. Da, habe ich auch schon unserem Pfarrer gesagt, da wünsche ich, dass es eine Hölle gibt, damit dieser Hitler reinkommt, weil der so schlimme Sachen gemacht hat, ja? Also, diese. Obwohl auch dann unser Pfarrer sagt, kann man trotzdem nicht sagen, es kann wirklich sein, dass der Herrgott in der letzten Sekunde noch, gesagt hat, tut es Dir Leid? Weiß ich nicht.

Besides describing their imagery of heaven directly, the participants have also spoken on the topic of body and soul during our discussion on disposal methods, especially in connection with the acceptability of cremation. For example, Martha expressed that since the essence of a person is already separated at the time of death, the body is just some material remains. Therefore, the method is unimportant to her:

Ja, sonst ist mir – ich denk, wenn ich tot bin, dann ist mir das eigentlich dann egal, ob ich im Körper in der Erde liege oder verbrannt bin. Also, ich hab Freunde, die haben gesagt also sie haben jemanden – also, Frau und Mann – sie haben das schon lange geregelt, sie wollen nicht in die Erde und von den Mäusen gefressen werden. Ich denke mir, das ist mir doch egal – ich merk's ja dann auch nicht – ob mich die Mäuse fressen oder ich verbrenne, das ist ja dann egal.

Walter also claimed that when he dies it would not matter if he is buried or cremated. On the other hand, he believed cremation is somehow unpleasant and cruel:

Für mich! Ach weißt du, ist mir eigentlich egal. Ich finde das nicht wichtig. Also, mein Körper ist tot. Und der ist auch nicht mehr da. Also, ob ich den – mir wäre es – also, wenn ich einen

Angehörigen verlieren würde, mir wäre es am sympathischsten, ihn zu beerdigen. Also, eine Erdbestattung zu machen. Weil dieses – dieser Akt des Verbrennens – ich weiß nicht, mir ist das irgendwie unsympathisch.

In a similar vein, Maria assumed that the body may somehow still have sensations and feelings. „Deshalb möchte ich gerne begraben werden, aber eigentlich auch nicht, weil, da kommen ja Würmer. Also, eigentlich, Ich bin noch sehr unentschlossen, irgendwie weiß ich nicht so genau.“

From the imagery of heaven to the subject of body and soul, the participants' attitudes are essentially ambiguous. There seems to be an inclination to tentatively relate the feelings and images to this world on one hand, while trying to avoid a concrete depiction on the other. Could that be a reminder of the struggle between a maximum and a minimum way of describing heaven? A maximum description can be either anthropocentric or theocentric. That is to say basically a picturesque and detailed view including depictions of continued family relations or work activities, and a beatific vision or heavenly light. Yet many preferred to portray heaven as a symbolic representation with minimal description while assuming human constructs would only remove God as the centre of heaven. Relying upon abstractions instead of poetic images, they felt it was impossible to know what comes after death or if there is life after death at all. Therefore, as argued by McDannell Lang,

The division between maximal description and minimal description, between popular and philosophical perceptions, between image and abstraction, and between hope and skepticism structures the contemporary discussion.<sup>114</sup>

Following this line of thought, we may be able to comprehend why the soul was sometimes described as mere spiritual existence, and at the others as a body-dependent entity.

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<sup>114</sup> Colleen McDannell & Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001), 308.

Nevertheless, we find that a minimal description of heaven is generally preferred while a person's soul is to a certain extent related to their earthly existence. At times, the survivors' attitudes are ambivalent and viewpoints contradictory, a grave is still seen as a bridge connecting the living and the dead. This ambivalence may be partly due to tension between efforts required to tend the grave and the desire to visit grave without bearing any other responsibilities. As Gerhard expressed, a grave is necessary but it is better to be "pflegeleicht". Perhaps, "pflegefrei" would be the most welcome. Since to be free of responsibilities is not the same as to be free of ties with the dead, it is worth exploring further the multiple layers of meaning demonstrated by references to their individual life situations as well as to the social environment as a whole. Yet most important, the wish to maintain a relationship with the dead prevails regardless of the changes in the environment. When the relationship remains strong, the dead are not lost. The analysis of this relational perspective will be presented in Chapter 5. For the time being, we will try to elaborate the relevant themes which emerged in our discussion of the ideas of life after death, and start to compare similarities and differences between the two groups of participants.

## 4.2 The Interpretation of Hope

Is it possible to imagine death without envisaging some form of afterlife? Mircea Eliade's answer is no.

Death is inconceivable if it is not related to a new form of being in some way or other. No matter how this form may be imagined: a postexistence, rebirth, reincarnation, spiritual immortality, or resurrection of the body. In many traditions there is also the hope for a recovery of the original perenniality.<sup>115</sup>

Eliade believes that, "consciously or unconsciously, we are perpetually exploring

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<sup>115</sup> Eliade 1976, 44.

the imaginary worlds of death and untiringly invent new ones.”<sup>116</sup> Consequently, the eschatological ideas developed within a single religious tradition are not supposed to be free of inconsistencies. In the face of the contradictory ideas, a self-regulatory mechanism may evolve. “In a great number of religious creations we recognize the will to transcend oppositions, polarities, and dualism in order to obtain a sort of *coincidentia oppositorum*, i.e., the totality in which all contraries are abolished.”<sup>117</sup>

This sort of union of opposites, as reflected in the dynamic views of our participants in both cultures, is clear evidence of a common yearning for a posthumous existence: the dead are not confined to the grave, the dead still exists but in an unknown dimension, be that an idyllic paradise or a mysterious underworld. And our investigation does not end here. It would be too soon to conclude that the common yearning reveals an identical mentality or ideology for all. Instead, it is necessary to further explore background motivations and identify distinct as well as similar conceptions with respect to the two cultural backgrounds. Only after mapping out the correlation of ideas about life after death in the Christian and the Chinese contexts respectively can a comparison be grounded. As stated earlier, it is not our intention to build a model which depicts the thinking of the elites and the ordinary people as two mutually exclusive stands.<sup>118</sup> Rather, what we intend to identify is a living tradition ingrained, represented, and regenerated from age to age. To determine the traces of

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 44-45.

<sup>118</sup> As an attempt to break the academic norm of separating the sources into popular and elite genres, Colleen McDannell & Bernhard Lang drew the following conclusion after studying a wide range of European and American materials on heaven: “We found that the distinction between upper-class ‘beliefs’ and lower-class ‘superstitions’ must be used with great caution. While medieval scholastics and numerous twentieth-century theologians look down at ‘vulgar’ concepts of heaven, such two-tiered opinions have not always existed. In the nineteenth century, for instance, most erudite theologians and ministers believed in the same qualities of heaven as did popular writers and spiritualists. Although we certainly were open to the idea that the canon of Christian thinkers – Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Luther, Kant, Tillich – would dominate the understanding of life after death, we found the contrary to be true. The most creative insights into the beyond often came from those seldom spoken of in the scholarly circles: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Emanuel Swedenborg, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.” (McDannell & Lang, xii). It would be out of the scope of this study to evaluate their judgement of the significance of the lesser-known writers. Their observation, however, reminds us that not only other forms of art but also those forgotten works would have a considerable degree of influence on the conceptualization of death.

Christian eschatological or traditional Chinese teachings would be a promising venture.

In Christian tradition, eschatology refers to the systematic explanation of “last things”. According to Brian Daley, it concerns

the hope of believing people that the incompleteness of their present experience of God will be resolved, their present thirst for God fulfilled, their present need for release and salvation realized... the attempt to construct a theodicy; a justification of faith of God, a hope in the final revelation of God’s wise and loving activity throughout history.<sup>119</sup>

Practically speaking, discussions of the final events usually lead in two directions, namely universal and cosmic eschatology and individual eschatology. From a macro perspective, universal and cosmic eschatology deals with the approach of the end of the world, the general judgement and the final consummation of all things. Individual eschatology, on the other hand, focuses on the personal level, involving themes such as the particular judgement, heaven, hell, eternal happiness or eternal punishment. Nevertheless, while an eschatological dimension can be found in various aspects of Christian life, it is necessary to interpret the death of individuals within a broader framework, that is, the cosmological vision.

Needless to say, early Christian writers have played an important role in shaping eschatological beliefs in European cultures. Drawing from a variety of sources available in the Scriptures or in their own cultural traditions including philosophical reflection and popular beliefs, they adopted different rhetorical means to reveal their vision. The focal points of their discussions ranged from explaining the origin of death, conceptualizing death as the separation of souls and bodies at death or as the participation in the glory of God’s own life, to portraying the life after death including the notion of the interim state or purgatorial suffering in detail. Though their emphases varied, the centrality of the

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<sup>119</sup> See introduction to *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

death and resurrection of Christ, and the unity with God remains the heart of all eschatological discourse. Yet the development of eschatological ideas, as Daley described, did not follow a linear route. It is better to regard them as the product of “the social and ecclesial challenges met by Christian communities in each generation” and “the personal theological interest and allegiances of individual writers”.<sup>120</sup> That means death has been interpreted in a different way under difficult circumstances. For those living under oppression or in a deprived situation craving for justice and retribution in the final day, death is something quite different than for those seeking philosophical explanation of the world in a peaceful time.

Characteristically, an ideal abode after death is portrayed as heaven. As illustrated by Jerry Walls, the concept of heaven bears two fundamentally different images, namely the theocentric view and the anthropocentric view. The theocentric view, in its extreme version, “casts heaven as a timeless experience of contemplating God, and requires no human dimension”. The anthropocentric view, on the other hand, stresses the reunion of family and friends, and portrays heaven as similar to this life, but without pain and evil.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, the two models, as reflected in theology, art and literature from different periods, co-exist most of the time. Put alternatively, the emphasis of the heavenly scene keeps shifting throughout history. For a while the divine presence may be more prominent, and then the human relationship may become the focus in the depiction. Fitted into Walls’ framework, our study shows that those participants who are more involved in the church tend to stress the theocentric perspective more. For them, the mercy of God is held as the most important feature behind the concept of heaven, whereas the image of suffering in the afterlife as appeared in the Middle Ages is rejected. For others, the accent was put on love and interpersonal relationship, denoting an anthropological orientation. Probably due to these bearings, resurrection, an important and frequently used denominator in discourses on the nature of life after death, is missing from our responses.

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<sup>120</sup> Daley, 3. See also Franz-Josef Nocke, “Eschatologie” in *Handbuch der Dogmatik*, ed. Theodor Schneider (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2002), 377-478.

<sup>121</sup> See Jerry Walls, *Heaven - The Logic of Eternal Joy* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

For the nature of existence after death, the notion of the separation of body and soul at death and the belief in bodily resurrection had triggered numerous philosophical debates in the past. Today a dualistic view as such is seldom held as desirable. As reported in the German Bishops' Conference 2005:

Die Aussage über die Trennung von Leib und Seele im Tod ist nicht selten dualistisch missverstanden worden, als würde es sich dabei um zwei unabhängig voneinander existenzfähige Teile des Menschen handeln. Da die Seele kein Teil des Menschen neben dem Leib ist, sondern die Mitte der Person, geht die Person des Menschen ein in das Leben bei Gott. Aber auch der Leib ist kein bloßer Teil des Menschen, sondern die Person in ihrem konkreten Bezug zu ihrer Umwelt und Mitwelt. Trennung von Leib und Seele ist zu verstehen als Abbruch des bisherigen Bezugs zur Umwelt und Mitwelt. Die Hoffnung auf die leibhafte Auferstehung der Toten meint eine neue, durch den Geist Gottes verwandelte und verklärte Leiblichkeit und eine wesenhafte (nicht stoffliche) Identität auch des Leibes.<sup>122</sup>

Instead of fixating on the nature of body and soul, introducing the notion of identity or personhood essentially transcends the long debate on the separation of body and soul and the belief in bodily resurrection. As Hans Kessler stated, the identity of the new life after death corresponds to but is not limited to the material body.

Die Rede von der Leibhaftigkeit der Auferstehung hält somit ein Doppeltes fest: dass die von Gott auferweckte und in sein Leben geborgene Person sie selbst (identisch) bleibt und vollends wird, und dass der Bezug der Person zu den anderen und zum materiellen Kosmos nicht abbricht, sondern durch die verwandelnde Kraft des Geistes und der Liebe Gottes geheilt, entgrenzt und so vollendet wird. Gott macht aus unseren

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<sup>122</sup> Die deutschen Bischöfe Nr. 81, 11.

Lebensbruchstücken – mit unserer vollen Einwilligung – ein Ganzes.<sup>123</sup>

Essentially, in Kessler's terms, death entails as a new and deeper understanding of reality through God. „Es geht also nicht um eine andere Welt hinter unserer Welt, sondern um ein erweitertes Verständnis der einen Wirklichkeit, die reicher und tiefer ist, als unsere Sinne und Wissenschaften erfassen.“<sup>124</sup>

Interestingly, the perception of death reflected from the interviews shows an affinity with the approach to understanding death stated above. It was once suggested by a historian that in the past, death was seen as a membrane linking “two communities and two worlds”, but for people in our generation death is “a wall against which the self is obliterated.”<sup>125</sup> Yet reality suggests that the continuity of self or personhood is much treasured. However frustrated the participants might seem to be, they are still looking for a continued relationship with those who died in accordance with their original identity. This is also a genuine longing for a transformed identity in a reality that is meaningful for them. Of course, cosmologically speaking, few of the participants in our study have made God's presence in this world a necessary link to their perception of life after death. Nor are they awaiting the coming of Christ or the final judgement. They are, in any case, anxious for a particular afterlife embracing a self or personhood representing their present identity. What most concerns them is the eternal happiness for individuals rather than the nature of being in the spiritual realm. Their emphasis was thus more often put on the continuation of the original personality in a new existence. This was particularly noticeable in extended discussions related to the preferred place and form of disposal during our interviews.

Since keeping a dead body or ashes at home is not allowed by German law, one must choose a cemetery for placing the remains. The choice is primarily based on the location of the cemetery. Whether a location is considered suitable

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<sup>123</sup> Hans Kessler, “Wie Auferstehung der Toten denken?” *ZNT* 10 (2007), Heft 19: 55.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>125</sup> See Frederick S. Paxton, “History of Christian Death Rites”, <http://www.deathreference.com/Ce-Da/Christian-Death-Rites-History-of.html>.

usually depends on two factors, namely the distance between the cemetery and the bereaved, and the wish of the departed if known. For practical reasons, the simplest solution is to bury in the area where the departed used to live so that family members or acquaintances nearby can tend the grave on a regular basis. For example, Gisela said that her choice is mainly based on the proximity of a family member to take care of the grave:

Das ist eine Frage, die ich für mich, für mich entschlossen habe, wenn ich meine Mutter um zwanzig Jahre überleben sollte, dann möchte ich, dass das Grab geschlossen wird, und ich möchte verbrannt werden. Ja. Weil ein Sohn wohnt, na ja, fünfzig, sechzig Kilometer von hier entfernt, dem ist also nicht möglich, wöchentlich oder was weiß ich wie oft, zum Grab zu kommen und das sauber in Ordnung zu halten. Außerdem kommt noch hinzu, das Grab ist sehr groß und er wird ja dann auch nicht mehr jung sein. In zwanzig Jahren bin ich 83 und mein Sohn ist 58. Ja. Und ich denke mal, man muss sich damit auseinandersetzen.

Second, it involves both the wish of the dead and the efforts of the living made to fulfil that wish. The wish is nonetheless essentially intertwined with the ideas of body and soul, or the nature of existence after death. Take Maria's case as an example. At first she was very upset by the fact that she could only afford to have her mother cremated and the ashes installed in a niche. But since the columbarium is located in an area where she believed her mother would probably enjoy staying, she assumed her mother would be satisfied and was then very thankful for having such a pleasant site:

ich war zuerst war ich ein bisschen irritiert. Also, meine Mutter hat kein Grab, sondern die ist eingäschert worden und hat so ein Fach in einem, wie soll ich sagen, einem Schrank? Und, ich war ein bisschen irritiert, weil die ganze Zeit über war es so, dass das Friedhof, also, das – vorne war mein, war, war meine Mutter, in diesem Schrank?

