CORPSES TO CREMAINS, CHICKENS TO JPEGS
The Reception of Cremation and Related Rites by Hong Kong's Practitioners of Popular Religion

by

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Abstract

This study investigates cremation in Hong Kong as well as a number of related practices—the use of columbaria, green burials, and the worship of ancestors online. Why these practices emerged is considered in addition to their promotion by the state and reception by practitioners of popular religion. It is demonstrated that cremation became accepted with little fuss for practical, political, and cultural-religious reasons. It is also shown that columbaria, although possessing desirable fengshui, are problematic in that they lack sites for worshiping Houtu and are becoming smoke-free. Green burials, campaigned for by the state and endorsed by ethicists, have been met with resistance because they involve scattering cremated ashes (viewed as harmful and/or disrespectful to the dead) and fail to provide ancestors with permanent places of rest. With regard to online worship, there has been little enthusiasm as it is does not concord with people’s ritual sensibilities.
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for

Walter (Lodge) Mudlo,
Shadow,
and Tyson Cook
When the Master went inside the Grand Temple, he asked questions about everything. Someone remarked, “Who said that the son of the man from Zou understood the rites? When he went inside the Grand Temple, he asked questions about everything.” The Master, on hearing of this, said, “The asking of questions is in itself the correct rite.”

– The Analects, 3.15 (translation by D. C. Lau)
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Introduction

Over the past several decades, mortuary practices in Hong Kong have undergone a number changes. While certain rites have only been altered slightly, others have become almost unrecognizable; new ones have emerged, and old ones have passed away. Perhaps, the most striking change has been the near-unanimous shift from ground burial to cremation and the storage of ashes in columbaria niches. That there are currently people opting to scatter cremains at sea or in Gardens of Remembrance (jinian huayuan 紀念花園) is also remarkable, as is the fact that some citizens are now availing themselves of an online memorial site (wujin sinian wangzhan 無盡思念網站), provided by the Hong Kong Government’s Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), which allows individuals to communicate with and make electronic offerings to the dead.¹

The challenges that these practices pose to traditional Chinese beliefs and values are manifold. Indeed, outside of Buddhist monasticism, cremating the dead has been regarded with contempt throughout much of Chinese history by commoners and gentry alike.² Previously, in Hong Kong, it was custom to provide each of one’s ancestors with a permanent resting place marked by an omega-shaped grave (or earth-mound), situated according to the principles of fengshui 風水 (geomancy; lit. wind-water). Since the dead were thought to be capable of acting as either a benevolent or malevolent influence in the lives of the living, significant amounts of time and resources were often spent determining an appropriate burial site from where the deceased could act as a conduit of power and be visited throughout the year, especially during grave-sweeping festivals (i.e. the Clear and Bright Festival (Qingming jie 清明節) and the Double Ninth Festival (Chongyang jie 重陽節)). Choosing correctly meant comfort for the departed and good fortune for the living while failing to do so meant discomfort for the dead and problems in the lives of the bereaved.

¹ Chinese terms have been transliterated according to the pinyin system with the exception of the names for districts in Hong Kong. Here, I have retained the Cantonese transliteration recognized by the Hong Kong Government. For the sake of uniformity, quotations have also been altered in this way.
² A brief history of cremation in China is provided in Chapter 1.
Without a doubt, the practice of cremation challenges traditional notions about how corpses may be safely and respectfully handled. The subsequent management of cremains—their storage or lack thereof—raises questions about fengshui, the cult of Houtu 后土, the souls of the dead, and the performance of grave-sweeping festivals. In addition, while opening the door to a number of new possibilities, online memorialization appears to challenge ideas about how worship may be conducted and about how space and place are conceived of more generally. Attendant to all of these practices, of course, are concerns regarding the proper expression of filial piety (xiao 孝).

Before engaging these issues and others in the subsequent chapters, however, I will use the remainder of this introduction to outline the current project’s method and approach and also to provide a brief summary of the existing scholarship.

**Chinese Popular Religion**

The practices being contemplated herein belong most suitably to the designation “Chinese popular religion”. There is a tendency for this term to act as a residual category. However, I follow Philip Chart in my desire for it to stand as more than just a placeholder for “religious odds and ends that do not fit under the heading of one of the ‘great traditions’” and hope that it will serve “to direct attention to the ‘lived religion’ of Chinese people.” I understand it to be “popular” in the sense that it is points to religious beliefs and practices that exist beyond class and institution and are shared by the majority of people. Being non-institutional, Chinese popular religion possesses no fixed cannon and has no organized clergy to promulgate its views. Rather, its ideas are primarily transmitted orally within families and consolidated in ritual experiences. It is “Chinese” in that it imagines an ordered universe based on unequivocally Chinese concepts and developed in and around the geographical area known as China. Finally, it is “religious” in that it envisions a world populated by a host of supernatural beings, namely ghosts, gods, and ancestors. Unlike many organized religions, however, it is not interested in

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5 Ibid., 221.
6 Many Hong Kongese do not view the actions discussed herein as being religions. The term “religion” (zongjiao 宗教) is a foreign concept and used in Hong Kong only to refer to organized religions, such as
Ultimate Reality. Although soteriological concerns do arise (especially in relation to the dead), for the most part, popular religious practices tend to focus on preventing misfortune and attaining practical benefits for the living within this lifetime. With these goals in mind, practitioners tend to move fluidly from shrine to temple, from god to bodhisattva, giving up offerings according to the principal of *do ut des* as they search for a being with the greatest power to respond (*ling* 靈) to their daily wants and needs. This attitude is slightly different where ancestors are concerned. There is still a sense that offerings can yield returns. Indeed, Emily Martin Ahern calls “reciprocity… the heart of ancestor worship”. But, unlike with gods, the reciprocal bond between ancestors and their offspring is a matter of fate, not choice. Moreover, the relationship tends to be marked by a kind of love that is absent from deity worship. Thus, while the gods are often abandoned or even punished for failing to respond to the needs of their devotees, ancestors only rarely incur such treatment.

As with deities, though, people’s use of religious professionals is fluid, although reasons for a particular choice might be influenced more by things like cost and convenience than by the efficacy of the officiant. As Charles D. Orzech observes with regard to the Buddhist *fang yankou* 放焰口 (release of the flaming mouths) and Daoist *pudu* 普度 (universal salvation) rituals, the two rites “are not interchangeable for the Buddhists and Daoists who perform them”, yet “many laypeople who hire the priests and monks care little about the matter” so long as the

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8 This attitude already existed during the medieval period and played a significant role in the rise and decline of a number of gods and goddesses. See Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127-1276* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).


10 For an example of ancestral tablets being destroyed by a descendant, see Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors”, 161.

11 Such fickleness is of no matter to Buddhist or Daoist religious professionals who, unlike the clerics of Abrahamic traditions, are unbothered by a non-committal laity.
desired result can be achieved. In this way, the clerics of organized religions and many of the rites which they perform can be thought of as being “‘in but not of’ popular religion”.

There are two other types of individuals who participate in but cannot be said to be of popular religion. The first are those exceptional human beings, like the Confucian philosopher Xunzi 荀子, who engage in various rites for their social and psychological functions but deny any supernatural efficacy. The second are those who attend ceremonies and perform rituals only because they feel obligated to do so. The first type of person is rare and the second feels pressures that are a testament to the prevalence of the beliefs and values being expressed by and through the practices within his or her social sphere. Either way, at present, our concern is with those who remain open to the possibility of their actions being efficacious in a religious sense.

**RITUAL AND RITUAL SPACES**

My meditations on Hong Kong mortuary practices have been greatly influenced by the thought of the late Catherine Bell, a Chinese Studies scholar and ritual theorist, and, to a lesser extent, by the work of Ronald L. Grimes, Kevin Schilbrack, and J. Z. Smith. Bell, for her part, sees “ritual” as a culturally relative category. What constitutes ritual in one context, she says, fails to do so in another. As individuals act within a given sociocultural setting, they develop what she calls a “ritual sense”, the ability to distinguish ritual actions from ordinary ones. A person’s sense of ritual, Bell explains, “is not a matter of self-conscious knowledge of any explicit rules of ritual but is an implicit ‘cultivated disposition’”. Particular ways of acting come to be viewed as distinct within the mind of a participant by means of what Bell calls “ritualization”, a process that employs a number of strategies (e.g. formality, invariance, repetition, etc.) designed to “invoke a series of privileged oppositions” relative to everyday actions. Sometimes, an action becomes distinct simply by virtue of its being performed within a unique environment, a marked-off space. Pouring out wine at a restaurant or bar, for example, is likely to be thought of far differently than its equivalent at an altar or at the foot of a grave. As

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16 Ibid., 140.
Smith notes, “within the temple, the ordinary…becomes significant, becomes ‘sacred’, simply by being there”.

The various components of a given ritual must be considered not only in contrast with ordinary actions, however, but also in light of other rituals, both past and present. As Bell argues, “ritual acts must be understood within a semantic framework whereby the significance of an action is dependent upon its place and relationship within a context of all other ways of acting: what it echoes, what it inverts, what it alludes to, [and] what it denies” (emphasis added).

It is in this way that religious practitioners come to develop an even subtler “sense”, which helps them to delineate between profane ritual actions and ritual actions which might be said to be numinous (i.e. have the power to affect by supernatural beings and forces).

Of equal importance to the current project is the notion that belief is inextricably linked to ritual actions and environments. It is obvious that rituals have communicative power; they assume certain things about the nature of reality and implicitly convey these ideas to their participants. The actors, in turn, tend to see themselves as “simply responding to a de facto organization of reality”. According to Bell, it is this “invisibility of ritual in naturalizing assumptions about the nature of reality that denotes in part the basis of its effectiveness”.

Even an act as simple as burning a paper offering has much to say. It implies, for example, that death is not a matter of annihilation and that the dead still have wants and needs in the hereafter. It communicates the existence of invisible realms populated by various types of beings who require different kinds of offerings. It suggests that objects are able to be transmitted to these worlds and that doing so is of benefit.

Of course, I in no way view participants as being simply blank slates onto which the worldviews implied by rituals are uninhibitedly inscribed. Rather, I agree with Bell, who argues that rites are “experienced as a negotiated appropriation”. “The socializing—or ideologizing—effects of ritual”, she says, “appear to depend on many factors, such as the degree of people’s involvement in the rites, the amount of ritual repetition, and the degree to which the values espoused in the deep structure of the ritual are reinforced in other areas of social life”.

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18 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 220.
20 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 176.
21 For instance, deities are offered gold spirit-money whereas ancestors are offered silver spirit-money.
22 Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 208.
Schilbrack takes the agency of participants once step further by suggesting that rituals act as tools ("cognitive prosthetics") with which practitioners can grapple with larger, philosophical and/or religious questions in much the same way that a pen and paper might assist one in solving a math problem.\(^{24}\) Changes to rituals, then, are of great significance, not only because they affect what is transmitted to subsequent generations and how, but also because they alter the toolkit from which individuals draw to articulate their beliefs.

When existing rituals change or new ones emerge, they are unlikely to be accepted unless they meet certain criteria. Most importantly, a ritual must appeal to the “ritual sense” of its prospective participants. In the context of popular religion, this often means that the new rite must feel efficacious in a religious way. In most cases, this will mean that the new or altered rite retains some measure on continuity with the past. As Bell notes, “a ritual that evokes no connection with any tradition is apt to be found anomalous, inauthentic, or unsatisfying by most people”.\(^{25}\) However, while “frivolous changes…undermine qualities that make ritual aesthetically moving or authoritatively reassuring”, alterations to rituals, when done tastefully, can act as a “particularly effective means [for] mediating tradition and change” and even work to empower people in turbulent times.\(^{26}\) Much the same can be said about the construction of ritual sites, such as the columbaria and online memorial pages discussed below. Ritual spaces are often indispensable to the proper execution of a rite. At the very least, they directly affect how a practice is experienced and reflected upon. As Smith states, “the creation of a new ritual site is always an intriguing process. For, from the standpoint of ritual, novelty may result in a functional gain, but, just as often, in an ideological loss. If the former allows the freedom to innovate, the latter may result in a lack of resonance”.\(^{27}\) Thus, as the rituals and ritual spaces in question are considered in the subsequent chapters, close attention will be paid to what has been kept and what has been left behind, what is novel and what is antique, and, more importantly, what does and does not fail to resonate with the “ritual sense” of practitioners.

**Existing Scholarship**

The scholarship which examines the recent shifts in Hong Kongese mortuary practices is


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 222-223, 251 and Bell, “Performance”, 217.

\(^{27}\) Smith, *To Take Place*, 75.
minimal. The vast majority of work is contained in just three articles written almost two decades ago by the geographer Elizabeth K. Teather (one co-written with Chun-shing Chow).28 Teather focuses mainly on the emergence of columbaria themselves, which, at the time, she referred to as “a totally new cultural artifact…without precedent in Chinese culture”.29 Along with Chow, she regards columbaria as “collective tombs”, seeing them as “the commoner’s equivalent to the royal tombs of Imperial China”.30 She argues that these structures seem to strike a balance between functionality and cultural sensitivity.31 And, since they consider things like fengshui in their design, she suggests that they must not represent any fundamental shift in popular cosmology. She does note, however, that columbaria niches prevent fengshui considerations from occurring at the individual level and that they are “neither an architectonic symbol of a system of beliefs nor a mnemonic device that reinforces them, as was the traditional, omega-shaped grave”.32 Unfortunately, being much more concerned with the sites as a whole, Teather moves past these problems rather quickly.

Lily Kong is the only other scholar to have considered emergent death rites in the context of Hong Kong, having authored an article which deals with Hong Kongese sea burials (haiyang 海葬) in conjunction with Taiwanese woodland and park burials (shuzang 樹葬 and huayuan zang 花園葬). In addition, she looks at online mourning and memorization in urban China.33

With regard to sea burials, Kong discusses some of strategies that have been employed by the government to make the practice more accommodating and points to some of the culturally rooted reasons for its slow rate of acceptance (e.g. lack of grave, mixing of cremains, inability to provide offerings, etc.). Her treatment of Taiwanese woodland and park burials is much the same. With regard to online memorial sites, she suggests that their arrival has worked to supplant “the need for locatedness of grief and memory in the physical world” and, thus, represents a shift

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30 Chow and Teether, “Chinese Graves and Gravemarkers in Hong Kong”, 303; Teether, “Themes from Complex Landscapes”, 27.
32 Ibid., 425.
33 Lily Kong, “No Place, New Places: Death and its Rituals in Urban Asia”, Urban Studies 49, no. 2 (2012). Unfortunately, Kong does not discuss online memorial sites in Hong Kong as her paper was first received in April 2010, two months before the sites were launched.
to “spatial transcendence”. She does not propose, however, that these sites are without issue. In urban China, memorial pages are costly, temporary, and prey to online vandals. Furthermore, Kong observes that memorial sites fail to produce many of the social benefits linked to communal events like grave sweeping.