Also, ganz nah, weil das war wirklich, der Friedhof ist mitten im Wald und da gibt es kein – ja, und dann habe ich noch immer gedacht und mich immer gefreut und hab mir gedacht, dass meine Mutter das Glück hat auch, mitten im Wald zu sein. Und, dort zu leben. Und, ja, das ist sozusagen auch ein Gefühl, das ich habe, wenn ich dann vor diesem Schrank stehe und dann.

In fact, usually both factors would be taken into consideration. Concerned about whether he would have companions in the cemetery in which he is going to be buried in the future, John said:

And, but, my preference would go in the area where I come from so where my father was buried in Northern Germany. Just because there's some family around in the area.

But, you know, somehow I wouldn't like to die there on my own. And, you know, without anybody on your own and it is cool, but you know? But I think how it's going to be, so, ja, It's my preference to be buried in the village.

At the same time, he believed it is equally important to select a cemetery in a place where his children would be more likely to visit:

I do think it would be, it would mean something to me if my family are happy to come to the graveyard to show my children or grandchildren or whoever might be around at that time. So that would be very close to them. I think probably if I die this time I would be probably be buried in Frankfurt although I wouldn't really like it because I didn't feel a tie in it.

Clearly, this kind of attitude is rooted in the assumption that one could still remain in touch with those died before him and those who outlive him. Besides the possibility of keeping the relationship and interaction, as demonstrated in other cases, the departed are also believed to be able to experience the world as it is, including the ability to enjoy the environment around the burial ground. Taking the stress on aesthetic values shown in the

previous chapter into account, we find the idea of life after death widely-accepted, though not often explicitly acknowledged.

Regarding the preferred forms of disposal, the differing opinions encountered are on one hand in correspondence with the social trends, and on the other associated with the teachings of the churches to a considerable extent.<sup>126</sup> A notable theme which emerged is the acceptability of cremation. In recent years, cremation has become a growing alternative to the traditional form of body interment. The current rate of cremation in Germany is over 40% of the total number of deaths. However, cremation appears to be a controversial subject among the participants. For example, when talking about the preferred form of disposal, Maria said tentatively:

Deshalb möchte ich gerne begraben werden, aber eigentlich auch nicht, weil, da kommen ja Würmer. Also, eigentlich, ich bin noch sehr unentschlossen, irgendwie weiß ich nicht so genau.

Although she would like to be buried instead of being cremated, she is afraid of the decomposition process following body interment, while somehow the dead body is thought to be capable of sensation, such as feeling the pain of being burnt or being devoured by worms. In fact, her frustration is shared by many others. To Walter, who preferred whole body interment, cremation is regarded as brutal:

die Vorstellung irgendwie so, was weiß ich, ihn sehr gern gehabt habe, zu verbrennen, das ist mir irgendwie un-, mag ich nicht, also ich meine, dass es halt kaputt geht, von alleine, das ist nun mal so, das kann ich nicht ändern, aber ich würde es irgendwie einfach, ich finde, das ist so eine natürliche Vorstellung, dass man es der Erde gibt. Also so, dass man das einfach zurückgibt an die Natur. Und dieses Verbrennen, das finde ich irgendwie so brutal – das ist

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<sup>126</sup> For a summary of Roman Catholic Church's historical responses to and current stand on the alternative forms of disposals, see Die deutschen Bischöfe Nr. 81. In 2004, the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) also published a paper called "Herausforderungen evangelischer Bestattungskultur: Ein Diskussionspapier" to clarify its position.

vielleicht ökologisch sinnvoll, das kann sein, aber – oder ökonomisch auch, heutzutage.

However, the idea of brutality, besides related to the capability of sensation, may reflect the perceived value of human beings. In Christian teachings, human beings, consisting of both the immaterial mind and the material body are seen as being created in the image of God. Thus to deliberately damage or destroy the body, which is considered part of a human being, is intolerable. This underlying conception may account for the rejection of cremation by some, whether they have a close tie with the church or not. Of course, for those who are an active church member, like Emile, it is not surprising to find a more explicit acknowledgement:

Nein, nee, nein, wird – will ich nicht, obwohl – heute ist es ja erlaubt, auch für Katholiken. Früher war das ja für Katholiken. Aber dadurch, dass ja die – das Grab schon da ist, ja, das ist also extra als meine Mutter als erste starb, haben wir dann entschieden, das nennt sich Vierergrab, das heißt also zwei da und zwei hier. Wird dann schon tiefer gesetzt. Also der, das, der erste Sarg wird tiefer gelegt, damit vier Säрге reinkommen. Und deshalb ist also für mich dann, keine Verbrennung, nicht.

Apart from cremation, most participants were aware of other ways of disposing human remains and the consequences of those choices. For instance, the idea of sea burial or burying cremated ashes in a forest was not foreign to them. Martha mentioned:

Die muss in die Erde auch. Entweder in die Erde oder auf dem Wasser vom Schiff streuen oder ein Friedwald oder anonym irgendwo beerdigen, ganz anonym, ohne irgendwelche Namen und Stellenangabe, das. Aber man darf die nicht zuhause behalten.

As mentioned by Diane, an active church member, a tree, as part of creation, may signify some kind of regeneration power:

Gut. Ja, ich denke, dass ist, auch wichtig, der Baum symbolisiert das Leben, der Baum ist, vergleichbar mit einem selbst. Der Baum hat Wurzeln, der Baum hat einen Stamm, der dich trägt, und der Baum hat Äste, die eben deine Sehnsüchte, deine Hoffnungen, alles in sich trägt, und, dass man sich einen Baum aussucht, ein Baum ist ja individuell, es gibt nicht den Baum, sondern sehr viele Bäume und jeder Baum hat seine Eigenart, so wie jeder Mensch seine Eigenart hat... so, wenn einer das Gefühl hat, dass er das tun möchte, äh, es ist ein Stück der Schöpfung, ja, und, wir sind eins mit der Schöpfung, wir sind ein Teil dieser Schöpfung, und warum soll das dann nicht sein? Also, ich finde es sehr positiv. Also, ich kann das, könnte mir das auch vorstellen. Ich habe nur noch nicht, ich bin nur nicht sicher, welchen Baum ich nehme, ja?

Interestingly, no one brought up the idea of new or alternative disposal methods by themselves. They were not enthusiastic about recent alternatives such as placing a symbolic portion of cremated remains into space or transforming the ashes into a diamond. Nor had they thought about having their loved one cremated in neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands or Switzerland in order to get round the German restrictions and bring the ashes home. For burial at sea, a less common but long practised alternative, it is basically understood as a choice for those who have a close connection with the ocean. Since most have not lived by the sea nor connected with the sea in any special way, they were not keen on this option. Obviously, in addition to financial reasons, the selection also reflects the efforts made to fit in the lifestyle of the departed, or to fulfill the expectation of the departed, if the survivors happened to know their wishes.

Yet some scholars maintain a quite opposite view. Take the cultural historian Norbert Fischer as an example. Concerning the growing numbers of cremations taking place and crematoriums available in Germany, he commented that this phenomenon is a product of industrialisation intrinsically harmful to the cultural tradition. While a dead person becomes merely a part of the operational

procedure, "Das Ganzheitliche am Tod entfiel damit" and "Es ging um Effizienz, nicht mehr ums Ritual."<sup>127</sup> Therefore the choice of an alternative burial form, or a more affordable option is believed to have a weakening effect on the values of all memorial activities. The truth is, all over the world, the prevalent methods are constantly influenced by social, cultural and religious factors. In order to get a more comprehensive picture, we must recognise modifications in memorial activities that correspond to voluntary or unavoidable changes instead of simply attributing such changes to historical process. Like other anthropologists or historians have suggested, under certain circumstances, such as for reasons of hygiene, cremation may be preferred.<sup>128</sup> When we return to the scenario in Hong Kong, it is clear that due to rapid population growth and a shortage of land, cremation has become the most viable option. Yet the practice of performing rituals for the dead did not fade out because of a shift in disposal method. Elizabeth Teather has stated aptly:

The practice persists of visiting the resting place of deceased forebears during the Gravesweeping Festivals, even though the site is a niche, not a coffin grave. The niche is certainly neither an architectonic symbol of a system of beliefs nor a mnemonic device that reinforces them, as was the traditional, omegashaped grave.<sup>129</sup>

In light of this, it is plausible to assume that the perseverance of visiting does embody certain deep-rooted cultural-specific beliefs. One way or the other, the participants are able to frame their ideas about life after death according to the shifts in practice.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, contrary to Fischer's assumption, cremation itself should not be regarded as a hindrance to the transmission of culture. Or at least it is clear that his notion is not applicable to the Hong Kong Chinese context.

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<sup>127</sup> Quoted in "Krematorien: Der Kampf um die Asche", *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 29, 2006.

<sup>128</sup> For example, see Barbara Happe, "Gesellschaftliche Faktoren und Entwicklung der Bestattungs-, Friedhofs- und Trauerkultur am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts", *Friedhof und Denkmal* 1/2000: 9-20.

<sup>129</sup> Elizabeth Teather, "High-Rise Homes for the Ancestors: Cremation in Hong Kong" *Geographical Review*, 89.3(1999): 425.

<sup>130</sup> See also Brenda Yeoh's "The Body after Death: Place, Tradition and the Nation State in Singapore" in *Embodied Geographies: Spaces, Bodies and Rites of Passage* ed. Elizabeth Teather (London: Routledge, 1999), 240-255. Examined the shift in another Chinese context, she found that "the general acceptance of cremation and the columbarium landscape does not signal the end of traditional Chinese funerary rites".

For our Chinese counterparts, what they care most is to inter the remains as soon as possible and let the person rest in peace, whether the remains be the entire body or just the ashes. As described by Kelly:

When I die, I want to be cremated. It's convenient, does not involve so many procedures. My dad had told me when he was still alive, "cremation is better, you just need to press the button and everything's done, you don't need to find a second burial place ten years later."

Though the activities involved in the grave visit may have been simplified, this does not mean survivors do not want to visit the grave of departed family members and be visited by their offspring when they are dead themselves. Echoing the emphasis of some Frankfurters, Ben stressed the importance of the cemetery's proximity. He reminisced about his brother's situation:

One of our main concerns is proximity. Proximity means accessibility. For example, Wo Hop Shek is too far away. One of my elder brothers died when I was twenty-something. Till now, I've never visited his grave, even though he was buried in Chai Wan, which is already closer to our place than Wo Hop Shek. On the gravesweeping day, we can only care for our papa and grandpa. Since his grave is too far from the other graves and it's inconvenient to visit all in one day, we will not go there. Oh, if you're buried in Wo Hop Shek, how can the children go there to visit you in the future?

One may suggest that while Hong Kong is so small, it should be feasible to reach every corner within a couple of hours. That is true, but the problem is, if the forebears were buried in different cemeteries, it would not be possible to pay a visit to all of them in one day or one weekend during the grave sweeping seasons. Therefore the following issue turns out to be a shared concern: Will anyone come to see me if I am buried in a remote area? For the sake of future visitors, cremation or full body interment is chosen, in most cases the funeral and

postfuneral practices align with the concept of whole body disposal. To explain this phenomenon, Kellaher, Prendergast & Hockey have put forward the notion of “compensatory amplification” for cremation may be visualised as the miniaturisation of the body.<sup>131</sup> This observation reminds us of the significance of bodily integrity associated with the expectations about grave visitation and upkeep. Further studies to compare the theme of bodily integrity in different cultural contexts are recommended.

With regard to the Chinese participants’ ideas about the material and immaterial parts of human beings, we find comprehensible but intermingled traces of different traditions. A “rationalistic-pragmatic attitude”, as Mu-chou Poo named it,<sup>132</sup> is revealed in their responses. In the book *Hanfeizi*<sup>133</sup> there is an interesting dialogue: Once the king of Qi asked a painter, “What is the most difficult to draw?” The painter replied, “spirits.”<sup>134</sup> This anecdote echoes the mentality of our participants for they all realised it is hard to envisage the world to come, especially the nature of being in that world.

Yu Ying Shih has pointed out that, contrary to perception, the Chinese did have an idea of an afterworld before Buddhism arrived, although the distinction between “this world” and “other world” in ancient Chinese thought might not be as clear as in other cultural traditions.<sup>135</sup> Of course, after Buddhism was gradually grounded and transformed, Chinese conceptions of the soul and afterlife were also altered, noticeably in the prevalent notions of karma, hells and journeys of souls. Nevertheless, unlike in the Christian traditions, as Stevan Harrell suggested,

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<sup>131</sup> Leonie Kellaher, David Prendergast & Jenny Hockey Kellaher, “In the Shadow of the Traditional Grave”, *Mortality* 10 (4): 237-250.

<sup>132</sup> Poo Mu-chou, “The Concept of Ghost in Ancient Chinese Religion”, in *Religion and Society: V.1 Ancient and Medieval China*, ed. John Lagerwey (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong and École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2004), 179.

<sup>133</sup> Written by Han Fei in the Warring States Period in China.

<sup>134</sup> “客有為齊王畫者，齊王問曰：畫孰最難者？曰：犬馬最難。孰易者？曰：鬼魅最易。”（外儲說左上第三十二）  
*Hanfeizi* Book 11 Chapter 32.

<sup>135</sup> The misconception is caused by early studies dated back in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and maintained by certain well-known scholars including Hu Shih and Joseph Needham. For example, Needham asserted that “If one bears in mind the conceptions of different peoples (Indo-Iranian, Christian, Islamic, etc ) there was no such thing as an ‘other world’ in ancient Chinese thought at all - no heaven or hell, no creator God, and no expected end of universe once it had emerged from primeval chaos. All was natural, and within Nature. Of course, after the permeation of Buddhism, ‘the case was altered’.” But historical and archaeological findings contradicted his position. For example, in ancient paintings unearthed depiction of heavenly realms can be found. See also Yu Ying Shih, 381.

the niche or the burial site should be located in a convenient district. Balancing various factors such as Fengshui, location, personal preferences as well as the insufficient supply of columbariums, some participants mentioned that they would like to look for a suitable site and secure a place for themselves before they really need it.

All in all, it is worth noting that in both cultural contexts, whether Chinese culture the concept of soul (or *ling-hun*) was seldom discussed as such, except in Confucian discourse.<sup>136</sup> The neo-Confucianist Tu Wei-Ming explained that the complex ideas of soul can be approached from the conception of chi: “Soul, in the Chinese sense, can perhaps be understood as a refined vital force that mediates between the human world and the spiritual realm.”<sup>137</sup> Consequently, Tu affirmed that:

We, the living, are not separated (or indeed separable) from the dead, especially from our ancestors, those to whom we owe our lives... The biological nature of our existence is such that we do not exist as discrete temporal and spatial entities. Rather, we are part of the cosmic flow that makes us inevitably and fruitfully linked to an ever-expanding network of relationships. Human selfhood is not an isolated system; on the contrary, it is always open to the world beyond. The more we are capable of establishing a spiritual communion with other modalities of being, the more we are enriched as human beings.<sup>138</sup>

Such philosophical explication, as well as the ideal of maintaining everything in the chain of the continuity of the world and seeking the unity of heaven and man (參天地之化育, 與萬物共生), might be embedded in the mind of the people, but is not ostensible in our study. Rather, we discover a strong resonance to the

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<sup>136</sup> “The concept of *ling-hun* is not necessary to explaining or dealing with culture or personality in ordinary situations, and is generally mentioned only in eschatological, teratological, or psychiatric contexts. Normal human behavior, perhaps, does not require any explanation except in its absence. But from explanations formulated in that absence we gain a clearer picture of what ordinary believers in Chinese folk religion might say about the concept of person, if in fact they thought in general terms about such a concept.” (Harrell, 528).

<sup>137</sup> Tu Wei-Ming, “Chinese Concepts of the Soul” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* " Vol.13, 447.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

Confucian teaching of appropriateness in ritual performance. As presented in the last section, it is believed that grave visitation has to be done in a proper time, in a proper way.

However, the Confucian principle of appropriateness and the proposal of “caring for the dead is similar to caring for the living” (事死如事生) may not be able to counter the inner imbalance or anxiety over the unknown, as commented by Lai Chi-tim.<sup>139</sup> While “the post-mortem locale of the dead” is seen as unfathomable, in Confucian ideology, the idea of the underworld is not specified, nor are there any ways to expiate one’s transgression. Daoism, on the contrary, is concerned by the fate of the dead and the restoration of soul. Through redemptive funeral and postfuneral rituals, the spirit of the dead is supposed to be liberated or brought to a peaceful state. And by measures such as burning the papier-mâché products, the unsettled mind of the bereaved may be alleviated. Behind this is the supposition of an intermediate state after death in which the departed can still benefit from help offered by the living.

The idea of an intermediate state is not unique to Daoism, moreover. Apparently, Mahayana Buddhism, the other most influential school of thought in China, also suggests the bardo stage between death and rebirth.<sup>140 141</sup> However, since life is seen as impermanence, Buddhist thought rejects the existence of an everlasting soul or the ultimate permanence of a person. Neither do the Buddhists see the need to explain its non-existence. According to the principle of dependent origination, there is no belief in being, but only in becoming. Each moment is actually both a birth and a death. Life, as everything else, arises from causes and

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<sup>139</sup> See Lai Chi Tim, “Making Peace with the Unknown: A Reflection on Daoist Funerary Liturgy” in *Death, Dying and Bereavement. A Hong Kong Chinese Experience*, ed. Cecilia Lai Wan Chan & Amy Yin Man Chow. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 87-92.

<sup>140</sup> The most elaborate description of the intermediate state between death and rebirth can be found in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

<sup>141</sup> According to the Mahayana text “The Scripture on Rebirth in Accordance with One’s Vows in the Pure Lands of the Ten Directions”, “whether one’s life span has not yet ended or whether it has already passed or even on the day it ends, parents, relatives, associates, and friends can, on behalf of the one whose life span has ended, cultivate various acts of blessing. They should fast and observe the precepts with a single mind, wash and purify the body, and put on fresh, clean clothes. With one mind, they should reverence the Buddhas of the Ten Directions. They should also offer flowers and incense to the various Buddhas. If they do, then the deceased will achieve deliverance from the troubles of suffering, be raised up to heaven, and attain the way of nirvana.” Quoted in Stephen Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 27.

conditions.

All living beings consist of physical and mental elements. The law of energy conservation implies both physical and mental energy of human life cannot disappear without cause, but they can manifest themselves simultaneously. After death, the physical body will return to nature, just as the fallen leaf will gradually decay and return to nature to be eventually absorbed by other plants. As well, the mental energies of the dead person do not terminate with the non-functioning of the body but continue to manifest themselves in another form, thus producing re-existence. This is called rebirth or re-becoming in Buddhism rather than “reincarnation”, because there is no permanent entity or soul that is reincarnated or moving from one life to the next.<sup>142</sup>

In this way, the Western Paradise, the blissful abode of the death, is not seen as a continuation but an abrupt discontinuation of life in this world. And only through such a rupture can death be escaped once and for all.

Although the concept of Western Paradise is central to Pure Land Buddhism, as Myron Cohen observed, it is seldom emphasised by the majority of the Chinese population, and the notion of salvation or liberation was given little room for expression.<sup>143</sup> He contended that an orientation towards liberation in the Western Paradise would surpass the function and logic of ancestor worship, even if “internal consistency as such is not necessarily to be expected with respect to the totality of any popularly held body of religious beliefs and practices.” Corresponding to Cohen’s observation, our participants showed little interest in discussing the Western Paradise. However, we cannot agree with his conclusion that the lack of interest is due to the superiority of other religious concepts such as multiple souls, since in fact, neither was the issue of the number of souls,

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<sup>142</sup> Jing Yin, “Death from the Buddhist View: Knowing the Unknown” in *Death, Dying and Bereavement. A Hong Kong Chinese Experience*, ed. Cecilia Lai Wan Chan & Amy Yin Man Chow. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 94.

<sup>143</sup> Myron L. Cohen, “Souls and Salvation: Conflicting Themes in Chinese Popular Religion” in *Death ritual in Late and Modern China*, ed. James L. Watson & Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California, 1988).

which has triggered numerous philosophical debates, of interest to the participants.<sup>144</sup> Rather than focusing on the nature of soul, it has been suggested that to identify the context is of utmost importance to understand how the living perceive and interact with the dead. “Because the contexts are separate, there is little conflict and little need for abstract reasoning about a non-existence problem.”<sup>145</sup> In other words, “an analytical perspective” must be distinguished from “an action perspective”.

In this regard, what bothers Chinese people most is not whether the dead is considered to be manifested in multiple spots, namely the underworld, the grave and the ancestral tablet. Survivors hope the departed are not suffering, and hope they are enjoying the current state, or can attain a better state if the present one is not the best. Based on our review, we find that the imagination of a posthumous existence inevitably entails ideas inherited from different origins. It is plausible to conclude that their perception is ingrained with the Confucian principle of appropriateness, manifested by Daoist rituals and offerings, with the Buddhist Western Paradise as the ultimate ideal. For the participants, the different concepts are parallel and compatible instead of mutually exclusive. Most significantly, it is clear that the participants are not concerned about the number of souls or the status of the souls but the relationship with the departed. As noted by Laurence Thompson, the various but parallel responses to death are intended to affirm the unbroken relationship of the dead and the living so that the departed may remain “a communicating member of the family”:

Salvation, the overcoming of Time, thus appears in two guises in the Chinese religion. On one hand it means subsisting after death as an ancestor; on the other, it means gaining the Buddha’s paradise or some form of blissful immortality according to Taoist

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<sup>144</sup> In his classic text “The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion”, Harrell examined the notions of two, three, ten and twelve souls according to different traditions of thought. For example, he suggested that “the ideas of two souls stems from the fundamental yin-yang dualism which has permeated so much of Chinese religious and philosophical thought, and which has influenced folk belief as well. Chu Hsi was following a line of reasoning extending back to the pre-Han philosopher Tsou Yen, and perhaps even further. This dualistic scheme also associates *hun* with *shen*, or gods, and *po* with *kuei*, or ghosts. The former celestial and immortal; the latter return to the earth and gradually fade away.” See 519-528.

<sup>145</sup> Harrell, 523.

notions. In either case it depends ultimately upon the filiality of the survivors.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Laurence G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1996), 130. He argued further that "This makes their responsibility for performing the appropriate rituals very heavy. It also gives them the satisfaction of feeling that they are able to cope with the crisis of death effectively." However, we found that the responsibility to perform the rituals is not often seen as a heavy burden by our participants.



## 5 A NEW RELATIONSHIP

### 5.1 Family & Tradition

A. Hong Kong

B. Frankfurt

### 5.2 Intergenerational Reciprocity & Continuing Bonds

### 5.1 Family & Tradition

A. Hong Kong

Utterances at the graveside tended to show the departed is thought to be present and able to hear the words of the living, even if they may not be able to communicate with them literally. For instance, after recounting some instances of talking to his departed father, Eric added “Of course, I will say good bye to him before we leave, but can he hear it?” In addition to describing the offerings and reporting the latest news in the family, requesting blessings are also common. Eric explained:

I would not ask the ancestor to let me know the winning numbers of the next lottery draw in order to win some money. I would not ask for such kind of things. What I would like to ask is his blessings for Henry, and the well-being of the family. Mostly it's just a psychological relief. It doesn't matter if it cannot be realised. I am not demanding anything special. It would be fine already if there is nothing bad happens to us unexpectedly. I don't think it's too greedy. As our beloved he is just taking care of us.

Similarly, Sandy also described that she was not craving for exceptional benefits but only basic protection. “Just because she is my grandma I would say

something like, would you please protect us so that we can live happily.” It is clear they do not expect the bond with their beloved will cease at the moment of death. Unconsciously, guidance and protection are supposed to continue regardless of the fact of death. Kelly described that for her father, his departure is actually a liberation from earthly burden. “But he is still with me, just in another form.” Death does not break the ties abruptly. The relation is transformed, but not ended.

When discussing the meaning and usefulness of the funeral and postfuneral rituals, Lam referred to the unexplained ritual practices as traditional customs. He is not convinced by the idea that in order to sustain a loving relationship, the living must observe certain practices. In his opinion, neither is the dead relying on them.

Some may have other concerns, including hygiene or Fengshui. I think most rituals are only intended to show to the ancestor, or mainly to the living. We cannot prove if the dead can really see us, but those at the ceremony can see the rituals. Perhaps you will feel more comfortable, or believe that the redemptive rituals may eventually liberate the dead and let them reincarnate into a human being again. Some believe that it is effective, and can help speed up the reincarnation. Of course, if so, it would be great. But it doesn't sound very convincing to me. But I am Chinese, I will take part in it.

It's a convention. Nobody would explain to you why they are doing this and that. The only way is to follow them. There are always some senior and conservative members to advocate the traditions for no specific reasons. Only if the task is ridiculous, for example, to jump down from here to the ground floor, then you have to say no. Otherwise, if they are just asking you to wear a red or white shirt, or ask you to say a few words, or to kneel down, it will do you no harm. You cannot say that you are a Catholic or Protestant and you don't want to kneel down. If you treat yourself

as Chinese, you can just view it as part of the Chinese tradition. Although I have no religious belief, I will follow the rituals out of respect.

Yung, however, tended to believe that the welfare of her life after death is to a large extent dependent on the rituals performed by her children.

I am pretty greedy. Of course I have to let my son arrange a Christian funeral for me. But I will also ask my daughter to arrange some Daoist rituals for me later on. I don't know which ways I should take when I am in the underworld. The best is to prepare both.

In chapter 3 we have already pointed out that auspiciousness is critical in the selection of gravesite. The selection is not merely a pragmatic consideration. To a certain extent, it also reflects how much the living value the views of and the relationship with the departed. However, Ying pointed out that as in the case of her husband's family, it was not possible to choose a specific niche for that was assigned by the authority according to the installment date, even though they wanted very much to do so.

Unless you do not want to be interred in a columbarium, like my dad and mum, they can choose the location by themselves. For example, my brothers had consulted a Fengshui master before picking a site and designing the grave, and then arranged the date for my parents' interment correspondingly.

At times, the children might find it hard to arrange the death matters in accordance with the requirement of their parents or other senior members of the family. Having received a direct request from her grandaunt, Yung and her siblings encountered a dilemma three years ago.

She was a rather open-minded elderly woman. Before she died she had told us she wanted to be buried whole. But we couldn't promise her. We could only say we would try our best. She said, "Bury me in a remote cemetery instead then. You don't need to

come and see me.” From what she said you know she was not stubborn. Finally we had her cremated and interred in Wo Hop Shek instead.

Between fulfilling the final will of her grandaunt and their own wishes to visit her grave, they chose the later. Facing a similar situation, Ben has tried to convince her mother, who wanted to be buried in a new gravesite that has never been used by others before, to change her mind.

In Hong Kong there are very few burial spaces available. But you can try to look for something in Shenzhen. The price would be more reasonable, and you may have a chance to find a better location. We did go there but failed to find a suitable place... In the end we just hoped that we could get one in Hong Kong which would match her expectation.

Later on, because of a connection of his father, they managed to contact the Buddhist cemetery and acquire a site for re-occupation. They visited the site, took some pictures and showed them to their mother. Finally her mother accepted this proposal. Balancing the interests of different parties is another example of how the grave can portray relational aspects of the living and the dead.

## B. Frankfurt

As shown in the last section, the efforts made to satisfy the wishes of the departed indicate that the deceased is not neglected even though he is not physically present. The selection of s gravestone is an example. Diane said it has to be done according to her father’s will no matter how difficult it might be:

Und uns war es auch ganz wichtig, es war ein ganz wichtiges Element, wie dieser Grabstein beschaffen sein muss für meinen Vater. Mein Vater hat immer gesagt, er will das alles – ist nicht so sein Ding, aber werft mir einen Stein in meinen Vorgarten. Und aus dem Grund hat mein Vater einen Flusskieselstein, einen

großen Stein, aus Quarzstein, und normal sind die gar nicht genehmigt, aber wir haben ihn. Er ist genehmigt. Also, man kann Berge versetzen, wenn man etwas möchte. Und er hat diesen Stein. Und das hat uns auch wieder, dazu geführt, also, er ist trotzdem noch da, ich weiß, dass wir alle ab und zu, ich sehe das immer mal, wenn das irgendwie, dass jeder von uns da ab und zu mal hinpilgert.

Sometimes, when their wishes could not be fulfilled for various reasons, the bereaved would feel helpless. Knowing her mother had no special tie with the cemetery, Maria was upset by the fact her mother was not buried where she would have liked:

Also, weil dieser Friedhof hat nichts mit mir und ihr zu tun. Wir waren nie gemeinsam auf diesem Friedhof. Die ganzen Verwandten von uns liegen in einem Grab begraben. Und, meine Mutter war auch nie auf diesem Friedhof, ja, höchstens irgendwann mal zu irgendeiner Beerdigung oder so. Und, ich war nie, vorher nie auf diesem Friedhof, ja? Und, es ist so – eigentlich war es nicht ihr Ort und ist auch nicht mein Ort und es ist auch nicht unser Ort, aber – gut, ich habe gesehen, dass die Urne in diesen Schrank gestellt wurde, und, ihr Name steht drauf. Aber ich weiß wirklich nicht ob, ich weiß nicht ob sie wirklich da ist, sozusagen.

Deshalb habe ich am Anfang auch, so die Idee gehabt, ihr so was wie ein Grab zu machen an einer Stelle, die ihr wichtig war. Und, irgendwo, wo sie gelebt hat, so, Ja, und das muss man, also, es war so, dass, sie hat an der Bergstraße und da gibt es – das ist so eine Region, und da gibt es ganz viele Burgen und Schlösser. Und eines, eine Burg heißt Burg Frankenstein. Und dann, als meine Mutter, ja, noch gut gelebt hat, ist sie oft da hochgefahren zu dieser Burg und da gab es eine kleine Hütte. Und von dieser Hütte aus, da konnte man sich reinsetzen und dann konnte man so über

Eberstadt und zum Teil auch Darmstadt, also über das Kloster und Dörfer und Städte und irgendwie konnte man so runterschauen. Und, manchmal saß sie da stundenlang und, auch schon als sie schon krank war. Und das, das ist so, davon hat sie erzählt und das ist ein Ort, wo sie, sage ich, ja, der hat ihr gut getan. Ja, das ist ein guter Ort für sie, ja?

Und wenn, also, wenn man mich gefragt hätte, ja, dann hätte ich gesagt, dann beerdigt sie dort oben, ja? Aber das geht ja nicht hier in Deutschland. Deshalb hatte ich mir überlegt, ob ich ihr dort oben so etwas wie ein Grab mache, auch wenn sie da nicht liegt, aber weil, weil, das ein Ort ist, der ihr Spaß gemacht hat. Der, der ihr – da, wo die Sonne für sie geschienen hat und wo sie, Weitblick hatte und wo sie, wo sie gerne hingegangen ist. Ja? Das ist sozusagen der, der ideale Friedhof für sie.

As revealed in their considerations above, a parent-child relationship is taken as more of an everlasting truth than a this-worldly term. Not only that, but other interpersonal relationships are also believed to be retainable. For example, John projected that he would be able to recognise and contact his friends and acquaintances again:

So there is an idea of being together with others but not lonely, you know, a group of people, a body of people. That means some people doesn't speak to me, you know, they are not lonely, we are all part of the generation. And there are other generations before and after us and they can learn something from us and we can learn from them. That means something to me that I would certainly like and at least in this life.

He also wanted his children and grandchildren to visit his grave so that they could try to experience or grasp the meaning of being in communion with older generations.

For some, a grave is not for their children but also depends on themselves.

Gisela believed it would be pointless to be buried in a place that nobody would be willing or able to take care of the grave in the future:

Ja, wie gesagt, mein ältester Sohn würde das Grab gerne behalten, ich schätze auch deshalb, weil er ja an seinem Großvater sehr gehangen hat, an seinem Vater und weil die beide in diesem Grab sein werden – also sind. Und meine Mutter ebenfalls. Und alleine aus diesem Grund möchte er schon das Grab behalten. Nehme ich mal. Um zu diesem Grab gehen zu können, zu den, zu den Verstorbenen gehen zu können. Während mein jüngerer Sohn sagt, ich möchte meinen Nachkommen, wenn er Kinder hat, diese, diese, diese Belastung nicht zumuten. Sie wissen ja heute gar nicht, wo die Kinder irgendwann, irgendwo mal arbeiten werden, ob die immer in der Nähe von Mühlheim wohnen, oder ob sie im Ausland wohnen – das weiß man ja nicht.