**Sources and Approach**

To engage the issues surrounding contemporary burial practices in Hong Kong and their reception, I collected a number of primary sources, including state-produced materials and funeral parlour publications, all of which I have read hermeneutically. Since many of the rituals being discussed have historical precedents in classical texts, such as the *Liji* (Book of Rites) and the *Yili* (Book of Etiquette and Rites), as well as in later ritual manuals, such as Zhu Xi’s *Jiali* (1130-1200) *Jiali* (Family Rituals), I have also consulted these works, albeit with an understanding that they were never adopted wholesale at the popular level. Additionally, so as to experience Hong Kong, its cultural matrix, and ritual spaces firsthand, I conducted several stints of fieldwork. As I performed this research, I primarily maintained an atheistic posture, yet, at times, allowed myself to slip into a ludic stance, which is to say that I playfully entertained the world as if a practitioner of popular religion. Doing so, I would argue, is unavoidable for any person who practices empathy and, at the same time, quite useful when dealing with questions regarding the reception of emergent practices in a region and culture other than one’s own as it allows one to get “closer to belief…on ontological [rather than] merely cognitive grounds”.

This fieldwork took place every summer from 2014-2017. Throughout these times, I visited a number of funeral homes—Grand Peace Funeral Parlour (*Fuze binyiguan* 福澤殯儀館), International Funeral Parlour (*Wanguo binyiguan* 萬國殯儀館), Universal Funeral Parlour (*Shijie binyiguan* 世界殯儀館), and Po Fook Memorial Hall (*Baofu jinianguan* 寶福紀念館)—as well as the columbaria, crematoria, and Gardens of Remembrance at Cape Collinson (*Gelianchen jiao* 歌連臣角), Diamond Hill (*Zuanshi shan* 鑽石山), Fu Shan 富山, Wo Hop

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34 Kong, “No Place, New Places”, 430 and 416.
35 Ibid., 429.
36 Ibid., 431.
37 Rather, only choice selections of these texts were adopted, usually for utilitarian purposes.
Shek 和合石, Cheung Chau 長洲, and Kwai Chung 葵涌, and the columbarium and Garden of Remembrance at Peng Chau 坪洲. Some of these sites were either missed by Teather or else boast impressive, new columbaria and/or crematoria that were nonexistent at the time she conducted her research. In addition to sites listed above, I also visited a number of small businesses in Hung Hom 紅磡, which provide temporary storage for niches or specialize in funerary products, such as coffins, niche plaques, flowers, funerary clothes, and joss paper. Finally, I took on the role of cyber-ethnographer as I systematically explored and analyzed over one hundred online memorial sites.

Thus, my explanation of the current state of mortuary practices in Hong Kong is chiefly grounded in empirical “data”. Furthermore, this “data” has been understood within a context determined by historical studies, the ethnographic archive, and my own experiences. At the same time, I have made use of various categories, such as “Chinese popular religion” and “ritual”. However, I have tried to keep these designations (as well as my understanding of the overall context in which the practices in question are being negotiated) sufficiently vulnerable so as to allow for readjustments to be made in light of new data and experiences. That said, I do not believe that the products of my research demanded any radical alterations be made in this respect (indeed, in many cases, the data lent itself to reaffirmations). Nevertheless, it is my sincere hope that the fruits of this labor might work to expand human knowledge and understanding, even if only slightly.

**Chapter Overview**

In Chapter 1, a brief history of cremation in China is provided followed by a consideration of the historical and cultural-religious reasons which led to and allowed for Hong Kong’s

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39 The English names for the funeral parlours are those provided by the funeral homes themselves. At times, they differ from their Chinese counterparts.

40 Since the situation in Hong Kong is occurring in a unique cultural and political context, I have tried to rely mostly on the region’s own ethnographic archive. However, where relevant, I have also consulted the works of academics who have performed ethnographic studies outside of Hong Kong, such as J. J. M. de Groot’s writings on death and dying in Fujian and Emily Martin Ahern and Stuart E. Thompson’s in Taiwan. Finally, given the current lack of research directed at modern mortuary practices in our area of interest, I have also looked to the contributions of Zhou Shaoming, Martin K. Whyte, Natacha Aveline-Dubach, Maylis Bellocq, and Yukihiro Kawaguchi, each of whom, to varying extents, has thought and wrote about cremation related mortuary practices in mainland China.
comparatively smooth transition away from ground burial. The consequences that storing cremains in columbaria niches has for *fengshui*, the cult of Houtu, and grave-sweeping festivals is dealt with in Chapter 2. The third chapter explores two alternative forms of disposal: scattering ashes in Gardens of Remembrance and at sea. Reasons for the practices’ lack of appeal in the region will be contemplated. Particular attention will also be given to the government’s newest promotional strategies, which seek to transform the way in which practitioners of popular religion think about life after death. Thereafter, a short discussion of environmental ethics will be provided since such thought has no doubt influenced public policy and has the potential to sway popular opinion regarding corpse disposal. Finally, in Chapter 4, I provide the first-ever analysis of Hong Kong’s internet memorial service. The implications of online worship will be considered and an explanation will be provided for why the vast majority of individuals are not using the site religiously.
Proper disposal of the dead has been and continues to be an issue of great importance within the Chinese world. Love, filial devotion, and social approval likely make this a concern of any individual’s but, from a popular religious perspective, there exists one more reason to fret: ancestors possess the ability to reward or punish the actions of their descendants. Therefore, the shift from ground burial to cremation in Hong Kong demands scrutiny. In what follows, I will examine and attempt to provide an explanation for this momentous change. To start, I will give a brief history of the practice in China. Then, I will explore its emergence in Hong Kong and offer a number of practical and political reasons for its development in the territory. Finally, in the second half of the chapter, I will focus on the role that regional customs and ways of understanding fire, bodies, and souls have played in making the transition to cremation in Hong Kong particularly smooth.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CREMATION IN CHINA

Cremation has been performed in China by minority groups since at least the fourth century CE. This is especially true of the Kitan, a nomadic people from the northeast, who eventually established the Liao dynasty (907-1125).\(^1\) The members of China’s largest and most dominant ethnic group, however, the Han, only began to adopt the custom during the Tang (618-907) in connection with the rise of Buddhism (which cremated at the monastic level) and an increased level of intercultural exchange.\(^2\) Throughout the Five Dynasties period (907–960), the practice continued to grow. Christina Han attributes this in part to the turbulence of the times. The brutal violence and political tumult characteristic of the period, she argues, caused the act of burning bodies to be viewed more positively as it was an effective method for preventing the

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\(^1\) Christina Han, “Cremation and Body Burning in Five Dynasties China”, in *Journal of Chinese Studies* 55 (2012), 2.

\(^2\) Ibid., 3.
dead from being mutilated by enemy soldiers. At the same time, unrelenting warfare meant that many died away from home and cremation served the practical purpose of transforming remains into something more transportable. Unlike corpses, cremains were lighter and could be kept comfortably until an opportunity presented itself for their safe return. Once back in their ancestral homelands, the remains could be permanently interned, cared for, and take their position at the center of a number of family rituals, which served various social and religious functions.

Only two years after China was reunited in 960 CE by Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤 (927-976), however, cremation was made illegal. Lack of enforcement, though, meant that the practice continued to gain wider acceptance throughout the Song dynasty (960-1279). A number of prominent intellectuals of the day, including Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086), Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), and Zhu Xi, deplored the mode of disposal as barbaric and unfilial. However, their dissenting voices fell mostly on deaf ears. It was not until stricter measures were taken by the government of the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644) that the practice saw significant decline. By the time of the Qing (1644-1912), all of the flames had been virtually stamped out. A notable exception did exist, though. It remained legal to cremate for transportation purposes, a device that, as we have just seen, emerged during the Five Dynasties.

During the Republican Period (1912-1949), anti-traditional sentiments arose, coalescing as the New Culture Movement. Yet, burial practices remained unaffected at the popular level. Therefore, when the governments of the People’s Republic of China and British Hong Kong began promoting cremation as official policy in the second half of the twentieth century, ground burial had again become the norm, and the fact that cremation was once widely practiced had faded from collective memory. As before, burning the body of one’s ancestor came to be seen as unfilial, non-Chinese, and a desecration of the corpse. It is hardly surprising, then, that there occurred several instances of resistance in the mainland when and where the practice became compulsory. At times, the measures taken to avoid cremation were extreme. In March 1993, for example, forty elderly Chinese from Jiangsu province conducted mass suicide so that they might

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3 Ibid., 11.
4 Ibid., 14-6 and 18.
5 Patricia Ebrey, “Cremation in Sung China”, in The American Historical Review 95, no. 2 (1990), 409.
6 Beginning in 1397 CE, cremating one’s parent was punishable by decapitation. Ibid., 425-6.
be buried intact before a mandatory cremation policy would make doing so illegal in the following month.\(^8\) Most often, though, resistance took the form of secret burials at night.\(^9\) Such burials were made possible by means of bribes or through the purchase of substitute corpses, which were burned in place of loved ones. In most cases, the cadavers bought and sold were procured by ill means. Gangs, well aware that the sale of such replacements could earn them a handsome profit, began murdering the old and disabled to provide for the demand.\(^10\) Some fengshui specialists (fengshui xiangsheng 風水先生), too, engaged in this illicit trade. Indeed, as recently as 2006, one was arrested for having killed and sold ten people designed to be immolated in the stead of others.\(^11\)

In sharp contrast to the types of responses mentioned above, however, cremation was adopted by the citizens of Hong Kong with little protest. Today, nearly all deaths in the region are cremated. It is to a discussion of this smooth transition and the reasons for the practice’s overwhelming acceptance that I now turn.

**THE HONG KONG TRANSITION**

In Hong Kong, the move from ground burial to cremation was a relatively gradual process, taking place over many decades. Foreseeing future land constraints, the colonial government began passively encouraging the shift in the late 1960s by subsidizing cremation and decreasing provisions for permanent graves. This approach likely went a long way towards the practice’s eventual acceptance in the region. Unlike in mainland China, cremation was never made compulsory. Thus, burning the dead was seen as a voluntary act, even if the rising prices of ground burial meant that, for many, little choice actually existed. In addition, the move to cremation in Hong Kong was not associated, as it was in the People’s Republic, with an agenda to eliminate the traditional family structure and a wide range of popular customs. While the

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mainland transition was accompanied by the shouting of campaign slogans (e.g. “Oppose feudal superstition!” (反對封建迷信)), the shift to cremation in Hong Kong was a quieter affair and did little to invoke a defensive attitude.\textsuperscript{12}

The most significant reason for the increasing lack of space in cemeteries was population growth. When the British first took possession of Hong Kong in 1841, the number of Chinese inhabitants was under 8,000.\textsuperscript{13} The population jumped to over 72,000, though, in the 1850s, when many fled the Tai Ping Rebellion (1851-1864).\textsuperscript{14} A second flood of refugees came as the Nationalists and Communists fought in the 1940s, especially when the latter reached Guangzhou in 1949.\textsuperscript{15} And, in 1962, famine caused by the Great Leap Forward (1958-62) drove yet another wave. As a result, by the end of the 1960s, the population had reached almost four million.\textsuperscript{16}

At the same time, Hong Kong’s cemeteries received additional stress due to the inability of people to move human remains into China. The desire to return the dead to their ancestral homes in the mainland was common among migrants from Hong Kong and abroad. B. D. Wilson observes that Hong Kong had once “enjoyed a certain pre-eminence as a transit centre for the onward movement of human remains” into China from overseas.\textsuperscript{17} However, with the People’s Republic sealed off from the world, the bodies piled up. In 1961, a coffin repository set up by the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals in Sandy Bay (Shawan 沙灣) had, sitting in wait, close to 10,000 individual sets of remains.\textsuperscript{18} While some people ended up choosing Hong Kong to be the final resting place for their loved ones (further burdening the territory’s graveyards), others, anticipating an open border at some future date, embraced cremation as way to preserve ancestral remains and make them more transportable.\textsuperscript{19} That cremated ashes required no export license (unlike bones or cadavers) also provided the practice with an added attraction.\textsuperscript{20} This certainly echoes one of the reasons for cremation’s spread during the Five Dynasties. And, perhaps, the fact that burning the dead for transportation purposes had remained legal since that period was

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} For some more slogans surrounding the campaign, see Zhou Shaoming, \textit{Funeral Rituals in Eastern Shandong, China: An Anthropological Study} (Queenston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2009), 242.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Steve Tsang, \textit{A Modern History of Hong Kong} (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 16.
\item \textsuperscript{15} B. D. Wilson, “Notes on Some Chinese Customs in the New Territories”, in \textit{Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch} 23 (1983), 41-61.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Teather, “High-Rise Homes for the Ancestors”, 413.
\item \textsuperscript{17} B. D. Wilson, “Chinese Burial Customs in Hong Kong”, in \textit{Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch} 1 (1961), 115.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 115-6.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Teather, “High-Rise Homes for the Ancestors”, 426.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Teather, “Themes from Complex Landscapes”, 25.
\end{itemize}
enough to justify the practice for those familiar with the convention. In any case, the belief that cremation was better than burying the dead in a strange land was at least as strong in the twentieth century as it was in the tenth.

In no small part due to the reasons mentioned above, the government’s efforts to promote cremation were successful. By the mid-1970s, thirty-five percent of deaths were cremated and, by the early-1990s, nearly seventy. However, the shift to cremation was possible because of a number of other cultural-religious factors, as well. I devote the remainder of this chapter to a discussion of these elements.

Funerals, Flesh, and Fire

Traditional funerals in Hong Kong have four main objectives, all of which are interrelated. They seek concurrently to help the bereaved emotionally, to facilitate the expression of filial piety, to settle the soul(s) of the departed, and to deal safely and effectively with the corpse. Although each are endlessly fascinating topics, at present, I wish to explore only the thought and practices surrounding corpse management. In doing so, I seek to demonstrate that the traditional understanding of dead bodies as reflected in their handling and disposal during funerals made cremation more palatable—perhaps, to some extent, even desirable—for the Hong Kongese.

Dead bodies have long been objects of fear in Hong Kong. Corpses are regarded as powerful pollutants; they are “out of place”, disorderly (luan 亂), and, thus, require a great deal of ritual attention. James Watson acutely observed this attitude among the inhabitants of San Tin 新田 and Ha Tsuen 厦村 during the late-1960s and 1970s. According to Watson, whenever a death occurred in these areas, it was immediately “announced by women of the household who burst into high-pitched, stereotyped wailing”. This acted not only to inform those in the vicinity that certain individuals had entered mourning but also to communicate the existence of a newly emerged danger.

Indeed, immediately upon hearing these cries, newborns (human as well as

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23 Ibid., 160.
24 Ibid.
animal), pregnant women, ancestral tablets, and deities were ushered indoors, covered up, or carried off to some faraway place. The perceived danger in these instances was the so-called “killing airs” (Watson’s translation of shaqi 殺(煞)氣), an invisible gas-like substance, which can be transmitted from the dead to the living and cause any number of illnesses (shizhu 死注).

According to Watson, one mode of transmission is active; the unsettled soul of the deceased, which remains close to the body, directs the killing airs at those nearby. The second is passive; the airs, which stick to and radiate from the flesh of the corpse, are automatically transferred to those who touch the body, come too close to it, or touch an object that has contacted the deceased’s skin. The spirit of the dead gradually becomes less volatile and, by virtue of the various rituals performed for its sake throughout the funeral proceedings, is generally believed to be successfully pacified by the time of internment. Passive transmission of killing airs, however, remains a possibility so long as the corpse still has flesh, even if burial beneath the earth does significantly reduce the threat.