Nevertheless, regardless of whether the grave and its visitation are seen as being for the children or dependent on them, it is clear the choices are not simply one's own but include intergenerational concerns. Martha understood the situation very well and preferred to make the work of her offspring lighter.

Und für mich – ich könnte mir schon vorstellen, verbrannt zu werden und dann wirklich auf so einer Streuwiese mit Blumen oder im Friedwald ohne so ein Grab. Also, ich finde das ist irgendwie auch – also, für mich macht's nicht so einen Sinn, mit dem Grab... dieses Grab ist ja so – mit der Pflege immer und mit dem, dass dann doch immer doch jemand hin gehen muss auch, das so, das denke ich.

Concerning the maintenance of the grave, Gerhard also felt that the best way is to make it trouble-free:

I definitely am not favouring to have a grave which has to be watered and planted and maintained. I also don't want to have stone in the grave. I would like to do it to have for something

which is pflegefrei, easy to maintain, a pflegeleichtes Grab. Whether it's a cremation site or burial site it must be pflegeleichtes, small and easy to maintain. And unscheinbar, not with huge ornamentation

In fact, the burden of grave tending usually amounts to the requirement of providing flowers and plants. The importance of flowers and plants was stressed by all participants, regardless of their age and gender. As Paul expressed, “I take good care of the plants and I want the grave to look like a place that invites the onlooker's gaze to rest there for a few seconds.” In a similar fashion, Konrad also emphasised the central position occupied by the flowers and plants. “We went there and looked at the grave if everything's ok, the flowers were all right and as it was autumn we didn't put any water.” Even though he was not very close to his father, he assumed that it is essential to make his grave beautiful: “We're supposed to look after the graves of the parents.”

## 5.2 Intergenerational Reciprocity & Continuing Bonds

Research studies on Chinese death rituals and family life usually split into two streams. On one side, some anthropologists attempted to ascribe the acquisition of various potential advantages to the motivations of carrying out rituals. On the other side, some philosophers or historians emphasised the tenets of Confucianism such as propriety and filiality and the authority of textual references. In our study, however, the themes relating to family and tradition that emerged from the interviews go in neither of those directions. Interestingly, “intergenerational reciprocity” and “continuing bonds”, the two most significant themes that pertain to the Chinese, turn out to be shared concerns of the Frankfurters.

Before comparing the two contexts, we will first review the conventional advantage-seeking model for the Chinese context. Among those who propose that grave visitation is for the benefit of visitors, maintaining family lineage and

maximizing benefits for the offspring are the two most widely-accepted advantages. In the Chinese culture, lineage was often believed to be the key to understanding ancestor worship and the ancestral hall a place for maintaining lineage.<sup>147</sup> Looking from a historical perspective, Evelyn S. Rawski suggested that “the emphasis on the continuity of kinship links between the living and the dead” and “the belief that ancestors could intercede with deities on behalf of their living descendants” was a primary motivation for the development of the elaborate death rituals.<sup>148</sup> To her, the correctness of the practices can be judged for there is always a linkage between the written sources and the actual ritual performance. Our focus, however, is not the relation between the textual reference and the performance. Central to the issue is what we can learn from less elaborate or modified practices. So the question becomes how significant is the concept of maintaining family lineage today? Thus far we find that the notion of lineage may not be applicable in a contemporary urban setting. In the past, ancestral halls used to be the centre of Chinese village life. Family and community events usually take place in the hall or on the open ground around it. In addition to ancestor worship, community council meetings and festival gatherings are also staged there. To our participants, ancestral halls represent particular groups of people in older times. That is because Hong Kong is basically an immigrant society and the establishment of ancestral halls are common only to indigenous inhabitants, who are actually the minority.<sup>149</sup> Simply extending the observation from a village setting to explain funeral and postfuneral rituals today as a means of maintaining family heritage and lineage should not be deemed acceptable, though such remarks were not uncommon in

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<sup>147</sup> The anthropologist David K. Jordan commented that “lineages were an optional feature of Chinese social structure. Although every person by definition had a descent line, organized lineage groups were nearly universal in some periods and regions (particularly the Cantonese-speaking world), but a rarity in others...The prime collective activity of a lineage was ancestor worship, and whatever else it did, it always did this. Many a lineage would maintain a modest (or occasionally pretentious) “hall” (*tang* 堂) for this purpose, usually with provision for the permanent storage of ancestral tablets.” In “The Traditional Chinese Family & Lineage”, <http://www.anthro.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/hbfamilism-u.html>.

<sup>148</sup> Rawski, 23.

<sup>149</sup> Indigenous inhabitants refer to the residents whose ancestors were residing in the New Territories of Hong Kong before the beginning of British rule in 1898. It is mainly used for administrative and legal purposes instead of denoting ethnicity.

previous studies. To understand a more complex context like Hong Kong, this intrinsic background difference must first be acknowledged.

Maximizing potential benefits by manipulating the bones of ancestors is another widely-accepted theory. Maurice Freedman concluded his fieldwork in Taiwan with this statement: “As a set of bones, an ancestor is no longer in command of his descendants; he is at their disposal. They no longer worship him; he serves their purpose.”<sup>150</sup> He claimed that by selecting gravesites with good Fengshui, people made use of their ancestors for obtaining worldly desires:

In geomancy the tables are turned; descendants strive to force their ancestors to the very good fortune, making puppets of forebears and dominating the dominators. In ancestor worship, the ancestors are revered, in fengshui they are subordinated.

Apart from ancestor worship in the ancestor hall to maintain lineage, he argued that the manipulation of human remains by Fengshui is another facet that accounts for the sustenance of death rituals.

Interestingly, clues to support the above positions could hardly be found in the interviews. It is true that our participants did ask for blessings, but those blessings are different in nature from the extraordinary advantages described in other studies. One might argue that nobody would be so brutal or blunt as to admit that their offerings or their preparation of gravesites are done in their own interests. Or it might be because of the fact that they were not able to manipulate the bones due to the limited number of niches or graves available. Yet their inclination to try to feel the presence of the departed, or to let the deceased know what they are doing despite not being sure if those works are in vain, shows an innate tendency to reach the life beyond. Would this tendency be a sign of Confucian influence?

Reciprocity, a fundamental Confucian tenet, is often considered to be the guiding principle to building interpersonal relationships in Chinese societies according to different status. In a father-son relationship, filial piety is supposed

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<sup>150</sup> From Freedman, 87-88. See also Li Yih-Yuan's response.

to be manifested in different kinds of reciprocal thanksgiving or beneficiary acts. In previous research studies on death rituals, the notion of reciprocity has also been considered a motivation of ancestor worship. However, that analysis was often derived from an orthodox point of view. Paradoxically, according to the evaluation of James Watson, some scholars dismissed this proposition totally and conceptualised reciprocity as a commercial contract based on the idea of debts. For example, according to Watson, Emily Ahern claimed that ancestor veneration is a reciprocal obligation unrelated to filial piety and

explanations that focus on altruism or filial piety are not only irrelevant, they are misleading. By this logic those who wish to become venerated ancestors had best make material preparations while they are still alive and not rely on the benevolence of descendants.<sup>151</sup>

In this regard, they are falling back on the advantage-seeking model. And this is exactly what we must avoid.

For our participants, intergenerational reciprocity, rather than the maintenance of lineage and manipulation of ancestors' bones, is more likely to be a significant motivation. From the interviews and observations we also learned that neither the performers nor the community seems to care about the "correctness" of rituals as argued by Rawski. Instead, "appropriateness" appears to be the governing norm. Thus it is plausible to assume that the concept of filial piety, the first virtue of Confucian thought, is deeply embedded in Chinese culture and in the heart of the people regardless of their social status. It must nonetheless be remarked that, for the fluidity of ritual performance, textual descriptions of rituals should be viewed as a reference within a specific timeframe rather than as a measure of correctness for all time. As Catherine Bell puts it,

Intrinsic to these concerns with the dynamics of performance is a fresh awareness of human agents as active creators of both cultural

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<sup>151</sup> Watson & Watson, 444.

continuity and change rather than passive inheritors of a system who are conditioned from birth to replicate it.<sup>152</sup>

Therefore, to better understand their grave visit activities, it is necessary to advocate a paradigm shift: It is filial piety, the spirit of Confucianism, but not the written texts, which guides their lives.

Moreover, by intergenerational reciprocity we are not referring to a static relationship but the extension of family through time. If the living is the one who anticipates certain reciprocal acts, whether that be bestowing of blessings or fortunes, when acting out the rituals they realise the situation will be changed one day, no matter how unconscious it might be. One day too they will pass away. They know it. In turn, they will shift from the role of an agent to that of a patient. For the fulfillment of filial piety requires both an agent and a patient, the availability of offspring may then be a determining factor accountable for the attitude and position of the participants. In earlier studies, this deeper meaning of reciprocity was seldom addressed. From our interviews, however, we notice that those who mentioned the preferred place of burial, or those who act as a role model for their children, are also expecting their descendants or friends to come and see them in the cemetery in the future. This is a typical example of intergenerational reciprocity. It might be particularly stimulating in future attempts to make cross-cultural comparisons of such issues or predictions of trends.

Traditionally, Chinese women were expected to bear many children. It is an obligation instead of a voluntary choice. Mencius has stated that “There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them.”<sup>153</sup> Today, what we have found from the interviews from both cultures is a full control of one’s reproduction activities. In a world with fewer and fewer people intending to give birth to children, a notable transformation is anticipated. In effect, this trend is common in both cultures. According to the latest estimate,

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<sup>152</sup> Bell, 209.

<sup>153</sup> *The Works of Mencius*, Book IV Part I Ch. 26, trans. James Legge, <http://nothingistic.org/library/mencius/mencius28.html>.

both Hong Kong and Germany ranked last in birth rate.<sup>154</sup> When a married couple does not have children, they may well have already foreseen that it might be difficult to find someone to look after the grave if both of them passed away, or even it might be considered to be meaningless to have a grave at all if the family is believed to come to an end. Then why not choose a simple method to dispose the human remains?

Comparing the situation in Frankfurt, we notice that such intergenerational concern was also apparent during our discussion on visitation activities, especially on identifying the gravesite with a garden and gardening an essential undertaking. This undertaking, besides being seen as the consequence of social pressure, may illustrate the reciprocal responsibility of a filial relationship.

Flowers are commonly regarded as gifts of love and remembrance, fostering bonds between the living and dead.<sup>155</sup> Not a single participant queried the significance of bringing and planting flowers when visiting. Why do they say it with flowers and plants? In what sense can a bond with the dead be established through flowers? Usually the death of a parent implies the change or the loss of a long-term relationship characterised by the most natural and unconditional love. However, if one considered such a bond as boundless and transcending physical existence, it will not be hindered by the fact of death. Our responsibility and response may continue.

If there are no other conventional ways of showing respect for the departed, like the offerings of their Chinese counterparts, or possible means of maintaining the bond, perhaps arranging the flowers according to the wish of the departed before they passed away or to the style of their garden at home, or according to the norm in a particular setting may be an exemplification of the efforts to fulfill the responsibility. In their research on cemetery visitation, Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou have explicated how the themes of body, home and garden are interwoven.<sup>156</sup> “Every garden is a balancing point between human

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<sup>154</sup> In the CIA Factbook 2007, Germany ranked No 221, with a birth rate of 8.2/1000 population and Hong Kong ranked No. 223, with a birth rate of 7.34/1000 population.

<sup>155</sup> See Jack Goody, *The Cultures of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>156</sup> “Disposal of the dead by burial in the West tends to conform to what may be termed the concept of appropriate places. Living people inhabit houses, dead people lie in cemeteries. But notions of

control and wild nature.” And the gravesite may be seen as a reflection of the new home of the departed. In effect, the findings of the current study tend to corroborate the presence of an internalised sense of moral responsibility felt among the bereaved regardless of the degree of emotional intimacy with the departed.

As Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou commented in their study of cemetery visitors in the West,

Visits to the graves of parents were thus based on an internalized sense of duty that was mediated by an underlying code of reciprocity between generations. In most cases, the decision to visit the cemetery was an individual one, often acknowledged and accepted before the parent’s death.<sup>157</sup>

Reciprocity is not unique to our Chinese participants. Implicitly or explicitly, their German counterparts also expected to be visited in the future. The presence of intergenerational reciprocity, therefore, is a plausible underlying assumption. After death, the identity of a person does not simply vanish. It becomes the foundation of future contact and a continuing bond.

To those who maintain a transformed yet unceasing relationship with the dead, death is not loss. Manifested in various fashions, such relationships may include the continuous guidance felt in the heart of the living or the reception of offerings given by the living. Grave visitation is a clear instance of the attempt to keep the bond with the dead alive. Regardless of the religious tradition, their visits help to shape the bond.

In the past, the bereaved were often encouraged to accept that the dead are

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appropriateness can vary. In the course of the last two centuries the idea has been put forward and gained wide acceptance that the last resting place of the dead should be in a pleasing environment, less forbidding than the formal stonework of a churchyard. Hence arose the idea of a cemetery as a kind of garden, arousing thoughts about the beauty of living things as well as reminiscences of the dead person. The thinking behind the concept of the garden cemetery has been complex, presumably owing something originally to the Romantic movement at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. As part of its attempt to bring nature as landscape into service to soften the keener emotions of the mourners, this concept focuses on the image of the cemetery as an entity in itself, not merely as a repository for dead bodies. The result is a paradox: corruption below ground matched by new life above ground. Death is not conquered but denied victory.” Francis, Kellaher & Neophytou, xx.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 146.

gone and to forget them completely. Till the 1990s, the breaking bond model was still the mainstream in the fields of psychology and counselling. According to Robert Goss & Dennis Klass, the breaking bond model in which the deceased is supposed to be left behind so that new attachments can be formed without difficulties is now shifting to the continuing bond model in which

the purpose of grief is the construction of durable biographies of both the living and the dead that enable the living to integrate the memory of the dead or continued interactions with the dead into their ongoing lives.<sup>158</sup>

Perceiving the presence of a deceased loved one is not a denial of the reality of death. It is an inner reality pointing to a never-ending identity and relationship.

In this study, we discover that the participants' reference to an uncertain but much cherished two-way relationship rather than a futile wish of the bereaved coincides with the concept of continuing bonds.<sup>159</sup> Central to that concept is the perceived presence and support. The perceived presence and support may include the experience of seeing the departed, hearing their voices, feeling a closeness or dreaming of them. For instance, some Chinese participants have made a clear distinction between dreaming of the departed and receiving messages from them in their dreams. They claimed that they had interacted with their parents when they were sleeping. The domestic niche and ancestor rituals also underscored their co-existence at home. During the grave visit, what come to participants'

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<sup>158</sup> Robert Goss & Dennis Klass, *Dead But Not Lost: Grief Narratives in Religious Traditions* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>159</sup> Besides "Continuing Bond", "Continued Attachment" (CA) is another popular term referring to the bereaved person's belief in an active-ongoing relationship with the deceased. From a psychological point of view, the Belief in Afterlife (BA) and the Continued Attached (CA) suggested by a religious tradition may have both positive and negative effects. "On the one hand, as a belief system a religion may offer potential condolence – for example, in the knowledge that there will be reunion with the deceased in heaven (BA) or in the form of enabling prayer for the good of the deceased, which is one way of continuing attachment to the deceased. Both BA and CA would have positive effects in such cases. On the other hand, it is equally plausible that these same aspects could work negatively. For example, if BA brings with it the knowledge of reunion in heaven, this could prevent remarriage and confine the bereaved person to the role of widow(er), precluding important new social interactions that would normally be associated with increased well-being and readjustment. Likewise, CA could work negatively if it were associated with very strong dependency (as in the introductory example on the meaning of loss) and much yearning and pinning for the deceased person." See Margaret S Stroebe, "Religion in Coping with Bereavement: Confidence of Convictions or Scientific Scrutiny?" *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14(1): 23-36.

mind is that while they do not know the departed's new address, they still want to send something by burning the offerings. For the Frankfurters, the presentation of flowers tends to have similar implications. Common to both groups, there seems to be the belief that the deceased is aware of their visit. The grave, in this way, is like an anchor in the sea. As Gerhard Schmied put succinctly "Wenn wir auch nicht wissen, was mit ihm ist, wir wissen jedoch, wo er ist. Wir haben eine Anhaltspunkt fuer ihn."<sup>160</sup> Though this sounds like a paradox, when we do not know where they are, the only place we can hold onto is where they are buried.