Watson notes that, because of the risks surrounding death, people tended to take part in mortuary rites only when so obliged. This was (and still is) especially true of men, whose reproductive capabilities are thought to be compromised by the powerful yin forces released as flesh decays. In the past, the only individuals who dared touch the dead were corpse handlers and, in certain instances, the principal mourner. Even funerary specialists avoided direct contact because, unlike the killing airs actively sent forth by the soul of the deceased, which religious professionals are widely believed to be insusceptible to, the airs that cling to and

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25 Ibid., 158, 167.
26 Sometimes also referred to as “the winds of the dead” (siren feng 死人風): Wilson, “Chinese Burial Customs in Hong Kong”, 122. For types of illnesses, see Chi Tim Lai, “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 and Amy Yin Man Chow (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 89.
29 Ibid., 156.
31 It sometimes happens that the principal mourner is charged with washing the corpse. Currently, this is generally the practice in funeral parlours. See Peter Ka Hing Cheung et al., “‘Letting Go’ and ‘Holding On’: Grieving and Traditional Death Rituals in Hong Kong”, in Death, Dying and Bereavement: A Hong Kong Chinese Experience, ed. Cecilia Lai Wan Chan and Amy Yin Man Chow (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 73. However, in San Tin and Ha Tsuen during the time Watson conducted his fieldwork, even this intimate rite of ancient origins and beautiful expression of filial piety was the task of corpse handlers. The water, though, was still purchased by principal mourner. See Watson, “Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society”, 124.
passively radiate from the dead “[have] no volition and affect everyone equally”.

So contagious were these airs thought to be that corpse handlers were “treated like lepers” or “like living ghosts”. Watson observes that the people of San Tin and Ha Tsuen were careful not to look at or speak to such individuals. Even Daoist priests refrained from “hand[ing] anything directly to [them]”.

Immediately following internment, those who accompanied the corpse to the grave would undergo various purification rites. Water mixed with pomelo leaves was used to wash the hands and upper body and it was required that the bereaved cross over a small fire. In addition, fire was used to burn anything that had become contaminated by means of direct contact with the deceased. The clothes of the living, too, were passed through flames for purification.

It seems likely that the transition to cremation occurred with greater ease in part because fire was already viewed positively as something that could effectively rid mourners of the killing airs associated with decomposing flesh. At the same time, fire possessed (and continues to possess) another important function; it can transfer things from the world of the living (yangjian 陽間) to the world of the dead (yinjian 陰間). As C. Fred Blake notes,

There at least three ways that people in China…send valuables to the netherworld. The first is to place the thing of value…in a ritual venue and invite visiting spirits to partake of its essence…A second way…is to inter the valuable with the dead…[and] the third…is to destroy the vessel by immolation or by exposure to the elements of wind and water…but especially to the element of fire.

At first glance, it certainly seems possible that cremation could be made sense of both as a means to purify the world of the dangers created by decomposing flesh and as a way to send the deceased to the hereafter. In fact, the notion that cremation facilitates the dead’s transition to hades has developed in other parts of the Chinese world. For such an understanding to be

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32 Watson, “Of Flesh and Bones”, 159.
36 Chueng, “‘Letting Go’ and ‘Holding On’”, 76 and Watson, “Of Flesh and Bones”, 164.
37 Ibid., 168.
38 Ibid., 166.
40 Zhou notes of villagers in Shandong, China, “When [they] see the smoke rising from the cremation, they tend to believe that they are actually witnessing the hun going to the next world” (Zhou, *Funeral Rituals in Eastern Shandong*, 227).
possible, though, a departure from traditional beliefs regarding the body and its souls is necessary—an issue I take up in the following section.

**Preservation and Decay**

From a traditional Chinese perspective, the body must be cared for in both life and death. During life, one treads carefully because one’s physical being is the legacy of his/her parents. As *The Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經) states, “Our body and hair and skin are all derived from our parents, and therefore we have no right to injure any of them in the least. This is the first duty of a child”.\(^{41}\) In death, the body continues to be of importance because it is directly linked with the souls of the deceased. Preserving and caring for the corpse of one’s ancestor meant extending the life of its attendant souls and providing them with comfort.\(^{42}\) At least as early as the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), it was believed that human beings were one part Heaven and another part Earth.\(^{43}\) The earthly parts were said to be “*gui*” 鬼 in nature and were referred to as one’s “animal soul(s)” or *po* 魄; the heavenly components were said to be “*shen*” 神 in nature and were called *hun* 魂 or, sometimes, “intelligent *qi*” (*zhiqi* 知氣).\(^{44}\) It was held that, at death, these two aspects of an individual became separated. The former, associated with one’s flesh and bones, returned slowly to the earth/underworld and the latter abruptly to the sky/Heaven.\(^{45}\) Unlike Western notions of an individual soul, though, the ancient Chinese did not believe that a person’s *po* and *hun* lasted forever. Each was ultimately composed of various gradients of *qi* 氣—the fundamental stuff of the universe—and, if not preserved, would eventually “dissolve into…primal *qi* and loose their individual identities”.\(^{46}\)

Given this understanding of post-mortem existence, it is not surprising that the ancient

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\(^{42}\) The intactness of the corpse was also important, so much so, in fact, that, people used to bury hair and fingernail clippings. See James Legge, trans., *Li Chi* (*Book of Rites: An Encyclopedia of Ancient Ceremonial Usages, Religious Creeds, and Social Institutions*). 2 vols. (New York: University Books, 1976), 196. Dan Waters notes that “eunuchs in Imperial China kept their castrated private parts in jars to be buried with them on their death”, as well. See Waters, “Chinese Funerals”, 106.

\(^{43}\) Legge, *Li Chi*, 380-1. Ying-Shih Yü suggests that this understanding occurred at both the elite and popular levels. See Ying-Shih Yü, “O Soul, Come Back! A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China”, in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, no. 2 (1987), 375.

\(^{44}\) Legge, *Li Chi*, 220-1.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 369.

Chinese considered preservation of the body to be of great importance. Indeed, archeological and textual evidence demonstrates that a number of measures were often taken to prevent decay, such as embalming corpses and adorning them with talismans. A particularly common practice was to insert a piece of jade (believed to have preservative powers) into the deceased’s mouth. Of course, paramount in any effort to preserve a body is the coffin. For individuals of means, coffins were constructed of thick layers of pine (song 松) or cypress (bai 柏), which are insect repellent, long lasting, and were thought capable of naturally slowing decay. Today, in Hong Kong, coffins are usually made from phoebe zhennan (nanmu 楠木), zelkova (jumu 椹木), Chinese fir (shamu 杉木) or synthetic woods (zamu 雜木). Since most coffins are destined for cremators, the government discourages “heavily lacquered coffins [which] tend to produce dark smoke during cremation [as well as] unnecessarily thick wood [which]…[would] waste more fuel”. That they will “refuse to accept [such] coffins for cremation” is likely. In addition, the FEHD notes that “some large-sized Chinese type coffins cannot be inserted into existing cremators” and recommends coffins be built to dimensions no larger than seventy-eight inches long, twenty-eight inches high, and thirty inches wide. Despite these restrictions and

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47 Although even Mozi 墨子, a champion of frugality, prescribed funerary clothes and coffins, exceptions did exist. For example, Yanzi 晏子 claims in the “Yang Zhu” chapter of the Leizi 列子, “Once I am dead…it is the same to me whether you burn me or sink me in a river, bury me or leave me in the open, throw me in a ditch wrapped in grass or put me in a stone coffin dressed in a dragon-blazoned jacket and embroidered skirt” (A. C. Graham, trans., The Book of Lieh-tzu: A Classic of Tao, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 142 and 143).

48 Richard von Glahn notes that these sorts of measures were already being taken during the Han dynasty. See Richard von Glahn, The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 49.

49 De Groot notes such objects are also thought to “serve the departed soul as torches on its rambles through the dark regions beyond this world”. See de Groot, The Religious System of China (book 1), 92. Waters claims that bronze coins are also used and notes that the practice of putting objects in the mouths of corpses in China is close to 5,000 years old. See Waters, “Chinese Funerals”, 112. The Liji makes mention of “fine shells” being placed in the mouths of the dead but argues that people are only motivated by “a feeling which cannot bear that [the mouth] should be empty”: Legge, Li Chi, 168.


51 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, A Guide to After-Death Arrangements (Banli shen hou shi xuzhi 辦理身後事須知) (Hong Kong: Shiwu huanjing weisheng shu chuban 食物環境衛生署出版, 2015), 49.

52 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Respect the Deceased; Protect the Environment; (Zanzhong xianren baohu huanjing 尊重先人保護環境) (Hong Kong: Shiwuhuanjingweishengshu chuban 食物環境衛生署出版, 2004), 2.

53 Ibid.

54 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, A Guide to After-Death Arrangements, 50.
recommendations, however, any of the coffins that I encountered in Hong Kong would, if used for ground burial, still do much to retard decay.

Significantly, though, in Hong Kong, preserving the flesh of one’s ancestor has long been thought undesirable. In fact, it was common for the integrity of coffins to be compromised just prior to burials in order to speed up decay.\(^{55}\) Obviously, such a practice stands in sharp contrast to tradition. Why, then, encourage decomposition? One aim was likely to alleviate the community of the dangers posed by rotting flesh sooner. Another was to secure the bones of the deceased more quickly. The Cantonese and many other peoples of southern China and Taiwan practice (or once practiced) second burial.\(^{56}\) This involves burying the corpse in a shallow grave (xuezang 血葬) for a number years until only bones remain. Unlike the flesh of ancestors, bones are not considered a threat.\(^{57}\) In fact, they are highly valued. At a time deemed appropriate by a fengshui specialist, the bones are exhumed, cleaned, and carefully placed in an urn or jinta 金塔 (lit. golden pagoda). If all goes well, they are reburied a second time in a geomantically auspicious location. It is only after all of the flesh is gone and the osseous remains properly arranged that an ancestor is said to be at rest and the decedents can start to benefit from a grave’s fengshui.\(^{58}\)

Therefore, there was often a sense of urgency. In some places, it was even acceptable to cover the corpse with a bit of wine or dirt to hasten things along if, at the time of disinterment, flesh still clung to the bones.\(^{59}\) That the inhabitants of Hong Kong had long practiced second burial explains, to some extent, their willingness to burn the flesh of their ancestors and intern bodies that are not intact.

One might worry, however, that cremation would not allow for the meaningful arrangement and preservation of bones that normally attends the custom. The practice of second burial is viewed by those who perform it as a way “to save [the ancestors] bones from disintegrating in the earth”.\(^{60}\) The osseous remains are “pick[ed] up…in order to let the dead live again”.\(^{61}\) Indeed, where second burial is performed, the bones are often wrapped in cloth and


\(^{56}\) Second burial may still be practiced in Hong Kong by indigenous inhabitants under Article 40 of the Basic Law. See Kwok Shing Chan, “Hillside Burials: Indigenous Rights in the New Territories of Hong Kong”, in Anthropology Today 19, no. 6 (2003), 7-9.

\(^{57}\) Watson, “Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society”, 113.


\(^{59}\) Ahern, The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village, 205.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 204.

\(^{61}\) Ibid.
string and painted red to “symbolically re-flesh and clothe” the deceased. The skeleton is then arranged in what anthropologists have variously identified as either the fetal position or lotus posture (jiafu zuo 喑跌坐; Sanskrit: padmāsana). However, as Teather observes, the people of Hong Kong understand cremated remains to “represent bone matter rather than flesh”. Therefore, cremating the dead and storing ashes in cinerary urns prevents ancestors’ osseous parts from mixing with the earth in much the same way as does placing them in a jinta. Moreover, the bereaved may request that the remaining bits of bone are not pulverized into fine granules after cremation as they are in Western countries. This allows families to pick up the pieces and place them in urns in a manner reminiscent of second burial. Although it is certainly possible, I have encountered no evidence to suggest that cremains are wrapped up and painted as bones once were. It seems that the practice of provisioning ancestral remains with a new body has lost favour.

Perhaps, this can partially be explained by considering how the body-soul(s) relationship is understood in the present-day. In pre-Qin China, the hun was thought to be derivative of the po and it was only the po, not the hun, which travelled to the underworld. This being the case, it makes sense that, in ancient China, great emphasis was placed on preserving the corpse, which was inseparable from (even identifiable with) the po. Destruction of the body meant obliteration of the soul. Today, though, people are unconcerned with the po. Instead, their focus is solely on the provision and pacification of the hun (or linghun 靈魂), which began making the journey to the underworld alongside the po during the Han dynasty. It follows that placing great emphasis

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63 Wilson, “Chinese Burial Customs in Hong Kong”, 120.
64 Teather, “High-Rise Homes for the Ancestors”, 425.
65 Pulverisation of bones has, in the past, been used as a method for disgracing and/or disabling one’s enemies. See Maurice Freedman, Chinese Lineage and Society: Kwang-tung and Fukien (London: Athlone, 1966), 139 and Han, “Cremation and Body Burning in Five Dynasties China”, 8.
66 Interestingly, in Hong Kong, cinerary urns (linghui zhong 靈灰盅) are almost always used to store cremated ashes whereas, in other parts of the Chinese world, cinerary caskets (guhui he 骨灰盒), which resemble coffins, are preferred. No doubt, the choice in Hong Kong is rooted in a desire to simulate jinta, which, as the dead’s final abode, is naturally held to be more important than coffins, which have long been regarded as only temporary dwellings.
67 Yü, “O Soul, Come Back!”, 372. The notion that the hun born of the po can be found in the Commentary of Zuo (Zuo zhuan 右傳). Consider the following from the section entitled “The Seventh Year of Duke Zhao” (Zhao Gong qi nian 昭公七年): “人生始化曰魄，既生魄曰魂，用物精多則魂魄強，是以有精爽至於神明”. Yü believes that “the dualistic conception of hun and po began to gain currency in the middle of the sixth century [BCE]” and “reached its definitive formulation” by the second century BCE. Ibid., 370 and 374.
68 Yü suggests that this shift occurred in response to the Han cult of immortality. Ibid., 392.
on the *hun* and deemphasizing the *po* has the potential to reduce anxiety over the departed’s physical remains and make revitalizing bones seem less important.

When Zhou Shaoming asked his informants in Shandong about the possibility of cremation having ill effects for the dead, they responded, “‘Shi hun shengtian, shenti dai bu zou’, 是魂升天, 身体带不走, ‘It is the *hun* that goes to the next world, not the body’”. What they meant by this, says Zhou, is that “the body is left behind to decay. Therefore, as long as proper arrangements have been made and the correct rituals observed for the journey of the *hun* to the next world, how the corpse is disposed of is not significant”. Although it seems that the Hong Kongese share something of this sentiment, they are not quite so indifferent. The notion that the *hun* lingers about the body is still prevalent in Hong Kong, and where the body goes, the *hun* also. And, even though the *hun* is in no way completely identifiable with the remains of the dead, maltreatment of a corpse (or its equivalent) is still thought to have negative effects on the soul. Cremation, though, for the reasons mentioned above, is not viewed as such. Rather, it is a mode of disposal, which, today, is practiced without the slightest hesitation. In modern-day Hong Kong, the *hun* are simply no longer bothered by their bodies being burned.