Moreover, during their investigation on continuing bonds, Goss & Klass learned that "individuation is only half of the matter":

We are separate, but we are a part. We can only be individuals because we are in relationship. There is no mother without a baby and no baby without a mother. There is no me without you. We only know each other and ourselves in a web of bonds and meanings. The dependent co-origination that the Buddha taught is true of our relationships with each other in life and with those who have died.<sup>161</sup>

The idea of permanent loss of one's parent is thus rejected. The departed is still seen a part of the family. Unless we choose to live in an isolated state, we are part of the whole narrative.

If we are a part of the whole, do we change at the moment of death? Do we process the same identity or can we enjoy the same sort of companionship as when we are alive? At this point, the question of ontological status, as asked by a philosopher, may arise: "In virtue of what is a person in an afterlife identical to a certain person in a premortem state?"<sup>162</sup> For the purpose of this study, it is not advisable to classify the participants' responses into any philosophical framework which is independent of the specific conception of afterlife. Quite the contrary, as shown in the previous chapter, we find a shared hope of an undefined form of

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<sup>160</sup> Schmied, 213.

<sup>161</sup> Goss & Klass, 10.

<sup>162</sup> Lynne Rudder Baker, "Death and the Afterlife", *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 354.

existence beyond this life. Regardless of the perception of the ontological status, this hope is based on the assumption of an individual identity that transcends death. And this identity is built around their personality and their relationship with others. Since the connotations of the terms concerning post-mortem existence such as spirit and soul have already been discussed, and in the interviews the participants tended to use different terms interchangeably, we believe the term identity is the most adequate for such an ambiguous but compelling idea about the existence after death. More important, the term identity highlights the relationship aspect of life. Perhaps the definition given by Jörn Rüsen, a leading scholar in cultural studies would shed light on the issue:

Identity is a matter of personal and social coherence and togetherness in the manifold relationship to the circumstances and conditions of life. It has been grounded in experiences and convictions, on belief systems and interpretations of the real world. It is developed by a double process of internalizing experiences and externalizing intentions.<sup>163</sup>

While identity transcends death, a grave may have a finite lifespan. In Germany, *Reihengrab* is now the dominant form in most cemeteries. This kind of grave does not belong to a certain person perpetually. Its acquisition period is limited by the cemetery authorities. For the rich or others who have the opportunity to acquire a permanent grave, the grave may be able to “live” longer. Even so, when asked about whether she would like to have a decent grave or niche forever, one of our participants answered melancholically, “I don’t think it is so important, for even you have one, after one or two generations, nobody will come to remember you anymore.” The fact is that if the grave is still there, after a period of time, people may not visit it anymore. That means practically, that grave is no longer functioning. Grave visitation itself, in this regard, is not timeless, but a channel to transmit family and cultural values. Through visiting,

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<sup>163</sup> Jörn Rüsen, “Tradition and Identity: Theoretical Reflections and the European Example”, *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, 1.2 (2004): 144.

one identifies with the departed, internalizing the values in such a way that the departed becomes a part of the self.

From cemetery selection to grave visitation, the bereaved may experience a shift of family roles. Whether the realisation is sudden or gradual, it will be externalised. Our participant Martha, who is the eldest daughter, believed that it is her responsibility to take up all funeral and postfuneral arrangements for her father. She realised that her role has changed and that she has inherited the function as the head of family. “Das ist schon interessant – die älteste Tochter ist die – und die anderen wissen, auch. Meine Geschwister, die wissen das, dass ich dann doch gucke.” This change, eventually, leads to the awareness of how the bond could be continued. When we try to grasp the meaning of the bonds, as suggested by Goss & Klass, we experience the way individuals make sense of their world and narrate their own lives.<sup>164</sup>

Besides family, identity is also shaped by cultural tradition. Tradition, as defined by Jörn Rüsen, is of fundamental importance in identity formation:

People were born into an established cultural life, which determines what they are. They have internalized these preconditions into the mental bodies of their own – their selfness – as the mediating field between their personal interests and objectives on the one hand and the social demands and obligations on the other. There is no identity without such a traditional basis.<sup>165</sup>

In the ever changing circumstances of life, tradition denotes “an immutable essence” in which human self-relatedness is one of the most remarkable achievements. No matter how brief the lifespan of the grave might be, grave visiting plays a crucial role in the formation and transmission of cultural traditions. In the Chinese context, grave visiting is inevitably linked with the two core Confucian values, namely filial piety and appropriateness, as well as Daoist

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<sup>164</sup> See Goss & Klass.

<sup>165</sup> Rüsen, 146.

rituals and Buddhist ideology. And in the West, Christian influence is obvious. While some scholars believe cultures are so distinct from each other that it is not possible to find any commonalities even in the universal condition of facing the death of the loved one, it may be tempting to conclude that the mentalities of our participants are simply cultural-specific for most of them had explicitly identified the practices such as arranging flowers or burning papier-mâché products with their own cultural traditions. Yet if we shift our focus to the notions of intergenerational reciprocity and continuing bonds, there are clear resemblances in their mentality in spite of different expectation of gravesites, or flowers and gifts. And the expectation or promise to fulfill the wish of the departed and to maintain the bond is a clear example of human self-relatedness.

Rejecting the idea of permanent loss of one's parent, the departed is still regarded as part of the family. There is an unconscious perception in the mind of the bereaved that the departed is aware of the visit. At any rate, it must be stressed that, with or without the grave, the bond and the perceived presence should not be mislabelled as hallucination. As commented by some psychologists, though in literature and popular culture contact with the dead is not a taboo, for academics, they are still "unwilling to acknowledge a phenomenon that other realms of culture accept soberly and unstintingly. Still, people are afraid of the stigma of 'insanity' attached to beliefs such as CA (Continued Attachment)."<sup>166</sup>

Death marks an unalterable separation. Puzzled over the destiny of the deceased, the bereaved is also anxious to understand the departed's new identity, and their own in relation to it. As Lai Chi-tim aptly stated:

What this inquiry seems to convey is an unbearable pain in not being able to make the unknown knowable, to determine the identity and the destiny of the dead. To meet the questions of the dead at issue here with silence is to deny our bond already established between the deceased and us.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Ethan R. Benore & Crystal L. Park, "Death-Specific Religious Beliefs and Bereavement: Belief in an Afterlife and Continued Attachment", *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14.1(2004): 16-17.

<sup>167</sup> Lai 2006, 92.

The identities of the living and the dead depend on roles built around the family. From the moment of death, a shift of family roles is expected. It does not mean the role of a son or a father would fade away. But their relationship will be transformed. Through grave visiting, the transformed identities are reinforced and the bond maintained. The visitation thus becomes a visible part of the identity search, in which talking to the departed at the graveside has significant implications.

## 6 REFLECTION

- 6.1 Grave Visitation as a Means of Keeping the Bond Alive
- 6.2 Applicability of the Secularisation Thesis
- 6.3 The Phenomenological Approach & Comparison in Religious Dialogue

### 6.1 Grave Visitation as a Means of Keeping the Bond Alive

A grave is not merely a sign of the end of one's life. The way a grave is tended reflects how one imagines a once-living body passed to another realm. Those thoughts and expressions, as previous chapters reveal, are to various extents culturally and geographically constrained. For instance, common to both groups, spontaneous visits are mainly determined by the location of the cemetery. For regular visits, however, the patterns and activities vary. In Hong Kong, most of the dead were cremated. The ashes were often installed in niches while graves are small in number. Even if one managed to secure a grave, it would usually be small in size and covered entirely by cement. Unlike the Frankfurters who perceive obligations to embellish the graves, gardening or embellishment works were not necessary and thus rarely reported in the Chinese group. Instead, they felt the urge to come at special occasions.

Visiting a grave also shows a wish to carry a past relationship into the future. Though the expressions in the two settings vary, their concern for the loved ones is very much alike. It should not be excluded that they are all expecting to see the departed again no matter where that might happen. This expectation, and eventually the bond itself, is kept alive through grave visitation. Consciously or unconsciously, the bereaved supposed the departed is aware of

the visit or the presentation of gifts. By recalling the words or deeds of the dead, and by presenting linking objects such as flowers and food, they identify themselves with the departed, internalizing the values in such a way that the departed becomes a part of the self. In this sense, a hope for future union is indicated: I will continue to be there when my parents passed away, I want to maintain the bond as before, because I would like to see them again, somewhere else.

The ways of maintaining a bond or attachment are, nevertheless, seldom openly acknowledged. Though speaking with the dead at gravesides is not unfamiliar to the participants in both groups, it seems most are reluctant to recount their communications with someone who cannot respond verbally. Is continued attachment with the dead generally condoned? What kind of expressions might be considered acceptable? How could researchers encourage participants to comfortably describe their experience of continued attachment? Those questions warrant further investigation in connection with bereavement studies. A young man described how he felt his departed grandfather appears like a guardian angel around him:

I try to find out what it is like in my case. I remember I experienced him as someone who was supporting me. I remember when I finished my studies, when I was looking for a PhD opportunity, my grandfather asked, "Do you need money?" I felt that he wanted to support me. This feeling doesn't stop with the death of person. The feeling does not switch on or off. But the feeling supports you... Rationally of course I say that my grandfather is dead. Somehow in my unconsciousness probably I have a feeling that – may be the feeling that can be carried on.

However tentatively described, one cannot assume that the continuous guidance felt in the heart of the living is merely therapeutical. The phenomenon, though unexplainable, should not be reduced to illusions.

Still, can the hope for a continuation be considered an eschatological hope? For the German participants the influence of Christian values is considerable,

noticeably in the stress of the continuation of the original personality in the world to come. Since their imagination was more anthropocentric than theocentric, the participants' hope for eternal happiness and continuing bonds can be viewed within the framework of individual eschatology. Though they may not concern about the destiny of the whole world in general, they do care about that of their own and the ones they love. At times they might claim that it is unrealistic to believe in a life after death, or gave a verdict like "but I hope there's something". And notions such as resurrection, judgement or punishment were seldom mentioned. Yet the compassion of life and longing for reunion is where the resonance started, no matter how vague the hope appears to be.

Having explored the Chinese setting, we noticed that the observance of grave visitation can be traced back to an array of religious thoughts including Confucian teachings of filial duty and reciprocity, the Daoist concept of cosmic harmony, and the Mahayana Buddhist influence of merit making for liberation. This eclectic character, as far as the well-being of the departed is concerned, corresponds to the Chinese worldview that stresses on the wholeness of the universe and the interplay of *yin* and *yang*, the process of change. In short, different customs were formed and practised to express a similar hope for an undisturbed family bond and posthumous existence regardless of their backgrounds.

This hope, however, can also be empathized through a shared concern for bodily integrity in spite of the diverse ideas about death and life after death shown in the comparison in previous chapters. The compensatory amplification in disposal and rituals for those who were cremated is an example. In other words, it can be assumed that they were not intending to preserve the body in practice while on one hand, it is costly, and on the other, all of them understood the natural process of decomposition. The bodily integrity they are seeking is more the image and personality. As stated, this is the identity, the projection of the same self that matters. When whole body burial is not practical, as in Hong Kong, or unaffordable to some, as in Frankfurt, the integrity of body is no longer based on the mass buried. The notion of identity or personhood essentially transcends the long debate on the separation of body and soul or the belief in bodily

resurrection. With a continued relationship with those who died, this is also a genuine longing for a transformed identity in a reality that is meaningful for them.

At the end of the day the hope for a continuation connects us all, wherever that might be. The uncertainties of death would not be eliminated, but the hope for reunion is reinforced. Human compassion is manifested through remembrance. To visit the grave of a departed loved one reflects their concern about another dimension of life. In this sense, a grave is like a door leading to an unknown world. Though what is behind the grave is unclear, and no matter what their primary purpose of visit is, they do not assume that death is the end of one's life. They are searching for a transcendental dimension, the ultimate meaning of death and life through stepping out from their house and trying to go closer to the frontier. Through the practice, their beliefs and hope of the existence beyond this life are reaffirmed and reshaped. Eventually, this is their acknowledgement of an unconfined realm.

Such an unconfined realm is beyond the dichotomies between the sacred and the profane, body and soul, or the notions of heaven and hell, immanence and transcendence. This paradigm of infinite openness is known to the people from both cultural settings without bearing a specific name. This is a resolution that best describes the understanding of death for most. Where all dualities are shattered, there is no boundary, no distinction between the sacred and profane.<sup>168</sup> This dimension is opened up through encountering, questioning and embracing death through visiting the graves, participating in the rituals and remembering the departed. As a participant confessed:

I myself am very suspicious, or very doubtful whether there is an existence after death, but all the time I am in the funeral I become more convinced, I was sure yes if you look back on the person's life and how it were, and now the ceremony holds there must be, there must be something after. I think it's a belief that I as a person that will be very strongly, explained and also believed at funerals.

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<sup>168</sup> The distinction between the sacred and profane has always been a muchdebated issue in religious studies. See Gantke, Wolfgang. *Der umstrittene Begriff des Heiligen. Eine problemorientierte religionswissenschaftliche Untersuchung*. Diagonal: Marburg, 1998.

And the other echoed, “It seemed that almost at each of these dreadful moments the curtain to the other world swang open for a short while.” Rituals are the channels for them to touch and feel the otherwise intangible. Traditions are reformulated according to their own experience and for their audience, their children or their fellow human beings. Integrated into the hope of re-encountering the person as a whole, they are not indifferent to death.

## 6.2 Applicability of the Secularisation Thesis

Religiosity or religiousness covers a wide range of meanings. The concepts of sacred and profane, however, are still indispensable in most academic discourses. Particularly, a number of sociologists are interested in attributing the changes in family values, moral standards, or *Weltanschauung* to secularisation, a cultural or social shift from a sacred or religious world to a profane or secular. Yet our participants’ attitudes towards the dead tend to disagree with their lament that people are becoming less and less religious these days. In this section we will examine the secularisation model in the hope that the concept of religiosity could be elucidated through our specific findings. At the end, the discussion will make it clear the introduction of infinite openness above could be a viable paradigm for looking at death and afterlife.

The secularisation thesis has undergone significant modifications throughout the past decades, yet the decline of religion is still central to sociological investigations on religion. Attempts have been made to assess the extent and the ways the influence of religion has declined over time in the lives of individuals, cultural traditions and social institutions. Consequently, the decline is labelled secularisation.<sup>169</sup> A contested concept, the term secularisation is

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<sup>169</sup> “Theories about religion in terms of its social characteristics (which is a more accurate label than ‘social theory of religion’) have often involved ideas about the decline or negation of religion. This indicates a major difference from the social scientific study of, say, health or education. Whereas interest is high in the social distribution of poor health and low standards of educational provision, the eclipse of health or education as forms of social activity is not a common topic for research. By contrast, one can sometimes gain the impression that the social scientific study of religion is centrally concerned with the decline, erosion or eclipse of religion. Indeed, the prospect of its decline seems to motivate some researchers to study religion.” James Beckford, *Social Theory and Religion* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 30-31.

intrinsically problematic. As Swatos and Christiano pointed out,

The secularization theory is placed in relationship both to the Religion of Reason of the Enlightenment and developments in European religious historiography during the nineteenth century. The underlying conflict to be resolved with respect to "secularization" is whether the term can be used in a relatively value-neutral analytic way or whether it inherently carries unsubstantiated value presuppositions.<sup>170</sup>

Following their argument, it would be inadequate to generalize the claim to all cultures and say that the whole world is less religious nowadays. Simply assuming an indisputable age of faith in the past and extending the change of the western church-state relationship to another culture will not do justice to a comparative account. Even within a single cultural context, people could show diverse attitudes towards religious changes. For example, for those who associate religion with backwardness or superstition, the separation of church and academia is welcomed for it implies scientific development. For those who focus on church attendance, the apparent loss of interest in church activities may be regarded as a tragedy.