### Conclusion

Hong Kong’s shift to cremation was, no doubt, necessary given the territories growing population and limited space. Still, considering the level of importance placed on properly caring for the dead in Chinese culture, that the populace accepted the practice so readily and with such little fuss is remarkable. It has been demonstrated that the reasons for the transition’s smoothness are manifold. For starters, the manner in which the government encouraged the shift to cremation is significant as it fostered a non-defensive attitude by gradually and passively invoking change. Another important factor was that the boarders of mainland China became temporarily closed, which caused some to cremate their predecessors in hopes that increasing the storability and transportability of the dead would allow ancestors to be quickly returned to their native places when an opportunity arose. In addition, that cremation was viewed positively by the Hong Kongese rather than with angst definitely owes something to the ideas about flesh, bones, and

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70 Ibid.
fire which existed prior to the practice’s promotion in the region. Decaying flesh was considered a powerful pollutant while fire was seen as a purifying agent. Furthermore, fire was thought to possess the ability to transmit objects from the world of the living to the world of the dead. At the same time, the speedy acquisition of bone matter was thought desirable since flesh was a nuisance that prolonged final internment and descendants’ ability to receive the benefits of fengshui.

In the following chapter, we move away from issues pertaining specifically to immolating bodies and contemplate the structures designed to store cremains and burn bodies—columbaria and crematoria.
In tandem with the move to cremation in Hong Kong was a shift from permanent ground burial to storing remains in columbaria niches. Initially, citizens who chose to cremate could continue burying their loved ones in urn graves just as they might if performing second burial (see Chapter 1). However, when the government ceased providing new land for such graves, existing plots soon filled up. A person of significant wealth could still be buried traditionally, even acquire a coffin grave, but, for the vast majority of people, columbaria became the only viable option.  

The present chapter considers the issues that attend this change, particularly those concerning fengshui, the cult of Houtu, and grave-sweeping festivals.

**Fengshui and an Upward Gaze**

Ole Bruun is correct in suggesting that “nowhere in the world is fengshui so intensely integrated into every aspect of social, religious and commercial life as in Hong Kong”. Indeed, the construction of almost any structure in the region involves the consultation of a specialist so that the surrounding qi might be manipulated to maximum benefit. Even the plans for Hong Kong’s Disneyland were drawn up to meet fengshui specifications. Obviously, buildings can be found objectionable on grounds of fengshui, as well. Perhaps, the most famous example in Hong Kong (and the one most often cited by scholars) is the popular reaction to the Bank of China Tower (opened in 1990). Despite the goodly intentions of the architect, the structure was interpreted negatively by the people of Hong Kong. It was likened to “a harmful praying

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1 Chow and Teather, “Chinese Graves and Gravemarkers”, 293.
3 Ibid., 140.
mantis” or “numerous daggers” and is commonly “considered a kind of demonic architecture which arouses great anxiety among its neighbours and the general public”.\(^5\) Such interpretations are directly related to the popular Chinese worldview. Maurice Freedman suggests that, unlike most Westerners, who tend to view landscapes (or cityscapes) aesthetically, for the Hong Kongese,

> appreciation is cosmological. For [them] the viewer and the viewed are interacting, both being part of some greater system. The cosmos is Heaven, Earth, and Man. Man is in it and of it. So that while [a Westerner’s] characteristic reaction to a landscape may be to say that [he or she] find[s] it beautiful, [a person from Hong Kong] may…remark that he [or she] feels content or comfortable.\(^6\)

He adds, “It is for this reason that English-speaking Chinese in Hong Kong often use the word ‘psychological’ to refer to the effect of *fengshui*. They do not mean, as one might at first suppose, that geomancy is an illusion. They are asserting a human response to forces working in the cosmos”.\(^7\) It is not surprising, then, that, despite the fact that masters of geomancy arm themselves with various tools (most notably a peculiar kind of compass called a *luopan* 羅盤), how good or bad *fengshui* is determined is hardly an exact science.\(^8\) As one geomancer explains, “*Fengshui* is like poetry—it has symbols, classics, people, nature, and more—you cannot know exactly how it works…It takes a long time to learn, and still you see only the surface”.\(^9\)

It are not only spaces for the living that are designed according to the principles of *fengshui* but also sites for the dead. In Hong Kong, the ideal grave should be located on the side of a mountain, facing south towards water with nothing obstructing its view.\(^10\) The spot should be backed by trees and flanked on its left and right (east and west) by land formations respectively identified with the Azure Dragon (*Zuo qinglong* 左青龍) and White Tiger (*You baihu* 右白虎), which, together, are thought to create a kind of dignified “armchair” effect.\(^11\)

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5 Ibid., 110 and 111.
7 Ibid.
8 For a detailed description of a geomantic compass, see Ole Bruun, *Fengshui in China: Geomantic Divination between State Orthodoxy and Popular Religion* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003), 4-5. The *Liji* makes mention of tortoise shells being used to locate auspicious graves. See Legge, *Li Chi*, 135.
9 Ibid., 190. Bruun argues that the directions school of *fengshui* is “more orderly and predictable [than the forms school that is practiced in Hong Kong], allowing for less improvisation on the part of the geomancer” (ibid., 180).
11 The Azure Dragon and White Tiger, notes Bruun, are extremely ancient symbols, dating back to the Neolithic period. “Depictions of these totem animals”, he states, “have been found in graves of shaman chiefs dating
Other features are also taken into consideration—even local rocks and shrubs—but these two are understood to be the most crucial. The grave itself should be omega-shaped and properly positioned in the geological surroundings it seeks to emulate. Although generally retaining an armchair-look, de Groot suggests that “the ends [are] bent outward, in order that the noxious influences of the winds, on striking against the embankment, may glide along it and be forced to roll away from the grave to the right and left”. In addition, the height and orientation of the tombstone as well as the exact depth and direction of the coffin and time of internment should all be carefully calculated by a geomancer. As Potter notes, “a difference of a few feet in the

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12 De Groot, The Religious System of China (book 1), 942. Chow and Teather state there is evidence of armchair-shaped graves beginning in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). Chow and Teather, “Chinese Graves and Gravemarkers”, 295. They suggest that “most Chinese, especially those in southern China, have regarded the form of an armchair as the ideal shape of the grave” since “an armchair gives a sense of wealth, comfort and dignity” (ibid.).

13 Ivanka Charvatova et al. have also demonstrated that magnetic compasses were used to orient tombs in China from circa 3000 BCE. See Ivanka Charvatova et al, “Chinese Tombs Oriented by a Compass: Evidence from Paleomagnetic Changes versus the Age of Tombs”, in Studia Geophysica et Geodaetica 55, no. 1 (2011), 173.
location of a grave or a difference of a few inches in the height of an ancestral tomb might spell the difference between success and fortune for entire generations of descendants”.14

From a geomancer’s perspective, the grave’s ability to emanate positive fengshui is conditional on one other critical component—the state of the bones therein. The osseous remains are believed to be essential; “without them”, suggests Freedman, “one is cut off from the most powerful source of ancestral benefits”.15 It is for this reason that inhabitants of Hong Kong, on the advice of geomancers, used to disinter jintা after a few years to checkup on their ancestors. “If the bones were golden in colour”, explains Potter, “this showed that the fengshui of the grave was good; however, if the bones were found to be black, this showed that the fengshui was bad and they might be removed and buried in a different location”.16 The fact that the dead’s osseous parts have traditionally been manipulated by fengshui specialists in cold, calculative ways in the name of worldly gains has led Freedman and others to conclude that, in the context of fengshui, “the dead [are] passive agents, pawns in a kind of ritual game played by their descendants with the help of geomancers”.17 “The accumulation of [qi]”, he argues, “flow[s] automatically from the correct siting of the grave. The dead themselves…choose neither to confer nor to withhold the blessings that [flow] through their bones”.18 This view has been disputed by scholars, such as Ahern, however, who argue that practitioners of popular religion tend to see “the ancestor in the grave rather than abstract forces as the source of geomantic benefits”.19 For them, a grave is thought of as a house and is carefully constructed according to the principles of fengshui so that the dead might be more comfortable.20 The geological features surrounding a burial site as well as the height, orientation, and depth of a grave all have subtle effects on the indwelling soul, which, when pleased, will bestow blessings on its decedents. This understanding is made clear by the fact that spirit mediums and other diviners are often consulted to discern whether or not newly interned souls are happy with their environments.21

15 Freedman, Chinese Lineage and Society, 139.
17 Freedman, Chinese Lineage and Society, 127.
18 Ibid.
19 Ahern, The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village, 175. To be fair, Freedman himself admits, “It is quite possible that my own views have been biased by my paying more attention to geomancers than to laymen” (Freedman, Chinese Lineage and Society, 126).
Significantly, Hong Kong’s columbaria and crematoria were built with attention to *fengshui* and Chinese culture more generally. This was likely a necessary concession on the part of the government or any other builder who wished these structures and the form of corpse disposal they encourage to be accepted by the public. Obviously, at stake when choosing a resting place is ancestral comfort. But also, as Teather points out, “no loss of face should be involved if a family were to decide that this was an appropriate choice for a parent’s final resting place”. Perhaps, one of the most appealing options from a cultural standpoint would have been the stunning, octagonal columbaria at Cape Collinson (now full), which, from an aerial perspective, resembles the *bagua* 八卦 (see Figure 3). Of concern, though, with this structure and the others is that they do not allow for individualization (geomantic or otherwise), which has led Chow and Teather to refer to them as “collective tombs”. Indeed, the proposed columbaria at Au Tau 凹頭, designed in the shape of a giant armchair seems to strongly reaffirm this idea.

Yet, even though one cannot choose one’s niche at public columbaria, personalization still does occur beyond just the pictures and inscriptions on plaques. The precise locations of cinerary urns in their niches are fussied over by *fengshui* masters, for example, and niche ledges are often covered with small, plastic objects resembling worldly things, which act dually as offerings and as indicators of the deceased’s tastes and interests.

Another problem posed by columbaria is that they require storage of remains above ground, which is undesirable from a *fengshui* perspective but also goes against the traditional Chinese notion that the dead should enter the earth to be at peace (*ru tu wei an* 入土為安). Perhaps, to divert attention away from this issue, many columbaria and crematoria have been designed to encourage an upward gaze. The impressive and elegant chimneys of crematoria, of course, contribute much to this end. However, the architectures of many columbaria are equally effective. Perhaps, none is more so than Yeung Nim Hall (*Yang nian tang* 仰念堂) at Diamond Hill, which has the overall appearance of a staircase leading into the sky—an image borrowed from the Christian tradition (see Figure 2). The space connected to the crematory at the same location has also been “carefully planned” to influence the ritual experiences of the bereaved and

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22 Teather, “High-Rise Homes for the Ancestors”, 411.
23 The *bagua* is an octagonal symbol combining the eight divinatory trigrams, which are used in combination to produce the sixty-four hexagrams found in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經).
draw their eyes upward. A plaque at the site explains that mourners are made to follow a “ceremonial path of grief” (daonian yishi lujing 悼念儀式路徑), which begins in a space called the “Transition Courtyard” (Guodu tingyuan 過渡庭院). Here, “at ground level”, “[the mourners are] greeted by a sunlit circular atrium signifying the all-embracing roundness of [the sky]. They then ascend the stairs to the podium as if transitioning from this dusty world to Heaven”. As the bereaved continue along the path, the emphasis on the sky/Heaven (tian 天) continues. On the way to the service hall, for example, “they pass through a colonnade lit by sky-light”. And, once inside, the design of the hall encourages “soft natural rays from the sky-light and windows bring a dignified and comforting atmosphere to the congregation”.

26 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, *Untitled Plaque* (Diamond Hill Crematorium, Hong Kong, 2017).
27 Ibid. I have altered the original wording of this quotation from “transitioning from Earth to Heaven” to “transitioning from this dusty world to Heaven” because the Chinese equivalent does not use *di* 地 in parallel with *tian* 天 as the English version might imply. Rather, the term used is *chenshi* 塵世.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
Figure 3: Bagua-Shaped Columbarium at Cape Collinson (author’s photograph)
Drawing patrons’ eyes skyward also averts their attention from another issue—the reality that public columbaria offer no place for the supplication of Houtu, the god(dess) of the earth and watcher of graves. An adequate discussion of this deity, though, demands a section of its own.

HOUTU

Despite belonging to the lowest ranking deity in the Chinese pantheon, shrines to the earth god(dess) are by far the most commonly encountered in Hong Kong, surely surpassing in number even those of the red-faced Lord Guan (Guan Gong 關公). Most often, these bear the name Tudi Gong 土地公 (Grandfather Earth), although, occasionally, they include mention of his wife, Tudi Po 土地婆 (Grandmother Earth), as well. In some places, such as Taiwan, graveside shrines continue with these designations, however, in Hong Kong, the vast majority are inscribed with only the deity’s feminine title, Houtu, which, in speech, is often expanded to the more endearing Houtu Niangniang 后土娘娘 (Mama Earth).30 Whatever the name used, the deity is functionally the same. Arthur P. Wolf suggests the earth god(dess) has two major roles. One is to survey the living and report their actions in regular intervals to higher deities. The other is “to police…the ‘ghosts’”, and thus guard the living from what Wolf calls “the supernatural equivalent of bandits, beggars, and other dangerous strangers”.31 In addition, the deity serves the dead by assisting them in their initial trips to the underworld and by protecting them from ill-intending beings at their graves.32

At small shrines located to the proper left of headstones, Houtu is provided with offerings during grave-sweeping festivals and when burials occur. The Jiali, a Song dynasty ritual manual,

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30 Paper, The Spirits are Drunk, 218. Alessandro Dell’Orto notes, “[In Taiwan], over the last few years, small statues of Tudi Gong are [being] placed instead [of stones inscribed with ‘Houtu’] on the side of each tomb”. See Alessandro Dell’Orto, Place and Spirit in Taiwan: Tudi Gong in the Stories, Strategies and Memories of Everyday Life (New York: Routledge, 2002), 151. Sometimes, in Hong Kong, other designations are also used, such as Houtu zhi shen 后土之神 (Houtu’s spirit), Tushen zhi wei 土神之位 (the Earth Spirit’s place), and Houtu longshen 后土龍神 (Dragon Spirit Houtu). The latter term seems to originate from notion that Houtu is identifiable with a spirit called Dragon Gou (Goulong 勾龍). See Carole Morgan, “Traces of Houtu’s (后土) Cult in Hong Kong”, in Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society 36 (1996), 223. The term “Tushen” was promoted to create a differentiation between the earth spirit worshiped by commoners and the one worshiped by the state. See Ebrey, Chu Hsi’s Family Rituals, 106, n. 120.

31 Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors”, 134. Wolf also points out that gui, whom are associated with human beings earthly nature (see Chapter 1) are overseen by this deity (ibid.).

32 For a lively recounting of one such journey, see Ahern, The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village, 223-4.
which was extremely influential at the popular level, prescribes the steps mourners should take to worship Houtu prior to interment as follows:

They set a cup, decanter, wine, fruit, and dried meat in front of [the shrine]. They also lay out two sets of wash basins and wash cloths…The intercessor enters in auspicious clothes and stands in front of the spirit’s place, facing north. The attendants are behind him…After they all bow twice, the intercessor and the attendants all wash and dry their hands…The intercessor pours the wine and returns the decanter. Then he takes the cup and pours it out in libation in front of the spirit’s place. He prostrates himself, rises, and steps slightly back. The liturgist takes the board, stands to the left of the intercessor, faces east, kneels, and reads it: “On the day of the new moon of such month of such year, such year-cycle, the child of such office, A, presumes to report to the god of the earth. Now we are constructing a tomb for B, of such office. May the god protect it and see to it that no difficulties occur in the future. We earnestly make these respectful offerings of pure wine and dried meat to the god. May you enjoy it!” When finished, he resumes his place, and the intercessor…the liturgist and the attendants all bow twice, then clear away the remains and leave.33

Hereafter, the deity is supplicated annually to protect the grave and its inhabitant. Sacrifices at such times are conducted in much the same way as the burial sacrifice; however, the prayer is worded differently.34

Although it has been suggested that the earth deity is only supplicated prior to interment so that it might forgive the ground’s disturbance, it seems that the primary objective of the ritual outlined above is, in fact, to notify the deity of the burial and ask for its protection.35 The fact that the god(dess) continues to be worshiped on at least a yearly basis further supports this notion. The etiological folktales (based on the story of Meng Jiangnû 孟姜女) which seek to explain the existence of both second burial and graveside shrines, however, imply that, from a popular religious perspective, the deity’s functioning to keep the dead in their place is of greatest importance. I provide the versions recorded by Ahern and Stephan Feuchtwang below, beginning with Ahern’s.

A long time ago an emperor wanted to build a great wall around his kingdom. To provide

34 Ibid., 177.
35 Morgan, “Traces of Houtu’s (后土) Cult in Hong Kong”, 223.
a labor force, he conscripted thousands of young men. Conditions were so terrible for the
workers that many men died and were buried under or within the wall. When one young
worker had not returned home for some time, his wife set out to find him. When she
learned that he was dead, she cried until the entire wall fell down. Then in order to find
her husband’s bones, she bit off her finger tip and let the blood flow on the ground.
Whenever the blood hit one of her husband’s bones, that bone came up and joined
together with the others until the skeleton was complete. People told her to carry the
skeleton in her arms so that her tears would fall on it, making veins of blood on the
bones, and resulting perhaps in a return to life. Just then, Tudi Ma [土地媽] (the wife of
Tudi Gong, the earth god) offered different advice. She said it would be better if the
woman were to carry the skeleton on her back. But as soon as the wife did this, for she
readily accepted the advice of a goddess, the skeleton fell apart. Tudi Ma gave this bad
advice because she was feeling evil-hearted and thought that there were enough people in
the world already. After the bones fell apart, the woman put them in a pot and buried
them, marking a place with a stone. Thereafter, people continued doing this.36

Feuchtwang’s version is similar but centers around Tudi Gong instead of Tudi Ma and
emphasizes the development of graveside shrines more than it does second burial.

A man, only three days after marrying, was called to do military service and was killed
on duty at the Great Wall of China. His soul visited his wife in a dream, begging her to
come and find his bones to bury them properly. But when she came to the Wall there
were so many bones she did not know how to identify her husband’s. An old man with a
white beard, Tudi Gong, advised her that if she cut her finger and let blood drip from it
the bones at which it would stop dripping would be those of her husband. (Another
version of this story has it that the bones which would absorb her tears of mourning
would be her husband’s.) In this way she found and collected her husband’s bones
together in her skirts and carried them home weeping. She wept so profusely on to the
bones that they began to come to life again. But Tudi Gong considered it unjust that her
husband should be singled out from the other soldiers to be brought back to life. When
the wife had to go and find food to eat he offered to guard the reviving bones for her. On
her return she found that they had lost the life again. She was very angry. But that is

why there is a stone for Tudi Gong beside every grave. To keep the dead dead.\(^{37}\)

Despite the long history of Houtu shrines at graves, modern columbaria lack any space whatsoever for the deity’s worship. One might argue that, since cremains are stored above ground and no earth is broken when the dead are interned, Houtu need not be placated. However, such an argument ignores the deity’s tutelary functions, which, as demonstrated above, are of primary importance and also fails to acknowledge that, in other circumstances, the deity’s protective powers are employed far above ground. (Many skyscrapers house Tudi Gong shrines, for instance.) Not surprisingly, it seems that there are those who still believe that the earth deity has purpose at columbaria. In 2014, for example, at Diamond Hill’s Sincerity Hall (Zhi cheng tang 致誠堂), I discovered, in two separate locations, makeshift shrines to the god(dess). However, upon my return to the location in the summer of 2016, I found that the graffitied characters, forming the basis of one of these, had been whitewashed, presumably by the government workers attending the site. The image of this shrine being painted over, in fact, fittingly captures what is happening to the cult of Houtu. Stoke by stroke, columbarium by columbarium, it moves ever closer to becoming a veiled vestige of the past.

**GRAVE-SWEEPING FESTIVALS**

Before concluding this chapter, a word must be said about grave-sweeping festivals since it is on these days that the dead are brought to the forefront of people’s lives and that columbaria are most visited.\(^{38}\) In Hong Kong, grave-sweeping is practiced on two separate occasions. The first of the calendar year, the Clear and Bright Festival, occurs fifteen days after the Spring Equinox. The second, the Double Ninth Festival, is observed on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month.\(^{39}\) On these days, cemeteries (and now columbaria) are flooded with people who make offerings to their ancestors and, traditionally, Houtu, as well. Graves are cleaned, restored if necessary, and adorned on their tops with red money attached to mountain paper (hongqian


\(^{39}\) Originally, the Double Ninth was not a grave-sweeping festival. See Wilson, “Chinese Burial Customs in Hong Kong”, 121.
shanbu 紅錢山帛), which, in keeping with the understanding that the graves are houses for the dead, are likened to shingles.\textsuperscript{40} Offerings include candles, incense, and paper products. Additionally, comestibles are given, which are then picnicked on by families. Scott observes that these feasts typically consist of at least “roast pork, chicken, cakes, three cups of tea, and three cups of wine”.\textsuperscript{41} However, much more is often shared.

Most columbaria have been designed to accommodate festival activities. For instance, they are usually provisioned with wide corridors to deal with large crowds, equipped with incinerators for burning spirit-money, and fans for increasing airflow. In addition, many have areas where families may sit and eat. Notably, columbaria are also often located on high ground and, therefore, require an uphill journey to be visited, which is in line with the tradition of climbing hills to worship one’s ancestors (baishan 拜山) on festival days.

Presently, though, the government in conjunction with the Board of Management for the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries (BMCPC) is attempting to reform grave-sweeping practices. More precisely, they are promoting “the concept of paying tribute in a scenic and tranquil environment in memory of the deceased without burning offerings or joss sticks”.\textsuperscript{42} One educational booklet published by the FEHD recommends, “Offerings of the heart [should] replace external worship” (xinji daiti xingji 心祭代替形祭).\textsuperscript{43} It further advises, “Observing a moment of silence, expressing [one’s] thoughts in writing or offering a bunch of flowers are good ways to pay tribute to [one’s] beloved. Paying tribute by heart helps preserve the serenity of the resting places”.\textsuperscript{44} This campaign has purportedly been spurred by environmental concerns, which are probably not unfounded. One study estimates that 350 tons of joss paper is burned in Hong Kong each year.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, it is not uncommon to see, as part of this campaign, appeals being

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\textsuperscript{40} Thompson, Stuart E. “Death, Food, and Fertility”, in \textit{Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China}, ed. James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 104. Today, this paper ornament is also stuck to the tops of niches. Other terms for it include hongqian baishan 紅錢白山 and “lucky money” (lishi qian 利是錢). See Janet Lee Scott, \textit{For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors: The Chinese Tradition of Paper Offerings} (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 241-2, n. 17.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 44.


\textsuperscript{43} Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, \textit{Returning to Nature what Nature Creates (Huigui ziran shengsheng bu xi 回歸自然生生不息)} (Hong Kong: Shiwu huanjing weisheng shu chuban 食物環境衛生署出版, 2014), 26.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} Vincici Mak and students, “Urbanism for the Dead”, in \textit{HKIA Journal} (Xianggang jianzhushi xuebao 香港建築師學報) 63 (June 2012), 61.
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made to personal health and the environment. For example, the bagua-shaped columbarium at Cape Collinson is covered in posters and banners that have printed on them “Shao ran xiang lu shao hua bao, huanjing qingxin shenti hao 少燃香爐少化寶, 環境清新身體好”, which, loosely translated and in keeping with the rhyme, reads, “Burn less incense, candles, and treasure; a clean environment is the body’s pleasure!”.

The government has also started, in certain cases, to move beyond merely promoting its vision. In 2009, select floors of certain columbaria were made smoke-free, for instance, and, as of 2016, “to ensure the safety of patrons and the public” joss paper and candles may no longer be used within the octagonal columbium at Cape Collinson. The FEHD also “plan[s] to pilot a totally smoke-free columbaria for testing public acceptability” at Shek Mun. This would mean that “no burning of offerings and joss sticks would be allowed in the columbarium premises, including the niche floors and communal areas”. The government realizes, of course, that such restrictions will be difficult for many to accept. Indeed, they describe their introduction of smoke-free floors in 2009 as follows:

[The] FEHD encountered considerable resistance against the restriction on the burning of offerings and joss sticks on the smoke-free floors. Some members of the public simply disregarded the restrictions and burned offerings and joss sticks at random areas on the smoke-free floors when no FEHD staff or security staff were present. Nevertheless, through continuous education and publicity (e.g. putting up banners to publicise the restrictions) and administrative measures (e.g. frequent patrol by FEHD staff and security staff, especially during peak grave sweeping periods), there has been improvement to the situation.

They fear, though, if a totally smoke-free columbaria were introduced, “public education and...
persuasion alone may not suffice”. They also suggest,

Further stepped-up administrate measures against non-compliance during peak grave sweeping periods…risks triggering confrontation, and the possibility of substantive tensions between FEHD staff and visitors of the columbarium could not be ruled out, let alone the fire hazards that may arise as a result of non-compliant burning of offerings and joss sticks at random areas.

The reason why Hong Kongers are resistant to the government’s desired transition to smoke-free worship is likely due to the fact that making sacrifices to their ancestors without flame violates their ritual sensibilities. Without candles and incense, for example, their ability to create what they feel is sacred time and space is hampered, and, consequently, their sense of connection with the departed is weakened. Moreover, the inability to burn paper might make exchanges with the world of the dead seem awkward or incomplete. Proper treatment of this topic, though, will have to wait until Chapter 4, where attention will be given to the performance of religious rituals online.

CONCLUSION

Although columbaria have been constructed to be as appealing as possible from a fengshui perspective, they are lacking in other areas. They ignore completely the cult of Houtu and the common desire for bodies to “enter the earth to be at peace”. Instead, they avert attention away from these issues and towards the sky—at times, through the use Christian imagery. FEHD and BMCPC columbaria are also gradually becoming smoke-free, despite originally being designed to accommodate practices involving candles, incense, and burnt paper offerings. It seems that columbaria are moving farther and farther away from the “culturally sensitive” buildings Teather once proclaimed them to be.

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
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GREEN BURIALS

Although Hong Kong columbaria have been met with relative success, the government is having difficulties finding locations to build new ones. As a result, the wait time for a niche currently hovers around two years.1 Having no place to permanently inter the remains of their ancestors, people are forced to make use of temporary storage facilities provided by funeral homes and religious institutions, or else place them in the care of illegal operators. The Food and Health Bureau (FHB) states that they are faced with two main obstacles: “limited availability of space in the territory for columbarium facilities and local community resistance and reluctance to have facilities in their district”.2 Columbaria are commonly seen as polluted places, which have a negative effect on the fengshui of their neighbours. Many people believe that such structures being built near to them would affect them psychologically and would decrease the value of their homes.3 As of 2011, the FBH calculated that “columbarium projects involving over 240,000 niches [had already] been shelved as a result” of these kinds of objections.4 To create more space, the government has “relaxed the arrangement of placing additional cremated ashes into public niches”, which means that, now, non-family members may be interned together and there is no longer a strict limit on the number of urns that can be allocated to a single niche.5 In addition, the FHB has contemplated the possibility of introducing time-limited leases, annual management fees, or monetary incentives for the return of niches.6 They are also encouraging religious institutions and private columbaria providers “to develop more columbarium facilities at suitable sites or expand their existing facilities”.7 However, these operators are faced with the

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2 Ibid., 1.
3 Hong Kong Food and Health Bureau, Opinion Survey on Review of Columbarium Policy, 1.
4 Hong Kong Food and Health Bureau, Public Consultation on Review of Columbarium Policy, 7.
5 This change was instituted on January 2nd, 2014. See Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Cemeteries and Crematoria (Fenchang ji huozangchang 墳場及火葬場), http://www.fehd.gov.hk/te_chi/cc/index.html (accessed February 6, 2017).
6 Hong Kong Food and Health Bureau, Public Consultation on Review of Columbarium Policy, 4.
7 Ibid., 2.
same problems as the government. Recently, designs for a “state-of-the-art” private columbarium in Chai Wan, for example, had to be scaled down by 32,000 niches “to minimize the potential impact on residents and the surrounding area”. One proposed project—a columbarium built an ocean liner dubbed “Floating Eternity”—attempts to bypass such issues but has yet to set sail.

Despite these efforts, though, an annual death rate of close to 50,000 and an aging population has forced the government to admit that “it is not realistic to expect the supply of new niches to ever catch up with the rising demand”. Therefore, the state has turned to promoting new forms of disposal that do not require the storage of remains. These methods, which currently consists of scattering ashes in Gardens of Remembrance or at sea, it terms “green burials” (.green burzang). The present chapter will consider these new practices—the techniques used to promote them, the support they have received from environmental philosophers, and the reasons why they have, thus far, been embraced by only a minority of people.