From a linguistic point of view, the term has acquired various meanings in the course of time. In the church context, it was used to denote "an authorization given to religious with solemn vows and by extension to those with simple vows to live for a time or permanently in the world (*sæculum*),"<sup>171</sup> while the world means outside the cloister and their order. Interestingly, to go into the world is not supposed to be at odds with the religious profession. Taken the flux of language into account, this primary sense had subsided when the term started to acquire negative connotations. Later on the changing relations between religious organisations and the political and commercial counterparts led to a gradual shift of meanings. For instance, the Lutheran doctrines of the Two Kingdoms and

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<sup>170</sup> William H. Swatos & Kevin J. Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept," *Sociology of Religion* 60.3 (1999): 209.

<sup>171</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13677a.htm>, "Secularization."

other codes about social contracts encouraged a distinction between religious and secular spheres. In England, the legal boundaries between the religious and the secular was officially set by Henry VIII of the English State when establishments such as property and offices were removed from the Roman Catholic Church through the procedure of “secularisation”.

Historically speaking, the current sociological agenda on secularisation can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century when European philosophers started to formulate ideas about the church-state relation. Scientific advancement since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was then the key factor shaping the social boundary of religion and non-religion. Not until then were the concepts of the sacred and the profane being put in opposition to each other instead of juxtaposition. This stance was further promoted by prominent philosophers or social scientists such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud. One of the classical examples is Max Weber’s use of the term secularisation to denote the double-sided rationalisation-disenchantment process.

In the field of social sciences, the term “secularisation” is often used to describe the process as well as the result of the separation of state and church in Europe. The controversies surrounding secularisation, however, cover a wide-ranging scope. If the concept involved merely the separation of organisational establishments, there would not be much to argue about. Addressing the multidimensionality of the notion, Karel Dobbelaere has put forward an analytic scheme juxtaposing the dimensions of social system, religious organisations and individual religious involvement with reference to the macro, the meso and the micro levels.<sup>172</sup> In a similar vein, José Casanova stated that the secularisation theory is composed of three completely different and unintegrated scenarios, namely “secularization as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms”, “secularization as decline of religious beliefs and practices”, and “secularization as marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere”.<sup>173</sup> Concerning the philosophical influences behind the various

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<sup>172</sup> See Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels* (Brüssel, Peter Lang, 2002).

<sup>173</sup> See José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

approaches, Philip Gorski concluded that it is essential to recognise there are many secularization theories.<sup>174</sup>

For the sake of simplicity, I will continue to use the singular of “thesis” or “theory” as the complexity and diversity of the concept has already been addressed. I believe it is more important to remember that concepts like secularisation, secularity, or the secular are usually relative to the meaning of religion or religiosity defined by the narrator. Partly due to their Christian backgrounds, few scholars are concerned by the definition of religion in the conceptualization of secularization. As noted by Eric Sharpe, the discourse in the past indicated the continued confusions about what secularisation might be, instead of how it might be measured.<sup>175</sup> It is conceivable that the broader the definition of religion, the less the secularisation process is seen as prominent.

In recent times, the proposal of religious change resulting from differentiation and privatisation tends to receive much more attention than the prediction of the disappearance of religion based on earlier debates. Indeed, not all debates accepted the idea of the Golden Age of Faith underlying the secularisation theory. Some researchers challenged it by looking for empirical proof. They argued that the truth of secularisation claims depends solely on historical evidence. Peter Berger, as one of the most prominent proponents of the classical secularisation thesis, admitted in 1992: “By the late 1970s it had been falsified with a vengeance. As it turned out, the theory never had much empirical substance to begin with.”<sup>176</sup> Long before the confession of Berger, Gabriel Le Bras was among the first who openly criticised the thesis by saying that before a society can be de-Christianized it must be Christianized.<sup>177</sup> Following this position, Rodney Stark cited many works from renowned historians showing that

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<sup>174</sup> “First of all, there is not one ‘secularization theory’ but many. Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Berger, Luckmann, Parsons, Wilson, Bruce, Casanova What the various theories have in common is what might be called the differentiation thesis: They all argue that religious and nonreligious institutions have become increasingly differentiated over time, at least in the modern West. They take four basic positions: disappearance, decline, privatization, and transformation. The most fervid defender of the disappearance thesis is undoubtedly Comte.” Gorski, “Historicizing the Secularization Debate: Church, State and Society in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe, ca. 1300-1700”, *American Sociological Review* 65 (2000): 138-67.

<sup>175</sup> See Eric J. Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (London: Duckworth, 1983).

<sup>176</sup> Peter Berger, “Sociology: A Disinvitation?” *Society* 30 (Nov 1992): 15.

<sup>177</sup> See Gorski, 144-145.

the “Age of Faith” is nothing more than a myth. He argued that modernisation cannot be seen as the catalyst that pulled the god into the backstage. And secularisation means much more than deinstitutionalisation. True, simply to relate the power of the church to the level of personal piety can no longer be held as a sound proposition. Yet how realistic is it to measure the religiousness of the past? With reference to recent historical research, Philip Gorski suggested that the Middle Ages were “neither a period of universal faith nor a period of popular superstition.” Rather, it is a time in which faith and magic were intermingled.

In the past there was nothing like the European Values Survey or other similar area-specific investigations. Since systematic or quantitative records were not available, it is impossible to prove the rise or decline by statistical measures. Moreover, it is not our goal to confirm or falsify the thesis of religious decline or revival. What we want to draw attention to are situations such as diminishing religious authority and the notion of “believing without belonging”. In effect, even if surveys are available, the results must be interpreted with caution. Let us illustrate with two interesting results from the latest European Values Survey (Germany)<sup>178</sup>.

Q.27 Do you personally think it is important to hold a religious service for any of the following events?

Birth	63.9%
Marriage	68.1%
Death	73.4%

Q.30 Do you believe in

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
A. God	67.8 %	32.2 %
B. Life after death	38.8 %	61.2 %
C. Hell	20.1 %	79.9 %
D. Heaven	30.9 %	69.1 %

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<sup>178</sup> The European Values Study is “a large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey research program on basic human values, initiated by the European Value Systems Study Group (EVSSG) in the late 1970s, at that time an informal grouping of academics.” The project was started in response to the questions such as “Do Europeans share common values?”, “Are values changing in Europe and, if so, in what directions?”, “Do Christian values continue to permeate European life and culture?”, and “Is a coherent alternative meaning system replacing that of Christianity?” raised in a bishops conference. To explore the changes of moral and social values, three waves of surveys were conducted. In the last survey in 2000, 33 European states were represented. See <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>

In Q27 we notice a church funeral is regarded as important by a large majority. We do not know however whether that reflects one's own need or a perception of the need of others. In Q30, the survey shows many do not believe in life after death, hell or heaven. But there is no way for respondents to describe those concepts or for readers to figure out the meanings of them. That said, it is not my intention to devalue the importance of quantitative research. Quantitative data are essential. But even when we have the figures as listed above, we cannot simply say that nowadays people do not believe in some forms of existence after death. It is likely that many do have certain indefinable ideas about life after death. The problem is that people did not have the chance to formulate them into a clear-cut concept. As a result, they would probably just give a negative answer when being asked a yes or no question from a questionnaire. Because it is not a longitudinal study, neither can we claim that there is a religious decline of the people involved.

If a comparable study was done, most people in Hong Kong would also probably claim they have no religious beliefs and do not believe in the existence of heaven and hell, though they might participate regularly in family rituals such as "worshipping deities" (bai shen) and "worshipping ancestors" (bai zu xian) or visit temples in order to seek deities' blessings or guidance. Such phenomenon has been termed "a nameless but active religion" by some scholars.<sup>179</sup> Moreover, because of its colonial background, many schools and social service agencies in Hong Kong were founded by Christian organizations. In the last two decades, the scene has started to change. There was a significant increase in the diversity of service providers. The newcomers include both religious groups such as Buddhist and Daoist foundations and non-religious groups such as alumni chapters. However, no one would describe the situation as secularised. It is true that people in Hong Kong are more concerned about the quality of services provided than the ideologies of the founders behind. Though the churches occupy a central role in education and social services, they are not generally regarded as authoritative in other issues. In other words, they are confined to their specific functional roles.

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<sup>179</sup> See Liu Tik-Sang, "A Nameless but Active Religion: An Anthropologist's View of Local Religion in Hong Kong and Macau," *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 374-394.

For that reason, the attempt to apply the concept of secularisation to a comparative endeavour can be misleading. As Peter Beyer commented:

Looking at the question of secularization from a global perspective, and in light of the concrete examples that I have just given, one is led to at least one rather obvious conclusion. If we include Iran, Korea, and India in our view along with the United States and Sweden, it seems evident that the notion of secularization as a straightforward loss for religion of all societal influence or significance does not apply to global society as a whole.<sup>180</sup>

Secularisation in the sense of differentiation, which appears indisputable in the West, would have to be modified and extended to a setting in which the conceptual and structural opposition of the secular and the religious is not available. Especially in the study of funeral and grave visitation, which is regarded as a sensitive topic, a method based on bipolarised conceptualisation could be inapt.

In many contemporary studies on Western religious landscapes, church religion was used as the reference point for measuring the degree of secularisation. As a result, religions in other forms and styles could not be recognized, not to mention their latest developments. Obviously, to categorize religious activities without examining the background would certainly weaken the reliability of research. If the problem of categorization is well known, as Stark, Hamburg & Miller demonstrated in their examination of spirituality in America, Sweden and Japan,<sup>181</sup> concepts about religious forms such as church religion and unchurch religion, institutionalised and diffused religions may be used as an operating tool in a comparative study. Recognizing the particular social and cultural contexts from which the connotations arose may avoid a mere “nostrification” (Nostrifizierung) of other cultures in comparative analysis. As proposed by Joachim Matthes, an attempt to understand other cultural values should be

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<sup>180</sup> Peter Beyer, “Secularization from the Perspective of Globalization,” *Sociology of Religion* 60.3 (1999): 232.

<sup>181</sup> See Rodney Stark, Eva Hamberg & Alan S. Miller, “Exploring Spirituality and Unchurch Religions in America, Sweden, and Japan,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20.1 (2005): 3-23.

regarded as a task of contrasting various basic concepts rather than pairing up theoretical notions.<sup>182</sup>

In more recent debates different manifestations of religiosity are gradually acknowledged and included. Pluralism is thus a topic that cannot be avoided. For example, as he repudiated his previous statement about secularisation, Peter Berger reaffirmed the importance of pluralism in the discussion.<sup>183</sup> Specifically, pluralism may be seen as a locale-specific concept implying the availability of distinct faith traditions in a certain location. This involves not only the presence of information about other religious traditions, but also their existence as such. Ideally, the varieties should co-exist harmoniously, with people free to choose between them. Whereas individuals are supposed to be able to choose what to believe and how to put their beliefs into practice, it must be noted that their choices do not arise within a social or cultural vacuum.

Concerning death rituals, disposal and remembrance practices are shaped by communal norms or traditional values, and to a considerable extent reinforced by interpersonal contacts as well as by the mass media. Though essentially pluralistic, people are not completely free to choose because the government or cemetery authorities set the boundaries regarding burial regulations. While awareness of new disposal and remembrance methods in both Frankfurt and Hong Kong are increasing, the attitudes towards new trends vary. In Germany, the growing acceptance of cremation is often used to measure the degree of secularisation. Some scholars claim cremation is an unwanted child of modernisation or industrialisation.<sup>184</sup> On the other hand, our interviews showed

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<sup>182</sup> See Joachim Matthes, "Is Secularisation a Global Process? An Exercise in Conceptual History." In *Religion and Modernization in China. Proceedings of the International Association for the History of Religions held in Beijing, April 1992*, ed. Dai Kangsheng, Zhang Yinying & Michael Pye (Cambridge: Roots and Branches, 1995).

<sup>183</sup> Berger said, "If I look back on my earlier work, I would say that I was wrong about secularization, but right about pluralism. I misunderstood the relation between the two: the latter does not necessarily lead to the former (*vide* the American case). What pluralism does (and there I was right) is to undermine all taken-for-granted certainties, in religion as in all other spheres of life. But it is possible to hold beliefs and to live by them even if they no longer hold the status of taken-for-granted verities. In other words, I would now say that pluralism affects the how of religious belief, but not necessarily what." "Postscript" in *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, ed. Linda Woodhead. London: Routledge, 2001, 196.

<sup>184</sup>For example, see Norbert Fischer, "Zur Geschichte der Trauerkultur in der Neuzeit. Kulturhistorische Skizzen zur Individualisierung, Säkularisierung und Technisierung des Totengedenkens", in

the practice of cremation was often associated with a concern about money. A brief survey of the recent changes in burial practices may help us to understand the situation.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany, cremation was introduced for hygiene, economic and religious reasons. The first crematorium was founded in 1878 in Gotha and cremation had the same status as burial in German law since 1934. Currently, about half of the dead in Germany are cremated and the figure is rising. For Roman Catholics, cremation has no longer been forbidden since the Second Vatican Council, provided that it is not conducted for reasons against the Christian belief. However, burial of a human body is still preferred. The Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland/EKD) has acknowledged the practice since 1898. New burial forms preserve respect for the dead and continue to demonstrate the value of death, within which the Christian faith may still play a central role.

Since the 1930s, the German law concerning the disposal of remains stipulates that coffins and urns must be buried in a cemetery within 96 hours of death unless the remains are to be shipped abroad. Basically, this mandatory cemetery burial (*Friedhofszwang*) applies to all people who have died in Germany regardless of their ethnic origins.<sup>185</sup> A considerable amount of space has therefore been reserved for the disposal of remains. In Frankfurt alone, there are 35 municipal and 12 Jewish cemeteries covering 256 hectare of land. The oldest and the largest is the Hauptfriedhof founded in 1828 with 70 hectare including both traditional burial grounds for both corpses and urns, and columbaria for the installation of urns (*Kolumbarium/Urnenwand*). It is worth noting that many gravesites are leased for a limited period (*Ruhefristen Bestattungen*). That means they are not intended for permanent use. Usually, a grave for an adult (e.g. *Reihengrab*) in a municipal cemetery in Frankfurt is leased on a 20-year non-renewable basis.<sup>186</sup>

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*Totengedenken und Trauerkultur: Geschichte und Zukunft des Umgangs mit Verstorbenen* (Irseer Dialoge 6), ed. Markwart Herzog (Stuttgart u.a.: Verlag Kohlhammer ,2001), 41-57.

<sup>185</sup> One exception is Nordrhein-Westfalen, in which a new law on burial was passed in 2003.

<sup>186</sup> For a *Wahlgrab*, it can be occupied for 40 years. For a child died before the age of five, the grave can only be used for 10 years. For Muslims the regulation on the limited lease period has been waived.

In recent years, alternative burial forms are becoming more popular. According to the latest study of preferred forms of burial initiated by Aeternitas in 2007, 51 percent of the respondents wished to be buried in a traditional grave, whereas in 1998 and 2004 the figures were 87 percent and 62 percent respectively.<sup>187</sup> Though further investigation must be done to examine if this implies a generational or a structural change, it is clear a new trend is emerging. Since the introduction of the natural burial ground/forest cemetery (*Friedwald*) in 2000,<sup>188</sup> more than 25 forest cemeteries have been established all over the country. The closest one to Frankfurt is located in Weilrod, 40 kilometres northwest of the city. For burial of this kind, a lease of 99 years is expected. Though other methods such as cremation jewellery, sea and space burials are also available, compared with other Western European countries, German options are relatively limited. For instance, green burials in the United Kingdom have been available for almost two decades, while in the Netherlands, it has long been possible to take cremated ashes home.