SCATTERING CREMATED ASHES IN GARDENS AND AT SEA

Although the government has only just recently begun to promote scattering ashes in Gardens of Remembrance, it has been possible to perform a garden burial in the special administrative region since 1962. Carrying out a garden burial is a relatively quick and simple process, which, in Hong Kong, may be done at a private cemetery or else at one of eleven public locations. At the family’s discretion, the act may be preceded by religious activities, such as chanting scriptures and/or making offerings to the dead. Significantly, the remains are not confined to a specific spot in the garden but are, instead, spread evenly across the land by either a descendant or an FEHD worker. For a small fee, however, a commemorative plaque complete

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11 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, A Guide to After-Death Arrangements, 18.
with the deceased’s basic information and picture may be mounted on a wall in the garden.\textsuperscript{12}

Scattering cremains at sea is a much more recent phenomenon, the first official performance occurring in Hong Kong only on April 7\textsuperscript{th}, 2007.\textsuperscript{13} To conduct sea burials, the bereaved are transported free of charge from North Point (East) Ferry Pier on a 300 passenger vessel to one of three designated waters (east of Tap Mun 塔門, east of Tung Lung Chau 東龍洲, and south of West Lamma Channel 西博寮海峽).\textsuperscript{14} Generally, each set of cremated ashes may be accompanied by up to ten family members or friends, although it is possible to apply for greater numbers.\textsuperscript{15} Once anchored, “a master of ceremonies” conducts “a simple memorial service”, which involves food and incense offerings to the dead and concludes with sliding the deceased’s bagged remains down a wooden shoot and showering the location of their deposit with flower petals.\textsuperscript{16} All other types of offerings are disallowed and internment may not occur until the area is devoid of dolphins.\textsuperscript{17} Because of the remoteness of these waters, such trips can take up to several hours.\textsuperscript{18}

**Promotion and Public Response**

Green burial promotional activities have included things like exhibitions, public seminars, and talks convened by the FEHD. An area dedicated to exhibitions exists in Kowloon Park (*Jiulong gongyuan* 九龍公園), but, at opportune times—such as the annual Retiree and Senior Fair—booths distributing promotional materials have also been set up at other locations.\textsuperscript{19} Talks are most often held at centers for the elderly and at retirement homes. However, the campaign is targeting youths, as well. By 2015, forty-five talks had already been conducted at

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Kong} Kong, “No Place, New Places”, 419.
\bibitem{HongKongFood} Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, *Leaflet on “Scattering of Cremated Ashes in Hong Kong Waters”* (*Haishang sa ghui fuwu danzhang* 海上撒灰服務單張) (Hong Kong: Shiwu huanjing weisheng shu chuban 食物環境衛生署出版, 2015), 2-3 and Hong Kong Food and Health Bureau, *Public Consultation on Review of Columbarium Policy*, 15.
\bibitem{HongKongFood2} Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, *Leaflet on “Scattering of Cremated Ashes in Hong Kong Waters”*, 2-3.
\bibitem{HongKongFood3} Hong Kong Food and Health Bureau, *Public Consultation on Review of Columbarium Policy*, 15.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid., 8980.
\end{thebibliography}
schools and “to enhance the understanding of green burial...among youngsters”, “a green burial poster design competition” for school-aged children was held by the FEHD in 2014.\(^\text{20}\) Besides these more focused efforts, the government has also sought to reach the general public by means of promotional videos aired inside public transportation vehicles and subway stations.\(^\text{21}\)

Measures have also been taken to make scatter burials more appealing. The new Gardens of Remembrance at Diamond Hill and Wo Ho Shek, for example, have been made much larger than their predecessors, both covering areas of around 2,000 square meters.\(^\text{22}\) For sea burials, larger vessels are now being deployed to accommodate more people and, since 2014, voyages are being conducted free of charge during the Pure and Bright and Double Ninth festivals.\(^\text{23}\) Compromises have also been made to allow flower petals to be thrown overboard whereas, previously, no offerings whatsoever were permitted. The use of a wooden trough to convey ancestral remains to the water is also a novel practice, which was developed by Alex Cheng, the director of ceremonies, to retain the “Chinese tradition that the deceased…pass through wood before leaving [the world]”.\(^\text{24}\) The government has also contemplated providing monetary incentives for those who opt for green burials as is done in certain areas of mainland China. However, they have voted against the idea “for fear that some may misconstrue this as according a greater importance to financial considerations than filial piety”.\(^\text{25}\)

Despite the wide array of initiatives listed above, green burials are still only being practiced by a relatively small number of people. Many individuals feel that “scattering ashes is disrespectful to the dead” and non-Chinese—“an invention of the West”.\(^\text{26}\) In fact, protests have even been organized against the government’s green burial campaign.\(^\text{27}\) Kong observes that some

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 6.
\(^{22}\) Hong Kong Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene, Usage and Promotion of Gardens of Remembrance, Scattering Cremains at Sea and Internet Memorial Service, 3. Other Gardens of Remembrance range from ten to 900 square meters.
\(^{24}\) Ibid.
\(^{25}\) Hong Kong Government Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene, Promotion of Green Burial, 4.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
take issue with the thought of different people’s remains mixing together.\textsuperscript{28} In the past, this has only occurred in mass-graves, which have never been looked upon fondly in China, not only because they have normally been reserved for children, criminals, and the nameless dead, but also “because of the fact that certain spirits might not get along with one another”.\textsuperscript{29} Others worry that, if they choose to bury at sea, the remains of their loved ones will become food for fish.\textsuperscript{30}

For any type of scatter burial, the issue of ancestral remains being spread across a vast area and, therefore, having no precisely locatable position is not slight. Without such a designation, there is no place the soul may call its own and nowhere from which beneficial fengshui might come forth. This is somewhat less of a problem with garden burials since Gardens of Remembrance are by no means huge and plaques (referred to by some as proper seats of the soul (lingpai weizhi 靈牌位置)) are available for purchase.\textsuperscript{31}

The FEHD did briefly experiment with tree burials (shuzang 樹葬)—a form of green burial which seeks to avoid this problem by having the bereaved bury cremains instead of scattering them and, afterwards, planting a tree or some other kind of vegetation above to mark the spot.\textsuperscript{32} As Xu Zhiping notes, “tree burials are, in fact, a kind of ground burial”.\textsuperscript{33} They are, therefore, also in line with the cultural ideal of “entering the earth to be at peace”. Nevertheless, the initiative was quickly abandoned by the FEHD because the “public’s reaction was less than ideal”.\textsuperscript{34} The reason for the poor response, the government suggests, was rooted in “issues surrounding the maintenance of the trees”.\textsuperscript{35} As Aveline-Dubach observes of tree burials in mainland China, “the idea of tending these graves…is undeniably attractive [as a way to express

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28} Kong, “No Place, New Places”, 420. \\
\textsuperscript{29} Ahern, The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village, 186. \\
\textsuperscript{30} Hernández, “Hong Kong’s Drive for ‘Green Burials’” and Kong, “No Place, New Places”, 420. \\
\textsuperscript{31} Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, “Internet Memorial Service” (wujin sinian wangzhan 無盡思念網站), memorial.gov.hk (accessed August 2016). \\
\textsuperscript{33} “其实“树葬”也是土葬的一种” (Xu Zhiping 徐治平, “Shuzang 树葬”, Guangxi wenxue 广西文学 12 (2006), 76). \\
\textsuperscript{34} “市民對服務的反應不理想” (Hong Kong Legislative Council, Summary of the Fifteenth Meeting of the Public Works Subcommittee of the Finance Committee of the Legislative Council (Lifu hui caiwu weiyuanhui xia xia de gongwu xiaozu weiyuanhui: dishiwu cihuiyi jiyou 立法會財務委員會轄下的工務小組委員會: 第十五次會議紀要), April 20, 2017, http://www.legco.gov.hk/yr16-17/chinese/fc/pwsc/minutes/pwsc20170420.pdf (accessed June 2017), 23. \\
\textsuperscript{35} “樹木的保養問題” (ibid).}
filial piety] but it is a double-edged sword in Chinese culture, according to which any withering of the plant-grave could be seen as a bad omen".36 Perhaps, some remnants of past traditions which identified grave-trees with the souls below them still linger, as well.37 The notion that supernatural beings can occupy vegetation is by no means unknown in Hong Kong. Indeed, Lam Tsuen 林村 in the New Territories is home to a number of “spirit-trees”, which act as homes for Tudi Gong.38 Kong has also noted that, where tree burials are practiced in Taiwan, people “have expressed worry about being bound to the servitude of tree demons, while others are concerned that the souls of their loved ones would be trapped by tree roots, ultimately exercising a negative influence on the fortunes of future generations”.39 It is possible that some in Hong Kong are apprehensive toward tree burials for the same reasons.

In any case, to deal with the problems that arise from grave-less burials, the government has decided that it will, instead, “[take] steps to foster a change in mindset and culture”.40 The state is acutely aware that for scattering ancestral remains to become mainstream a dramatic “transformation of social traditions” is required.41 However, they are “optimistic” that, “with persistent efforts…[they] should be able to progressively secure a paradigm shift”.42 To accomplish this, they have, so far, employed two tactics. The first has been to provide the departed with individualized spaces online while attempting to convince people that the dead can be contacted, worshiped, and respectfully memorialized via the internet. The other has been to devalue graves and niches and valorize the notion of a free and unbound soul united with nature. Since Chapter 4 deals exclusively with the interment memorial service launched by the FEHD, this chapter will discuss only the second strategy.

Before proceeding, however, it should be made clear that, in the green burial promotion materials, the existence of ancestral spirits is never explicitly affirmed. Yet, since the reality of souls is already assumed by popular religious practitioners, it need not be. The state is able to tactfully engage popular notions regarding the dead while retaining a completely secular...
language. Thus, the following analysis considers how the words and images used in the videos and publications produced by the FEHD speak to those who possess a popular religious worldview while not denying that the materials’ might be intended to speak to others, as well.

**RETURNING TO NATURE**

The idea of “returning to nature” (huigui ziran 回歸自然) has mainly been employed in the governmental rhetoric surrounding garden burials and is used to deal with a number of issues. The promotional materials, for example, argue that returning to nature “nourishes the ten thousand things and gives rise to blessings” (zirun wanwu, nai fuzhi zhi ju 滋潤萬物，乃福祉之舉), which obviously targets worries people might have about lacking a niche or grave to produce beneficial fengshui.\(^{43}\) Statements like this also imply that the choice to scatter ashes will not give rise to ancestral retribution. Also of concern is that scattering ashes negatively affects souls. As we saw in Chapter 1, the connection between the hun and the body is extraordinarily strong and, traditionally, preservation of the body has, in fact, meant preservation of the soul. To alleviate any concern that scattering cremains might lead to the soul’s harm or destruction, the government is promulgating the idea that returning to nature provides a certain kind of immortality. Through garden burial, they proclaim, ancestral remains are absorbed by the surrounding vegetation, which allows the deceased to take part in the “transformations of life” (shengming lun hua 生命輪化) and “continue to live without end” (sheng sheng bu xi 生生不息).\(^{44}\)

In the context of sea burials, returning to nature means “join[ing] the boundless and [being] free”.\(^{45}\) The idea that scattering ashes at sea gives rise to an incredibly liberated post-mortem existence is central to all of the sea burial promotional material. One video, for example, opens with an image of a seabird gliding across the sky while the words “I hear freedom in the

\(^{43}\) Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, *Returning to Nature what Nature Creates (Huigui ziran shengsheng bu xi 回歸自然生生不息)* (Hong Kong: Shiwu huanjing weisheng shu chuban 食物環境衛生署出版, 2014), 2.


wind” (zai fengzhong, wo tingjian le ziyou 在風中，我聽見了自由) are displayed on the screen. In another, a woman states that sea burial has “allowed [her husband] to be free”. “Wherever he’d like to go, he can go”, she says. To alleviate any concerns people might have about the process being disrespectful to the dead, it is proposed that the human body is “nothing more than a leather sac” (shenti zhi shi pinang er yi 身體只是皮囊而已), which is shed upon death.

The FEHD also suggests that the living enjoy an increased level of freedom by choosing sea burial. Unlike the descendants of those whose ancestors rest in graves and niches, families who have scattered cremains at sea “may pay tribute to [their] beloved whenever [they] have sight of the boundless sea and recall the gentle voices of [their] loved ones whenever [they] hear the sound of waves”. All of this, of course, is an attempt to make Hong Kong citizens comfortable with not having a grave or niche. Unanchored souls spell danger from a popular religious perspective and failing to construct a permanent resting place would normally be seen as a gross and inexcusable shirking of filial responsibilities. However, the government clearly seeks to put a positive spin on grave-less forms of disposal, suggesting that graves, which traditionally bind the deceased and require regular attention from the living, are, in fact, something from which to be liberated. By having no fixed grave, the dead are granted greater mobility and the living, greater convenience.

The image of life after death implied by the garden burial videos and publications is, instead, one of the ancestral spirit dwelling in eternal peace and quietude, “under the warm sunshine and gentle breeze, amidst the flowery grassland”. The notion that the soul becomes free through the act of scattering ashes is definitely emphasized much more in the discourse surrounding sea burials. However, one still gets a sense from the promotional materials that

46 Ibid.
47 “讓他可以自由自在” (Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, “Short Film: Publicity Event: Return to Nature and Live On” (Duanpian “Huigui ziran, shengsheng bu xi” qi lai huodong ri 短片：《回歸自然 生生不息》齊來活動日), http://www.fehd.gov.hk/english/cc/images/green_burial_publicityEvent.mp4 (accessed May 2017)).
48 “他喜歡去哪裡就去哪裡” (ibid.).
49 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, “Short Film: Green Burial: Scatter Ashes at Sea—Benny Li Shun-yen”.
50 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Leaflet on “Scattering of Cremated Ashes in Hong Kong Waters”, 2-3.
51 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, Leaflet on “Scattering of Cremains in Gardens of Remembrance or at Sea” (Yu jinian huayuan huo haishang sa hui danzhang 於紀念花園或海上撒灰單張) (Hong Kong: Shiwu huanjing weisheng shu chuban 食物環境衛生署出版, 2016).
garden-dwelling souls are far more liberated than those who have their remains stored in columbaria niches. For example, in one video, niches are likened to tiny cages (gezi 格子) while Gardens of Remembrance are compared to “fetterless paradises” (wu shufu de letu 無束縛的樂土). The motif of floating dandelion seeds, which pervades all of the promotional materials, too, signifies freedom just as much as it does new life. That said, it seems that those who opt for garden burials over scattering ashes at sea do so because, with the former, some sort of demarcated piece of land exists where the soul can be said to remain and receive offerings from the living. One woman, writing to her dead son on his online memorial page, appears to distinguish between the two types of scatter burial along precisely these lines. Clearly influenced by the FEHD’s green burial rhetoric, she explains her decision to spread his remains in a Garden of Remembrance rather than at sea. She writes, “It will be arranged for you [to rest] in a flower garden. Don’t blame Mama for being selfish. Mama knows you like the ocean, that you like freedom! But, Mama can’t swim! It’s only so that I can visit you that I gave you this kind of arrangement!”.

**ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS AND ETHICISTS**

Although Hong Kong’s policymakers have met substantial resistance to green burials at the popular level, they are no doubt encouraged by a global outcry for responsible environmental action led by scientists and environmental philosophers. While scientists continue to draw attention to our precarious position on the planet and provide accurate data and innovative solutions, moral philosophers have been trying to provide us with a sound environmental ethic. It is important to briefly discuss these philosophical ideas as they have shaped and continue to shape public policy and popular opinion regarding mortuary rites. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to locate even a single intellectual who would willingly say that permanent internment is a sustainable form of corpse disposal. It is hardly surprising, then, that in the Chinese world, philosophers have explicitly encouraged or even practiced green burials. The cosmopolitan thinker Thomé H. Fang, for example, had his cremains placed inside a marble urn and deposited...

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52 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, “Short Film: Green Burial: Scatter in Gardens of Remembrance—Raymond Young”.