Yet neither the Catholic nor Evangelical Church in Germany welcomes the changing attitudes towards disposal method, and subsequently the visitation activities and grave tending patterns. Besides respect for human body, they are concerned about opportunities for remembering the dead. Here is the response of the Evangelical Church:

Allerdings ist es seelsorgerlich und psychologisch nachgewiesen und tritt faktisch auch immer wieder ein, dass Hinterbliebene, die einer anonymen Beerdigung zugestimmt haben, später erhebliche Probleme mit der „Ortlosigkeit der Trauer“ bekamen. Ein konkreter Erinnerungsort, ein identifizierbarer Grabstein, ja schon ein umgrenzter Bereich auf einem Friedhof haben für nicht wenige

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<sup>187</sup> The series of studies were initiated by Aeternitas e.V. The latest survey in 2007 is called “Bevorzugte Bestattungsform: Welche Bestattungsform würden Sie grundsätzlich für sich wählen, einmal ungeachtet aller gesetzlichen Vorschriften?”, [http://www.aeternitas.de/inhalt/news\\_und\\_trends/2007\\_04\\_05\\_09\\_47\\_16/download1.pdf](http://www.aeternitas.de/inhalt/news_und_trends/2007_04_05_09_47_16/download1.pdf).

<sup>188</sup> *Waldfriedhof*, Woodland cemetery, is different from *Friedwald*, a eco-cemetery, natural burial ground, in which the ashes must be interred in a bio-degradable urn. In countries where whole body burial is permitted in the natural burial ground, the coffin or shroud must be bio-degradable, and no embalming fluid or concrete vaults is allowed.

Menschen zentrierende und darum heilende Bedeutung. Die christlichen Kirchen standen auch deswegen den anonymen Bestattungen immer deutlich kritisch gegenüber.<sup>189</sup>

Centered on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the ritual chosen is supposed to be a manifestation of the transition from life to death which stressed the value of human body. For that reason, the Catholic Church is strongly against the establishment of anonymous burial grounds and forest cemeteries which will in turn discourage the practice of death rituals:

Die Konzeption des sogenannten „Friedwaldes“ (freier, unumfriedeter Wald; völlig naturbelassenes Waldgebiet; anonymes Urnenfeld; Baumsymbolik) lässt zentrale Elemente einer humanen und christlichen Bestattungskultur vermissen. Darüber hinaus sind bei dieser Bestattungsform weder ein christliches Totengedenken noch ein christlich-religiöses Brauchtum am Grab möglich (Kreuz, Licht, Weihwasserschale, Blumen). Die Deutung einer bloßen Rückkehr des Menschen in den Natur-prozess liegt nahe. Das weltanschauliche Fundament der „Friedwald“-Konzeption ist das naturreligiöse Bekenntnis: „Der Baum ist Grab und Grabmal zugleich; er nimmt die Asche mit den Wurzeln auf als Sinnbild des Lebens über den Tod hinaus.“<sup>190</sup>

In short, what the churches argue is that remembering the dead requires concrete places. If people give up the practice, they will forget the names and identities of dead. Eventually, they may be apathetic about people because a part of what makes them human has been lost.

But the fact is that although the number of anonymous burials is increasing, new forms of disposals are not necessarily anonymous. It seems that people are more interested in having a tailored site reflecting their personality

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<sup>189</sup> EKD, 11.

<sup>190</sup> Die deutschen Bischöfe Nr. 81, 64-65.

than being buried anonymously. From this point of view, this is not a change from named to nameless, but of the way to engrave the name. If individual identity is cherished, there is no reason to be displeased for a customised method or design. If a grave is for the dead or belongs to the dead, why should the deceased or the mourners' feelings of individuality be negated? The reason is a fear that if people are going to be buried in whatever form they like and mourn in their own way, the sense of permanence implied by a traditional grave may no longer be treasured. Without a "proper" burial site, a sense of transience will surface.<sup>191</sup> Then a common hope for eternity will no longer capture people's attention. To be precise, a collective Christian identity built within the boundary of a specific space will fade out. Yet different measures are taken in response to those changes. For example, the church has recently been re-introduced as the venue for funeral services to bring the dead back to the church instead of leaving all the responsibility to the cemetery chapel.<sup>192</sup> The first church-operated forest cemetery in Germany was founded in 2007 in Schwanberg.<sup>193</sup>

The concern over personalised burial and remembrance is not simply about a named place. At the core of the problem is the paradox of individual and collective identities. The individual identity the churches want to preserve, from this perspective, is not identical with that of the people themselves. The comments of Reiner Sörries over the first private cemetery in Germany may give us some hints:

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<sup>191</sup> Norbert Fischer commented: „Diese Entwicklungen zeugen davon, dass sich die Beziehungen zu den Erinnerungsorten in einem grundlegenden Sinn verändert haben - und damit auch zu den Orten von Tod und Trauer. Die neuen, partikularisierten Lebenswelten zeigen eher einen 'Durchgangs'-Charakter. Sie lassen sich mit jenen 'Nicht-Orten' vergleichen, wie sie der französische Ethnologe Marc Augé beschrieb. Man geht zu ihnen eine nurmehr flüchtige Beziehung ein. Das Flüchtige wird zum Selbstverständlichen und lässt alles Dauerhafte als historisches Relikt erscheinen.“ From "Vortrag 16. November 2006 Bünde/Westerenger: Ein Blick zurück in die Moderne." [http://www.n-fischer.de/tod\\_2.html](http://www.n-fischer.de/tod_2.html).

<sup>192</sup> „Im Blick auf die zukünftigen Entwicklungen in diesem Bereich geht es also auch darum, dass die christlichen Kirchen ihre Kirchenräume, ihre Gottesdienste und ihre jahreszyklische Erinnerungskultur (Volkstrauertag, Ewigkeitssonntag) vielen, auch ‚kirchlich ungeübten‘ Menschen verstärkt anbieten als Orte und Zeiten, an und zu denen der Verstorbenen gedacht werden kann. Indem die Kirchen ihre ‚Räume für die Ewigkeit‘ öffnen und z. B. auch wieder häufiger Trauerfeiern in den Kirchen (und nicht nur in den Friedhofskapellen) zulassen, schaffen sie öffentliche Erinnerungsräume für die Toten, deren Gedenken nicht unbedingt an erreichbare oder konkrete Friedhöfe und Grabsteine gebunden ist. Die Kirchen können sich so selbst als Orte öffentlichen Totengedenkens imponieren und damit ihre gesellschaftliche Funktion als ‚Kirche für andere‘ (D. Bonhoeffer) stärken.“ EKD. 10.

<sup>193</sup> See [www.schwanberg.de](http://www.schwanberg.de)

Fritz Roth möchte gegen den Strom schwimmen, wenn er sagt: „Der neue Friedhof richtet sich gegen die Anonymität in unserer Zeit. Er ist ein Impuls gegen den Zeitgeist.“ Ich hoffe, ich konnte zeigen, dass das Gegenteil der Fall ist. Die Gärten der Bestattung folgen dem Mainstream unserer Zeit, sie sind Ausdruck des Zeitgeistes und fügen sich passgenau ein in das neue Konzept unserer Gesellschaft und der Politik. Und sie sind tatsächlich der Inbegriff einer Individualität, die ihre Identität in der Exklusivität und außerhalb der herkömmlichen Gemeinschaft sucht und findet.<sup>194</sup>

As a matter of fact, undertakers will not just sit back and wait for customs to fade out. New trends are actually co-created or supported by the mortuary business. Moreover, no matter how much churches emphasise the importance of a traditional grave, most graves are not for permanent use. The brutal truth is that when the lease period ends, the next occupant will simply be placed in the same spot, probably on top of the previous one. From time to time, it has been reported that diggers could see the bones of the previous occupant because ten or fifteen years may not be enough for decomposition. Knowing this, we must re-examine how a site can be regarded as proper or permanent. Perhaps a natural burial ground with a 99-year lease would be a better choice if the time dimension is taken into account.

In Hong Kong, the method of disposal is seldom a controversial topic among different religious groups. For example, cremation is viewed quite differently. Since whole body burial is generally not a viable option because of land shortages, cremation has become the predominant form. People are well aware that cremation is the most accessible alternative if one would like to keep the remains within the border of Hong Kong. We could hardly find any complaints or hard-feelings upon knowing that the deceased was being burnt. There was no interruption (Abbruch) perceived because not having a burial site is

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<sup>194</sup> Reiner Sörries, "Privatheit und Identität in Friedhofswesen." [http://www.sepulkralmuseum.de/nachricht/sr\\_priva.pdf](http://www.sepulkralmuseum.de/nachricht/sr_priva.pdf). See also <http://www.puetz-roth.de/Das-Haus-der-menschlichen-Begleitung.aspx>

much worse than not having a whole body burial. Survivors resolve to take care of their elders while they are still alive and after death. No matter how the practice of public burial in public varies, ancestral rituals still prepare the presence of the dead within the family. Put differently, when there is no choice, various means will be employed to maintain a relationship. It transcends the idea of preserving the whole body.

The above review shows that the culture of burial and remembrance is changing rather than diminishing. It is inappropriate to claim that the emergence of new disposal and remembrance practices is the consequence of secularisation. Rootedness and identity are not bound to the soil but to the heart. The choice between traditional and alternative burial methods is beyond the conventional duality of individuality and community which formed the basis of the secularisation thesis. Such development entails “Kultur der Differenzen”, a renewal of the monopolised instead of a breakup (*Verfall*) of traditions.<sup>195</sup> Take the mandatory use of coffins in burial (*Sargszwang*) in Germany as an example. This law is now under review because some states have realised that people from another religious backgrounds, such as Islam, may find the use of a coffin unacceptable, if not offensive.<sup>196</sup> In this sense, a coffin is not only unfriendly to the environment but also to other citizens. Actually, in the past, *Konduktsarg* was used because an individual coffin was virtually unattainable for common people.

It is true that funerals and grave tending are getting more expensive and people are therefore looking for other options. Yet economic concerns should not be considered perverse. If *Konduktsarg* is to be advocated again, it could be both a cost-effective and environmentally friendly option. Cremation, on the other

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<sup>195</sup> „Letztlich geht es um die Entwicklung einer Friedhofskultur, die den Tendenzen der Pluralisierung, der Individualisierung und der multikulturellen Entwicklung in der Gesellschaft nicht ausweicht. Ein solcher ‚Kulturbegriff der Differenzen‘ würde den Friedhof als ein (immer neu) verhandelbares Diskursfeld verstehen, in dem sich die Beteiligten mit ihren verschiedenen kulturellen Normen, Werten und Verhaltensweisen immer wieder intensiv auseinander setzen würden, um im Dialog die eigene Angst vor der Fremdheit der Kultur der Anderen zu überwinden und so ein facettenreiches, aber gemeinsames Verständnis von Friedhof zu entwickeln.“ See Werner Nohl & Gerhard Richter, “Friedhof und Trauer: Leitlinien für die zukünftige Friedhofsgestaltung”, [http://www.aeternitas.de/inhalt/publikationen/2002\\_01\\_18\\_\\_09\\_08\\_10/studie.pdf](http://www.aeternitas.de/inhalt/publikationen/2002_01_18__09_08_10/studie.pdf).

<sup>196</sup> See Joachim Diefenbach, “Die neuen Bestattungsgesetze” Vortrag, gehalten am 18. Juni 2004 in Hamburg während der Mitgliederversammlung 2004 der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Friedhof und Denkmal e.V <http://www.sepulkralmuseum.de/nachricht/diefenba.pdf>.

hand, may rekindle the popularity of family graves as urns occupy much less space.<sup>197</sup> Opposed to the postulation of decline in family values, family ties will be strengthened instead. Moreover, the virtual cemetery, an emerging means of remembrance, has been shown to be a valuable way of fostering relationships between the living and the dead. In her studies about Web memorials, Pamela Roberts showed how the internet can be a counter example of “Ortlosigkeit der Trauer”:

Despite the fact that creating and visiting Web memorials can be done alone and that no contacts with others through e-mail links or guestbooks entries are necessary for Web memorialization, there is a considerable emphasis on relationships in these data. Existing ties to the dead and the living as well as new relationships started in cyberspace are portrayed throughout – in memorials, guestbooks, and survey responses detailing how each is used.<sup>198</sup>

Parallel to our reading of new disposal methods, Roberts shows that the trend of virtual memorials is not likely to lead to alienation. On the contrary, a new community is built through the internet. Online communication would not become a substitute for personal support, but a new means of encouraging further contact, be it by phone calls, visits or the post. In other words, modes of communication of the living both between themselves and with the dead are expanded as both online and offline relationships are enhanced. The possibility of using cyberspace to cope with death could be an effective way of meeting various psychological needs and lessening the tensions of different values. At any rate, changing lifestyles and increased mobility are making virtual cemeteries more and more popular.

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<sup>197</sup> It has to be noted that cremation may not be as environmental friendly as it sounds like. Roger Short, an Australian scientist has questioned the tradition of cremation by stating that the contribution of cremation to carbon dioxide emissions, not to mention the energy used in burning the corpse and the emission. Instead of cremation, he suggested we should be buried upright in cardboard boxes under a tree. As natural fertilizer, the remains would help the growth of the tree and the tree, in turn, would absorb carbon dioxide for decades. “Think earth to earth,” he proposed, “but not ashes to ashes or dust to dust”. See Australian Science Media Centre, “National Media Briefing on 17 April 2007”, [http://www.aussmc.org/end\\_cremation.php](http://www.aussmc.org/end_cremation.php).

<sup>198</sup> Pamela Roberts, “The Living and the Dead: Community in Virtual Cemetery.” *OMEGA* 49.1 (2004): 57-76.

Though the broadband coverage in Germany was attained at a slower pace than that of Hong Kong, internet access in both cities tends to be widely available and affordable at present. Yet none of the participants initiated a discussion of web memorials. Considering the fact that older participants are less interested in the cyber world while younger ones are less engaged in grave visitation and tending, it is not surprising to find that the idea of web memorials is not yet prevalent. In Frankfurt, the older participants usually live relatively close to the cemetery, so even daily and weekly visits are not a problem if their health conditions allow. Because younger people are looking for ways to avoid tedious grave tending duties while maintaining bonds, it is foreseeable that in the future web memorials might become a more widely-used alternative as the internet is an indispensable part of their life. In fact, because social networking on the internet is becoming more popular, it is expected that Facebook or Twitter for the dead will appear soon. From this point of view, individualisation does not necessarily lead to alienation. On the contrary, the problem of distance can be removed by the availability of internet. A seemingly personal and individualised use of technology revives the meaning of internet to be interconnected.

### 6.3 The Phenomenological Approach & Comparison in Religious Dialogue

We are not able to experience death and then come back to tell others what it is. Nor can we prove the existence of some kind of afterlife. Between a total denial of an existence after death and an unfailing trust of the life in the world to come, most participants in our study show a strong sense of uncertainty about afterlife. Though their attitudes were ambivalent, their answers fragmentary or apparently contradictory, the responses were genuine and reflect a religious dimension the participants themselves had not been aware of. It should not be surprising to note that when the participants were asked to describe their ideas about life after death, they admitted praying for or talking with the dead on one side, but doubted the existence of life after death on the other.

This finding challenges the idea of inconsistency of beliefs held by many theorists. If the term inconsistent is to be used, we must ask: Inconsistent in what sense? Is it in the view of the theorists, the researchers or the participants?

Religiosity is not necessarily the consequence of logical reasoning. Very rarely will people put forward a philosophical statement about a soul or an explication on post-mortem existence systematically in everyday life. However, systematic reflection on ordinary conversations, as suggested by Steinar Kvale, may lead to “a refined understanding of a human world understood as a conversational reality.”<sup>199</sup> With an openness to the experiences described, and attempts to bracket presuppositions, the phenomenological approach helps to straddle the boundary between the conventional dualistic concepts of objectivity and subjectivity. Thus the question is not about whether one can be sure that the description of the experience is accurate. The key is rather to look for convincing evidence that the thematic description is providing insights about the participants’ experience. A reliable way is to request negative descriptions of the phenomenon. In our case, for example, the descriptions of not being able to fulfill the duties of visitation were noted.