53 “將你安置在花圃上。別怪媽媽自私，媽媽知道你喜愛大海！喜歡自由！但媽媽不會游泳啊！而可以去探你的，就只好給你這樣的安排!” Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, “Internet Memorial Service”, memorial.gov.hk (accessed August 2016).
in the waters between Jinmen and the Taiwan Strait and Liu Shu-Hsien, a third generation scholar of New Confucianism (dangdai xin rujia 當代新儒家) and former professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, was brought to rest via tree burial.⁵⁴

Arguably, in the West, environmental ethicists can be divided into two main camps: anthropocentrists (i.e. those who understand value as anthropogenic) and nonanthropocentrists (i.e. those who extend intrinsic value to nonhumans).⁵⁵ Members of the former group are often said to advocate and/or practice “shallow ecology”, which is to say that they tend to see humans as bifurcated from nature and relate to the environment in only utilitarian terms, treating it as a collection of resources to be managed only according to human rights and preferences.⁵⁶ By contrast, those who practice “deep ecology” tend to subscribe to cosmologies that view the world as “unity in process” (the “central intuition” of the field, as Warwick Fox would have it), reject mechanistic materialism, and usually see animals, plants, species, and even entire ecosystems as possessing intrinsic value and, thus, as being subjects to which we are morally obliged.⁵⁷

Fox accuses anthropocentrists of possessing the same kind of “arrogant conceit [as] those who dwell in the moral equivalent of a Ptolemaic universe”.⁵⁸ Yet, “deep ecologists”, he claims, “are concerned to move heaven and earth in this universe in order to effect a ‘paradigm shift’ of

⁵⁵ These individuals are sometimes referred to as “biocentrists” or “ecocentrists” depending on how far they are willing to extend intrinsic value.
⁵⁶ Warwick Fox, “Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of our Time?”, in Environmental Ethics: An Anthology, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 252. Brian G. Norton offers a unique anthropocentric stance, which he terms “weak anthropocentrism”. This position still considers human beings to be the world’s only value-makers but maintains that moral interactions with the environment must be determined on the basis of considered preferences (i.e., preferences “consonant with a rational world view”) rather than felt preferences, which are the determinants of what he calls “strong anthropocentrism” (See Bryan G. Norton, “Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism”, in Environmental Ethics: An Anthology, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 165). According to Norton, this “makes possible appeals to the value experiences of natural objects and undisturbed places in human value formation. To the extent that environmentalists can show that values are formed and informed by contact with nature, nature takes on value as a teacher of human values” (Ibid., 165). In this way, he says, “there exists a framework for developing powerful reasons for protecting nature” without employing “difficult-to-defend references to the intrinsic value of nonhuman natural objects” (Ibid., 156 and 169).
⁵⁷ Fox, “Deep Ecology”, 252-3. Fox and others are quick to add, however, that the “biospherical egalitarianism” implied by deep ecology should only be understood in principle and that value differences must still be acknowledged in practice. “The only universe where value is spread evenly across the field”, claims Fox, “is a dead universe” (Ibid., 258). See also Arne Naess, “Identification, Oneness, Wholeness and Self-Realization”, in Environmental Ethics: An Introduction with Readings, ed. John Benson (New York: Routledge, 2000).
comparable significance to that associated with Copernicus”. It should be made perfectly clear, however, that many of the ideas proposed by so-called deep ecologists have long been extant in the East. Indeed, Eastern philosophies often acted as an impetus for deep ecologists’ meditations on the environment and their place in it. As Fang remarks, “For several thousands of years, [the] Chinese have been thinking [about] vital problems in terms of comprehensive harmony which permeates anything and everything”. “It sounds like an eternal symphony”, he explains, “swaying and swinging all the sky, all the earth, all the air, all the water, merging all forms of existence in one supreme bliss of unity”. While “Western thought is often permeated with vicious bifurcation which sets a number of things in implacable hostility”, for the Chinese, Fang notes, “Nature…is that infinite realm wherein the universal flux of life is revealing itself and fulfilling everything with its intrinsic worth”. “Everything”, he continues, “is valuable as it is, since it participates in that Universal Life which is immortal in virtue of its infinite ideal of perfection and its eternal continuity of creation”.

Not all nonanthropocentrists rely as heavily on cosmological stance as do deep ecologists, however. Holmes Rolston III, for instance, argues that even nonsentient organisms and whole species have inherent “goods and harms”, that they are “axiological system[s]” even if not moral ones. “Though things do not matter to plants, things matter for them”, he explains. Therefore, “insentient organisms are the holders of value, although not the beholders of [it]”, which is to say that “some values, instrumental and intrinsic, are objectively there, discovered not generated by the valuer”. Paul W. Taylor further argues that, since the good of an organism is intrinsically valuable it should “be pursued as an end in itself and for the sake of the entity whose good it is”. Others, such as Peter Singer, though, are not willing to extend our moral duties to nonhumans quite as far as are Taylor and Rolston. Instead, Singer argues that our moral obligation is clear only to sentient beings because such beings have interests; they avoid

59 Ibid.
60 Other major influences include Western mystical thought, physics, and psychedelic experiences.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 17 and 19.
64 Ibid., 21-2.
66 Ibid., 146.
67 Ibid.
suffering and pursue pleasure just as we do. “If a being suffers”, he says, “the fact that it is not a member of our own species cannot be a moral reason for failing to take its suffering into account”.\(^{69}\) To ignore the cries of other sentient creatures on these grounds, he says, is to be guilty of “speciesism” as doing so follows the same logic as that of racists.\(^{70}\)

Some Chinese thinkers have utilized or expanded on the ideas presented by these Western philosophers (e.g. Yu Mouchang and Lu Feng). Yet, there are those, too, who argue that, in a Chinese context, such propositions are untenable. Gao Shan, for instance, suggests that the idea that nonhumans have intrinsic value in the terms put forth by Rolston and Taylor is an unsuitable basis for a Chinese environmental ethic.\(^{71}\) For Gao, “the way Chinese philosophy defines human beings in terms of their feelings, biological powers, and intuition precludes the possibility of the formation of intrinsic value” as understood by Rolston and Taylor.\(^{72}\) “The metaphysical, epistemological and ethical meaning of intrinsic value in nature [implied by these thinkers]”, she states, “is a legacy of Western philosophical traditions, which is in conflict with…Chinese [ones]”.\(^{73}\) Instead of basing an environmental ethic on intrinsic value in nature, she says, a Chinese environmental ethic should be based on the concept of harmony between human beings and nature: *tian ren he yi* 天人合一.\(^{74}\) Although the notion of *tian ren he yi* can be understood from both Confucian and Daoist perspectives, Gao suggests that the Daoist approach, which is based on an “aesthetic appreciation…of nature…[as a] moving process” and “people’s participation in [that] beauty”, is most suitable.\(^{75}\) This concept has also been employed by Chinese intellectuals to make a case for green burial. Zeng Chen et al., for instance, suggest that a proper understanding of *tian ren he yi* forces one to see ecological forms of disposal as “not only consistent with, but conform[ing] to Chinese tradition”.\(^{76}\)

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\(^{70}\) Singer does not suggest, however, that all beings interests are necessarily equal. Ibid.


\(^{72}\) Ibid., 126.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 112.

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 116.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 122 and 112.

\(^{76}\) Zeng Chen, William Sweet, and Cheng Qian, "Ecological Citizenship and Green Burial in China", in *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 29, no. 6 (2016), 991.
In fact, developing environmental ethics grounded in Confucian and/or Daoist philosophy is quite commonplace as is the formation of Buddhist environmental ethics, Christian environmental ethics, etc. What would be useful, perhaps, is an environmental ethic rooted in Chinese popular religion, which acknowledges the existence of gods, ghosts, and ancestors. One seeking to create such guidelines, however, is faced with enormous challenges. To being with, popular religion has no cannon or organized clergy from which to conveniently draw. It does have rituals, which are authoritative and communicative, but these tend to be grossly utilitarian and self-centered and, therefore, do not lend themselves well to the formation of a responsible environmental ethic.

There is *fengshui*, of course. However, traditionally, *fengshui* has been primarily used in manners both highly anthropocentric and individualistic, usually being employed only for the wealth and happiness of single persons, families, or villages. Indeed, geomancy is usually an extremely competitive enterprise and is regularly the source of vicious disputes. Moreover, the fact that people are often concerned only for their own *fengshui* has the potential to lead to collective action problems. It is true that *fengshui* does seek to create a kind of harmony for the subject in relation to her immediate surroundings; however, it does not look to extend this beyond the individual or small group. Furthermore, it does not necessarily create “harmony” in an environmentally friendly way. As Bruun observes, “*fengshui* is the holistic approach to one’s fortune, without any strict distinction between natural, social and psychical domains”, which means that it “may work both in favour of development at the expense of the environment and against environmental degradation”.77 A Westernized version of *fengshui*, “stripped of much of much of its original folk-religious content” and infused with an ecological awareness, has come to Hong Kong in recent years.78 The problem is that this “new and radical reading of *fengshui*” is often unrecognizable at the popular level.79 The same issue occurs when the rituals, texts, symbols, etc. of religious traditions are selected to form environmental ethics without regard for context, a process which has been referred to as “confrontational hermeneutics” or “creative misinterpretation”. 80

Therefore, it seems that to utilize the stuff of popular religion to form a sound

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79 Ibid., 243.
environmental ethic would require, first, a reformulation of how that stuff is actually thought about by practitioners. (Hence the FEHD’s green burial campaign.) Fortunately, though, the fact that Chinese popular religion possess no cannon, organized clergy, or strict doctrines also means that it is has the potential to be highly adaptable. The willingness of its practitioners to remain open to multiple traditions simultaneously, whether philosophical or religious, too, means that the ethics formed within these schools of thought retain the potential to influence people at the popular level. With practical goals in mind, however, environmental philosophers might be wise to make strategic arguments over rigorous, intellectual ones.\textsuperscript{81}

\section*{Conclusion}

Green burials remain unpopular in Hong Kong because scattering remains is viewed as a disrespectful or even harmful form of disposal. They are also thought to be objectionable because they are grave-less. From a popular religious perspective, this is an issue, not only because it means losing the \textit{fengshui} benefits one can normally expect from a grave, but also because grave-less (i.e. homeless) spirits tend to wander about, wrecking havoc for the living. The government did briefly experiment with tree burials, a type of green burial that seems to provide a solution. However, the form of disposal was found unappealing and its promotion abruptly ceased. The FEHD has, instead, decided to actively engage the public in hopes that it can institute “a change in mindset and culture”.\textsuperscript{82} The campaign seeks to make people comfortable with or even have a preference for scatter burials by suggesting that grave-less forms of disposal are not only harmless but also liberating for both the living and the dead. At the same time, philosophers have been championing green burials on moral grounds. Whether or not a majority will eventually become convinced by advocates and adopt green burials, however, only time will tell.


\textsuperscript{82} Hong Kong Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene, \textit{Usage and Promotion of Gardens of Remembrance, Scattering Cremains at Sea and Internet Memorial Service}, 2.
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Ancestors Online

On June 10th, 2010, as part of its campaign to promote green burials, the Hong Kong government launched a free internet memorial service (IMS). Their hope is that the site can function as a temporary grave-substitute for those busy or abroad and as a permanent replacement for those who have had their ashes scattered in Gardens of Remembrance or at sea. In addition to providing an online space for the dead, the site also grants users the ability to send electronic offerings to ancestors “in place of burning joss sticks and paper”. In order for the site to live up to its slogan, “Pay Tribute Anytime, Anywhere” (suishi suidi biaoda sinian 隨時隨地表達思念), a mobile version was also launched on September 25th, 2011. An application is being developed, as well, which “will provide functions for personalised profile settings, notifications, and sharing with social media”.

Promotion of the service has occurred alongside the push for green burials and has incorporated many of the same methods—video advertisements, talks, public seminars, etc. As with green burials, shaping the opinion of youths has been a major focus. For instance, an IMS essay contest was initiated by the FEHD to target children in much the same way as did the green burial poster contest (see Chapter 3). Despite these efforts, though, as of March 31st, 2016, only 8,400 memorial pages had been created, which is to say that pages have been launched for only just over three percent of all those who have died in Hong Kong since the IMS’s conception.

1 Kong suggests that one issue with online memorialization in China is that services there cost money. A person making a single offering, for example, can be charged upwards of thirty RMB. See Kong, “No Place, New Places”, 427 and 429. This is not an issue in Hong Kong, however, where the IMS is operated by the government and requires no financial transactions on the part of the bereaved to open, maintain, or use.
2 Hong Kong Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene, Usage and Promotion of Gardens of Remembrance, Scattering Cremains at Sea and Internet Memorial Service, 4. It should be noted that the government makes no distinction between “online offerings” and “offline offerings” in Chinese. The word jipin 祭品 is used to refer to both.
3 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, A Guide to After-Death Arrangements, 33.
4 Hong Kong Government Legislative Council Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene, Promotion of Green Burial, 9.
5 Ibid., 8.
In what follows, first, a brief description of the internet memorial service will be provided. Since no academic literature has been written on the IMS to date, it is, perhaps, more detailed than would otherwise be warranted. Thereafter, a report will be made of several numerical facts derived from the analysis of 120 of these sites, which, to some extent, give rise to and inform the discussion they precede. Then, the implications that using the IMS to perform worship has for the small group of popular religious practitioners who choose to do so will be considered. And, finally, attention will given to why the vast majority of IMS users are, in fact, not engaging the platform religiously.

MEMORIAL.GOV.HK

According to the FEHD, a memorial page may be launched for any person who has his or her remains stored in a public columbarium or cemetery (including Gallant Garden (Hao yuan 浩園)), preformed a scatter burial, or made use of a public crematorium. In addition, if the individual was interred in a private columbarium or cemetery but was a resident of Hong Kong, he or she also qualifies.6 The individuals who create memorial sites for family members or friends who have passed away are referred to as “page owners” (banzhu 版主) and have the option of being guided through the setup process by a FEHD employee or can make use of the site’s demonstration videos.

Even the most basic pages include at least three tabs: “Home” (shouye 首頁), “Info” (shizhe ziliao 逝者資料), and “Guestbook” (fangke liuyan 訪客留言). Additional tabs for photos and videos are also often included and the option exists to have music play across them all. The Home tab features an area for displaying a photo of the departed (or whatever other picture one might prefer), which is set onto a background of the page owner’s choosing.7 Although it is possible to customize a background, the vast majority of individuals choose one of the many pre-designed backgrounds offered by the IMS. These consist of phrases superimposed on related images. The Info tab records the deceased’s particulars (name, birth and death dates, birthplace, native place (jiguan 籍貫), etc.). It also notes the page owner’s relation to the departed and provides space for a statement from this person (banzhu de hua 版主的話). A biography of the

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6 Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, *A Guide to After-Death Arrangements*, 33.
7 While most people use pictures of the deceased, I have also seen pictures of ancestral tablets used.
dead may be included here, as well. Finally, by clicking on the Guestbook tab, visitors to
memorial pages are able send ancestors written messages accompanied by offerings in the form
of pictures. One may either write something unique or select from thirteen pre-written messages
(e.g. “[You] will forever be remembered” (*yongyuan huainian 永遠懷念*), “Wishing you a
peaceful rest” (*yuan ni an xi 願你安息*), etc.). Up to five picture-offerings may supplement the
text. The offerings may be uploaded JPEGs from a personal device or else chosen from a store of
photos, which includes images of things like flowers, candles, paper money, fruit, desserts,
plated pork and poultry, wine, and tea, as well as more symbolic content, such as stars and hearts
(see Figure 4).