Human beings communicate with language. An interview cannot be done without it. It is true that certain concepts might be specific to a certain culture. Yet globalization and the subsequent intensive information available facilitate knowledge transmission and cultural exchange. We should not underestimate our ability to understand others with the help of background information and interaction. Even if certain terms are known to be untranslatable, the art of adequate rendering should not be undermined. At the same time, a deliberate employment of a “neutral” phrase in the hope of achieving a value-free or objective questioning is unnecessary because the meaning of a term was usually given by the co-researchers during their reflection. The over-concern of neutrality would only impede the flow of the dialogue. Exploring the meaning of a phrase in their own culture is more important than searching for ideal, theoretical

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<sup>199</sup> Kvale, 285.

wordings rarely heard in everyday life. As pointed out by Raymond Williams, the pioneer in cultural studies, “culture is ordinary: that is the first fact”.<sup>200</sup>

Understanding the dynamics of cultural production and plurality of interpretations, we will be able to appreciate the process of comparison. Comparing, as described by Jonathan Z. Smith, is “a fundamental characteristic of human intelligence.” “Without it, we could not speak, perceive, learn or reason.”<sup>201</sup> During the process of approaching another people and religion, the first task is to respect their culture. Without cultural sensitivity and contextual knowledge, the comparison will be imperialistic, religiously biased or anti-contextual. Yet the researcher’s background should not be interference but a catalyst. By raising questions about prevailing ideas in two different cultures, a comparative work contributes to the possibility of imaging a realm constituted differently than our own. At the end, we will realise that our inherited suppositions do not represent the full horizon of human experience.

Yet there are several difficulties related to labelling or categorization in this cross cultural comparison. First, as shown in the previous section, from a macro perspective the secularisation model is neither a valid operational tool nor concluding remark of the recent changes in burial and remembrance. Through reflection on the concept, we identified value and attitude differences towards remembering the dead between the two cultures. Second, we must avoid using incompatible classifications. In his investigation of cemetery visitors in Germany, Gerhard Schmied named people with a non-Christian oriented image of heaven as “Esoteriker”.<sup>202</sup> This is because in the very beginning he had already restricted

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<sup>200</sup> Williams stated: “A culture has two aspects: the known meanings and directions, which its members are trained to; the new observations and meanings, which are offered and tested. These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life--the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning--the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.” See “Culture is Ordinary” in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11.

<sup>201</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith. *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 241.

<sup>202</sup> „Es war schon in der europäischen Untersuchung angebracht zwischen ‚Leben nach dem Tod‘ und ‚Himmel‘ zu differenzieren. Leben nach dem Tod, ist eine Vorgabe, die nicht mit dogmatisch bestimmen

the imagination of life after death to European-centered ideas of heaven. Anyone who did not align with that image was deemed atypical. Needless to say, if we adopted his classification instead of using an all-encompassing notion of life after death our comparison would be futile. On the other hand, even if a model is sound in its own right, like Tony Walter's emphasis on eternity in the beliefs of afterlife,<sup>203</sup> it would be problematic to simply extend the Western idea of eternity to another culture.

In addition, we have to beware of euphemistic usages. In written Chinese, the term usually used to refer to grave visitation is *saumu* (掃墓), which literally means "to sweep a grave". It is an action-oriented expression without religious overtones. In Cantonese, the term is *bai shan* (*baai saan* 拜山), which literally means "to pay a visit to the hill". During the interviews the participants also described their visits as "to see" or "to venerate" the ancestors. In most situations those terms are interchangeable. Exceptions include an active church member who intentionally avoided the expression *bai*, which can mean "to venerate" besides "to visit", while describing her own visitation activity. However, she did use the word when talking about other people's practice. Alternatively, another participant who was visiting a burial ground instead of a crematorium deliberately took up the term *saumu*, most likely because she is one of the few who really has a grave to sweep. Interestingly, as one participant suggested, when organising their visits, they would use the location of the cemetery to denote the activity: "We will just mention the date and time that we'll meet in Shatin. And that's it." To deliberately omit the action verb to see, to venerate the ancestors or to sweep the grave is not uncommon. In my experience and observation, it was often preferred to speak about a location than to mention the activity itself.

Complicated and ambiguous, the language and conceptualisation involved in the topic of death and life after death warrants further analysis. This study is just an illustration of how sensitive it can be. Methodologically speaking, future

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Inhalten gefüllt werden muss. Vier der von uns Befragten orientierten sich in ihren Vorstellungen an nicht-christlichen Quellen. Wir können sie ‚Esoteriker‘ nennen; vor allen naturwissenschaftliche oder vielleicht auch quasi-naturwissenschaftliche Konzeptionen sind bestimmend.“ Schmied, 50.

<sup>203</sup> See Tony Walter, *The Eclipse of Eternity: A Sociology of the Afterlife* (New York: Pelgrave, 1996).

quantitative research would benefit from the examination of relevant concepts in this qualitative study by revising the attributes and scales accordingly. A possible application is to improve the grief and mourning assessment in social work or clinical psychology practice. Complementarily, it would be worth looking into remembrance in a private sphere such as the placement of a little shrine, a candle or photo at home to find out how the practices are integrated into everyday life. Comparing multiple locations in the world would be another challenge. Considering circumstances in places without birth control, or those suffering from wars or natural disasters, where life is not something that can be planned. Populations there would probably have other ways to comprehend intergenerational links and to keep bonds alive. This study tries then to be a reliable source of cultural comparison. Most importantly, it points to a genuine reorientation of religious education. With reference to phenomenology, religious education means the exploration of religious phenomena in a non confessional way. In addition to self-discovery, knowing that death is not the end will help students recognize the commonality of human existence and experience and develop empathy throughout the process.<sup>204</sup>

Concerning the similarities and differences of ideas about life after death, we must restate that commonalities are no more than resemblances judged within a mediating framework. Too often commonalities are misread as absolute universal. Our approach is instead an alternative to essentialist views. As Evan Zuess suggested, identifying common grounds and aspirations in outwardly different religions is as significant as recognizing the contextual differences among similar religions for the resemblances identified may promote tolerance between religions.<sup>205</sup> Using a similar logic of family resemblances, this tolerance

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<sup>204</sup> Alison J.H. Leech, "Schwierigkeiten, sich dem Fremden zu nähern" in *Religionspädagogik und Phänomenologie von der empirischen Wendung zur Lebenswelt*, ed. Hans-Günter Heimbrock (Weinheim: Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1998).

<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that structural resemblances or "the patterned ways human form social and cognitive worlds that are not contingent on any culture" may become apparent. See Paden, 88. See also Evan Zuess' comment, "Inasmuch as we all share a human and worldly environment it is not extreme to grant that some, at least, of these typifications are held in common. The implications of structuralist anthropology not only support this, but remind us of some of the paradoxes of Husserl's method: if certain structures prevail across many or all cultures, the conscious meanings given to them in any one culture are almost, or perhaps entirely, irrelevant. Such structures must operate at a preconscious level below and outside of any apparent contextual logic." (69).

is made possible by an open concept of religion which does not require the lowest common denominator.<sup>206</sup> As Ugo Bianchi said,

The term religion (and religious) is better considered at this point of research as an analogical term which overshadows sets of concepts and realities having in common some typical characteristics or "aspects", not always the same, sets separated, on the other hand, by differences which reach to the same depth as the similarities. This is a kind of "family resemblance" which is different from a strictly definable "universal". Moreover, those sets constitute, in their whole, widespread cross-cultural networks over the planet, and this is in favour of a holistic consideration of the world of religion.<sup>207</sup>

After all, religion is a way of life. Emphasising the practice in everyday life is therefore of great importance. In the past, religious texts and dogma were usually the focus of academic research. Popular religious activities including various death rituals were often marginalised or pejoratively labelled.<sup>208</sup> Recently, more and more studies were designed to explore religious practice and experience. Even so, many of them were mainly interested in searching for a prototype of the ancient rites or presenting the ritual performance in details descriptively. What we have achieved instead is to reveal both the practice of, and the ideas behind grave visitation through a non-ethnocentric framework, the basis for genuine interreligious dialogues.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> For example, René Gothóni argued that what made both Christianity and Buddhism members of the Religion family is through analogy instead of certain definite common features or "genetic relation" and "the believers in both religions long for what, according to their mythology, is conceived of as paradise." See *Attitudes and Interpretations in Comparative Religion* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2000).

<sup>207</sup> Ugo Bianchi, "Concluding Remarks: The History of Religions, Today." In *The Notion of 'Religion' in Comparative Research. Selected Proceedings of the XVIth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Roma: Bretschneider, 1994), 921.

<sup>208</sup> In fact, "those labels betray dogmatic assumptions that are not acceptable in an ideologically neutral form of the study of religion." Peter Antes, "A Survey of New Approaches to the Study of Religion in Europe", in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion: Textual, Comparative, Sociological, and Cognitive Approaches*, ed. Peter Antes & et al (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 59.

<sup>209</sup> For the difference between a dialogue and a monologue in religious-cultural encounters, see Wolfgang Gantke, "Wege zur Toleranz. Eine interkulturelle Orientierung", in *Wege zur Kommunikation. Theorie und Praxis interkultureller Toleranz*, ed. Hamid Reza Yousefi, Klaus Fischer & Ina Braun (Nordhausen: Bautz, 2006), 243 - 262.

Explicitly and implicitly, grave visitation reflects the concerns over a loved one after death. Though it is not often noticed or mentioned, the bond of love continues through ages. This is a dimension of human life that will not fade out in spite of the changes around the world. If love is seen as a religious value transcending all daily pursuits, how can the religiosity shown in the hope for reunion and the care of grave tending be denied? We can never fully comprehend the mystery of human life. But the power of love breaks the wall between life and death. Marcel Gabriel once said, “Being loved means being told that ‘you don’t have to die’” Religion can mean to find goodness in humanity, to taste the meaning of life by experiencing it, and then by connecting with others, even extending to the realm of death, but not only by philosophical utterances. Life is not absurd when one is grateful for the presence of others. We cannot dismiss the rituals as a mere hanging on the bygone, but should regard it as the source of happiness, the foundation of religion. In this regard, remembering a death is motivated by the wish to live out a life with purpose.

This is a dialogue seeking to appreciate different ways of life from within. As Ian Barbour emphasised, we must respect the integrity of other traditions and recognise the irreducible differences.<sup>210</sup> Throughout the journey, I could not agree more with Raimon Panikkar:

The inter-cultural dialogue is not a mere political necessity or an academic concern. It is a personal affair and has to begin by being an intra-religious experience. If I do not feel and suffer in myself the excruciating tensions and polarities of the real, if I see from within only one party and from without the other, I shall not be able to really understand, i.e. to stand under the two visions and thus to do justice to both.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> See Ch.9, Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1974).

<sup>211</sup> “The mutual understanding and fecundation of the different traditions of the world may be accomplished only by sacrificing one’s life in the attempt to sustain first the existing tensions without becoming schizophrenic and to maintain the polarities without personal or cultural paranoia.” Raimon Panikkar, “Philosophy as Life-Style” in *Philosophers on Their Own Work V.4*, ed. Andre Mercier and Maja Svilar (Berne and Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1978), 201.

I felt the tensions, and I struggled. I reached out to the fellow visitors, hoping to do justice to people from both cities.



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## APPENDIX I – LIST OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

### Hong Kong

1. Amy, 40, clerical officer, single, without children
2. Ben, 55, development officer, married, with 1 child
3. Ying, 45, trading firm owner, married, with 3 children
4. Yiu, 30, computer programmer, married, without children
5. Yung, 55, retired, married, with 2 children
6. Eric, 58, civil servant, married, with 2 children
7. Joey, 42, editor, single, without children
8. Kelly, 40, clerical officer, married, without children
9. Lisa, 62, retired, married, with 3 children
10. Hung, 30, insurance agent, married, without children
11. Sandy, 30, school teacher, single, without children
12. Lam, 31, air traffic control officer, married, with 1 child

### Frankfurt

1. Kuno, 52, social worker, married, with a child
2. Martha, 46, social worker, married, with 1 child
3. Helga, 50, housewife, married, with 2 children
4. Paul, 40, teacher, single, without children
5. Walter, 40, musician, married, without children
6. Gerhard, 71, retired, married, with 3 children
7. Gisela, 63, retired, married, with 2 children
8. Emile, 67, retired, married, with 2 children
9. Maria, 30, doctoral student, single, without children
10. Diane, 48, firm owner, married, with 1 child
11. Konrad, 33, teacher, single, without children
12. John, 36, management consultant/lecturer, married, with 2 children

## APPENDIX II – THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

### INTRODUCTION

- About the Project
- About the Interview
- Signing of the Informed Consent Form
- Clarification of Questions
- Remarks

### GENERAL QUESTIONS

- Try to remember one of the last times you were in the cemetery or at home thinking about or doing special things for the departed family members and tell me about the situation, how you felt and acted and what you said.
- What dimensions, incidents and people intimately connected with the experience stand out for you?
- How did the experience affect you?
- What changes do you associated with the experience?
- How did the experience affect significant others in your life?
- What feelings were generated by the experience?
- What thoughts stood out for you?
- What bodily changes or states were you aware of at the time?

### • BEHAVIORS/EXPERIENCES

- How often? On a regular basis or on specific occasions?
- What do you do?
- What is your relationship with the deceased?
- Would you please describe the details and order of the activities.
- Who is in charge of that? What is his/her relationship with the deceased?
- How is your involvement?
- Who else are involved?
- How long does it take?
- What kind of preparation works do you need to do?
- What about follow-ups?
- In what occasions have you talked to others about the rituals you have done?
- In which context will you discuss your feelings and thinkings about life after death?

## FEELINGS

- Would you please describe your feelings when you were performing those rituals or visiting the grave?
- What did you see, hear, touch, or smell?
- Which moment had the greatest impact?
- How do you feel about the relation with the departed?
- How strong is your wish to see your family members again?
- When participating in the rituals, how strongly do you identify with the following phrases?

Examples: pride for the achievements of the departed, gratitude to the departed, respect for the departed, personal satisfaction for keeping the traditional rites, shame for your failures and mistakes, affection for your departed loved ones, fear that the departed might be displeased, a sense of belonging to your family, a sense of need for yourself or your family, concern for the condition of the departed in another world

## KNOWLEDGE

- What do you know about those rituals?
- How were those rituals emerged?
- How do you make sense out of the related activities?

## OPINION AND VALUES

- What makes you go to the cemetery / perform those rituals? What do you believe is the most important reason for performing rituals for the dead?
- Some say that it is for the sake of the deceased. Some believe that it is a pacification of the mind of the bereaved. What are your expectations? In your opinion, how important is it for the departed to be aware of your acts?
- What would you related those rituals to, say, other daily activities?
- Which part do you especially like about, if anything? Which do you especially dislike, if anything?
- What kind of problems have you encountered during the funerals/grave visits?
- What difference have those rituals made to the family? Can you imagine the difference between a family which performs those rituals continuously and those without?
- Why is maintaining family traditions important to you?
- What do you think about others' attitude in dealing with deceased family members?
- What do you plan to do in the future? What do you expect your children to do after your death?
- The following questions are particularly important to our understanding of cultural differences. In some cultures, people claim that they perform those rituals are

expressions of filial piety. Some say that they do so in order to uphold the lineage or develop family welfare. What is your view on that?

- Can you tell me a special occasion that you feel the togetherness with your departed family members most intensively?
- Some believe that death is the end of everything. Some say that death is a kind of transformation which leads to another life. One exists in another form. What do you think about life/existence after death?
- Some say that the dead will give blessings to the living. Some say that the dead must be controlled or pacified so that they will not disturb the living. What do you think about this?
- Why is it necessary to go to a place different from your daily settings to perform the rituals?
- What did you actually do when you felt a wish to communicate with the departed? What is the main reason for trying to communicate with the departed?
- Did anyone in your family tried to communicate with a deceased relative through a spiritualist? What was the purpose of doing so?
- How much power do the deceased have to affect the earthly lives of the living by, e.g., protecting them or bringing them prosperity?
- When you encounter trouble or misfortune, how often do you appeal to the departed family members for assistance?

#### BACKGROUND

- Would you please tell me your education background?
- What about you religious affiliation?
- How often do you attend religious services or meetings?
- What kind of activities are they?
- Are you personally more or less regular in your participation of those ritual practices now than you were five years ago?

#### ENDING

- Tell me more, if you will, about your thinking on ...
- That covers the things I wanted to ask. Anything else you would like to add?
- Thank you!