**Numerical Findings**

Since memorial sites can only be reached by entering the name of the deceased into a
search engine, the sites analyzed could not be chosen at complete random. Limited by the
service’s software, I performed twelve separate searches, each using one of the twelve most
common Chinese surnames (Wang 王, Li 李, Zhang 張, Liu 劉, Chen 陳, Yang 楊, Huang 黃,
Zhao 趙, Wu 吳, Zhou 周, Xu 徐, and Sun 孫).\(^8\) I then proceeded to analyze the first ten results

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\(^8\) Shao Jiqi 邵弃疾, “Public Safety Bureau Stats: “Wang” Has Become China’s Most Common Last Name”
(*Gongan bu tongji: “Wang” cheng zhongguo diyi da xing you 9288 wan ren* 公安部统计：”王”成中国第一大姓
of each search.

Of the 120 memorial sites, ninety-seven were accessible, twenty-two were locked, and one contained locked content. Seventy of the sites were created for males (58.3%), forty-one for females (34.2%), and nine were shared by husband and wife (7.5%). Additionally, two single-person sites provided links to the pages of their spouses. Death dates ranged from 1966-2017; however, the vast majority of pages were launched for those who passed away within the last three years. Twenty-four percent of people provided lunar calendar equivalents for all such dates. The creators of these pages or “page owners” were most often a child of the deceased (71% of unlocked pages) and, of these, the majority were sons (59%). Less than half of all page owners made statements in the space provided for doing so and only forty percent of accessible memorials included biographies.

Eighty-three percent of Home tabs displayed a picture or the deceased or some other representation. Of these, eighty-six percent were colour photos and fourteen percent were black and white. Half of the memorial pages also included additional pictures of the deceased under the Photo tab. The four most popular Home tab backgrounds were the following: “It is truly good to be your child” (Zuo ni de zinü zhen hao 做你的子女真好) superimposed on an image of an adult walking hand-in-hand with a youth down a tree-lined path (17.5%), “How is Heaven?” (Tianshang ke hao 天上可好) superimposed on an image of a blue sky and green field (15.8%), “The sky and ocean have limits; only the thoughts and memories [of you] have none” (Tianya haijiao you qiong shi, zhi you si yi wujin chu 天涯海角有窮時，只有思憶無盡處) superimposed on an image of waves crashing against a rocky shore (12.5%) and “Which star are you?” (Na yi ke xing shi ni 哪一顆星是你?) superimposed on an image of a night sky (10%).

Under the Guestbook tab, messages were left on less than half of accessible pages (41%). In total 364 messages were made (9.1 per messaged page). However, not all of these were directed at the deceased. Photo-offerings were made on less than thirty percent of memorial pages, flowers being by far the most common. Significantly, only seventeen percent of accessible pages evidenced offerings that one would normally expect to see from practitioners of popular

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9 That memorial pages are able to be locked means that they are not subject to the same issues surrounding privacy and vandalism as sites are in mainland China. See Kong, “No Place, New Places”, 429.

10 There is a long history in China of husband and wife being buried together. The Liji proposes that the practice began with the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong 周公) and portrays Confucius (551-479) as a proponent of the practice. See Legge, Li Chi, 123-5, 132, and 202.
religion—i.e., offerings that included things like food and paper money.

**THE IMPLICATIONS OF ONLINE WORSHIP**

Before addressing the apparent lack of what we might call “popular religious activity” on the memorialization website, I would first like to take a moment to consider the implications for those few who are utilizing the service to communicate with and make offerings to the dead. When made, messages and offerings are most often sent on the occasions we might expect: Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, the Pure and Bright Festival, death-day anniversaries, etc. The words written tend to be similar to those that would be spoken at a grave or before an ancestral tablet; they wish the departed well, inquire into their wellbeing, inform an ancestor about major life events, and/or ask for assistance. One man, planning to open a pharmacy, for example, used the IMS to ask his parents to remove any obstacles and protect his venture. In keeping with the reciprocal nature of Chinese popular religion, he made picture-offerings of fruit and promised to take care of the family. Others tend to worry over the deceased’s diet, clothes, finances, etc. This, of course, is in keeping with the notion that life in the *yin*-realm parallels life in the *yang*-realm and that the dead, therefore, require the same material care as they did while alive. One woman, for instance, cautions her parent, “The weather is especially cold. Wear more layers and drink several bowls of hot soup!” 11 In another message, she writes, “Everyday, [may you have] peace and happiness and live in comfort with sufficient clothing and food!” 12

It seems that, for these individuals, an ancestor’s memorial page acts at once as an altar, a transmitter of offerings, and a soul-seat (either in lieu of one or more of the others or in addition to them). That the site acts as an altar is obvious; it allows for offerings to be presented before the deceased and petitions to be made. Instead of the usual modes of transmission, however, words and objects are sent to the otherworld with a simple click of a button (appropriately labelled *dijiao* 遞交 (to present, hand over, or lay before)). As a soul-seat, the site functions in the same way as do other worldly locations where the *hun* is traditionally thought to dwell, namely the grave, where the soul takes its seat near the body (sometimes in a silk banner inscribed with the deceased’s name (*lingjing* 靈旌)), and the ancestral shrine or hall, where the

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11 “天氣凍，著多件衫呀，飲多幾碗熱湯!” (Hong Kong Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, *Internet Memorial Service*, memorial.gov.hk (accessed August 2016).
12 “天天平安快樂安居衣食足!” (ibid.).
*hun* imbues a spirit tablet (or, sometimes, a photo). The materials which souls imbue in Chinese culture are clearly varied. Silk, paper, and wood all work. In Hong Kong, the use of silver has also been reported. Thus, even if it might feel strange for many, it is definitely within the realm of possibility that certain practitioners would feel comfortable with the soul making its abode in the stuff of cyberspace. It is equally conceivable, within the context of popular religion, for a single soul (or segments of it) to simultaneously rest in several different locations. Indeed, gods, who are, more often than not, the souls of exemplary human beings, concurrently reside in a multitude of places. According to scholars and institutional Daoists, however, the average person has but three *hun* and these belong to only three locations: the grave, the ancestral tablet, and the netherworld. The average practitioner, though, is rather hazy on the subject. As Stevan Harrell observes, “When people are asked whether there is one ‘soul’ in three parts, or one ‘soul’ which is somehow simultaneously in three places, or whether there are actually three separate ‘souls’, the common response is either wonderment or some sort of rationalization that varies idiosyncratically”. In any case, it is highly doubtful that those setting up memorial pages, emotional as they are, are making sure that their ancestors *hun* count is in accordance with theory. Rather, the memorial site is simply launched and engaged and rituals begin to take form with little reflection. A time may come, of course, when these rituals must be questioned or used as “cognitive prosthetics”. In such moments, new ways of thinking about the soul might develop. However, that such contemplation will ever occur at the popular level seems unlikely. As Harrell proposes, the seats of the soul are “separate contexts” and “because the contexts are separate, there is little conflict and little need for [the average person to perform] abstract reasoning about a non-existent problem”.

**Reluctant Practitioners**

Now, as noted above, only seventeen percent of memorial sites evidenced the types of

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16 Ibid.

17 The idea that rituals might be used as “cognitive prosthetics” is Schilbrack’s. See Introduction.

18 Harrell, 523.
offerings that one would expect to see from practitioners of popular religion. Even if we assume that all of the locked pages belonged to this category, the number still only jumps to just over thirty percent. It seems that either practitioners of popular religion are disinclined to create memorial pages or else tend not to use them in religious ways. In either case, the reason for the lack of religious activity on the IMS is very likely due to the fact that the site does not accord with the ritual sensibilities of most Hong Kongese regarding ancestor worship.

For starters, there are issues with the memorial sites acting as soul-seats. Not only is a memorial page not a physical object, its creation does not involve the kind of consecration ceremony that would normally be performed to fill something with a spirit. For instance, imbuing an ancestral tablet with the dead’s soul traditionally requires the bereaved son(s) to place the tablet on the top of the coffin and call the hun to rise up (qilai 起來) into the material.\(^{19}\) Shortly after, the tablet is empowered (usually by a fengshui master) via a rite called “dotting the tablet” (dian zhu 點主), which involves marking several points on the soul-seat with red ink (ideally mixed with blood from a white cock’s comb).\(^{20}\) In de Groot’s words,

\[\text{[The officiant] first…dots the topmost part, which in most cases is engraved or painted with the image of a sun in the midst of clouds , saying: Dian tian, tian qing 點天，天清], ‘I mark the heavens, pour out all your purity, O heavens!’ Then he marks the pedestal, pronouncing the words: Dian di, di ling 點地，地靈], ‘I mark the Earth, operate efficaciously, O Earth!’ In this way the natural influences of the Universe are summoned to work upon the tablet and thus insure the happiness of the soul for all time to come. Now the frontside is dotted on the right and left at about the middle of its height, the words pronounced running: Dian er, er cong 點耳，耳聰], ‘I dot the ears, be acute, O ears!’; then come two points at about the same height, but a little nearer the centre, with the words: Dian mu, mu ming 點目，目明], ‘I dot the eyes , be sharp, O eyes!’ Then follows a dot on the character for ‘males’, which stands in a smaller column of characters at the side, indicating the male descendants who erect the tablet as an object of worship for the family, the accompanying words being: Dian nan, nan chang shou 點男, 男長壽], ‘I mark the males; males, live long!’—and in the end a dot is placed on the character [zhu] 主, ‘tablet’, the last one in the large central column. Not unfrequently this character}\n
\[^{19}\text{De Groot, The Religious Systems of China (book 1), 211.}\]
\[^{20}\text{Ibid., 214 and 216.}\]
has the shape [wang] 王, and, receiving the dot on the top, is transformed into the required figure. The words pronounced here are: *Dian zhu, zhu xian ling* [點主，主顯靈], ‘I mark the word tablet, display spirituality, O tablet!’

Without these actions, which people have become ritualized to expect, it is easy to see how many would be reluctant to think of an online memorial page as actual dwelling place of a soul. Within religious contexts, performances of this kind are necessary to affect the transition of a mundane object into something beyond the ordinary. The informal launching of a memorial page, void as it is of inscriptions, incantations, religious professionals, or anything else of that nature, does virtually nothing to provide people with a sense that consecration has occurred.

Even if one does accept memorial pages as proper soul-seats (or even just as channels of communication), making picture-offerings to ancestors via computers or mobile devices is unlikely to resonate with practitioners of popular religion and, therefore, unlikely to seem efficacious in their eyes. New religious rituals tend to take hold and become standard at the popular level precisely because they feel real to people; they feel authentic; they feel powerful. More often than not, this means that they engage a worshiper’s senses with enough traditional features to make the rite feel proper, while introducing others which may be unrecognizable.

To appreciate why people might fail to resonate with online worship, one first needs to be familiar with the basic elements of popular religious memorial and sacrificial rituals as they occur offline. Blake observes that these rites almost always work to create sacred space, establish a connection with the otherworld, and, finally, break off that connection by utilizing candles, incense, foodstuffs, paper money, and firecrackers in, what he calls, “the canonical order of the common ritual service”. He explains,

The order of service proceeds quite consciously from the lighting of candles to mark the opening, to the lighting of incense to establish connection, to the presentation of food to enact communion, and then the gift of paper money, followed by a finale of firecrackers to mark the end of the ceremony and to effect the complete separation of the supplicants from any lingering demonic residues of their communion with the disembodied.

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22 Donald S. Sutton, “Death Rites and Chinese Culture: Standardization and Variation in Ming and Qing Times”, *Modern China* 33, no. 1 (2007), 142.
24 Ibid., 78.
Since firecrackers have been outlawed in Hong Kong since 1968, people have already become accustomed to their lack and have obviously had to find other ways to achieve a sense of return to the mundane world after performing religious rites. However, the same cannot be said for the other ritual paraphernalia. Incense is no doubt the most used of these and, in certain cases, is even “employed as a metonym for the whole”. Along with candles, lighting incense helps to generate an atmosphere set apart from ordinary existence. The poignant smell and mystical aura these two create clearly announce a space and time as sacred. So effective are they in doing this that the pair are employed across numerous cultures and religions, both East and West. Indeed, there is probably scarcely a person on the planet who would not feel an internal shift moving towards sanctity and calm when abiding in a space filled with incense smoke and soft candle light. What is more is that, in the Chinese context, incense is also believed to act as an offering and to establish connection with supernatural beings. Feuchtwang’s informants explained to him that “by means of the smoke curling up…the god [or ancestor] is notified of the intention to communicate. The smell of the incense catches the god’s attention and the smoke directs him to the person and the matter at hand”. It is not difficult to see why many feel that candles and incense are indispensable for the efficacious performance of religious actions. That smoke-free columbaria have been found objectionable makes perfect sense and that people are reluctant to worship online is equally understandable. In fact, the store of picture-offerings provided on the IMS does not even include incense. Candles are available, but the presentation of photographed candles before the dead does little to create a sense of sacred time and space. The flames remain motionless and one’s eyes continue to be filled with the cold, white light of an electronic screen.

Similarly, using picture-offerings provided by the IMS in place of food is not without issue. It is true that the switch to photos does not jeopardize the foodstuffs in so far as they are religious symbols. However, the aromas and tastes that food produces are lost. If the senses of the Hong Kongese are finely attuned to anything, it is most certainly food. As the popular adage

26 Blake, Burning Money, 78.
27 Feuchtwang, Popular Religion in China, 136.
29 For the rich symbolism surrounding food offerings in popular Chinese religion, see Thompson, “Death, Food, and Fertility”, 71-108.
goes, “The people regard food as Heaven” (*min yi shi wei tian* 民以食為天). And, for Blake, it is precisely the sensory experience that offering food in the mystical space created by the candles and incense that constitutes “the liminal moment or…transcendental ground of the ritual service”.\(^{30}\) He suggests, “the quickened senses of sight-smell-taste around the medium of food flow into feelings and emotions that know no temporal boundaries; there is a sense of the primordial, or the eternal, of a vast oneness”.\(^{31}\)

Just as the meal shared between the living and the dead is compromised, so too is the ability for the living to eat amongst each other. This is especially significant when it comes to grave-sweeping festivals, a time when families come together, not only to worship their ancestors, but also to picnic with the food offered. As Kong notes, when “the ‘netizen’ is…involved in making offerings on-line by him/herself…the sociality and collective act of a festival like Qing Ming is lost”.\(^{32}\) The “Durkheimian desire for ritual to play a social role”, she argues, is one reason why the practice of online memorialization has been slow to take hold in mainland China.\(^{33}\)

One might assume that the transition from paper products to picture-offerings on the IMS is insignificant. After all, many paper offerings are little more than representations of real things, which, although useful for the dead, are altogether unusable by the living.\(^{34}\) However, such an understanding is mistaken. The tactical component of making a paper offering cannot be underestimated. “In preparing papers for the flame”, states Blake, “there is often more handling of the paper than is necessary just to cast them on the flame or to ensure their complete immolation”.\(^{35}\) The reason for this, he proposes, is that “by touching, pressing, twisting the papers…[one works] something of [oneself] into the offering”.\(^{36}\) Such “mindful-body work produces value that is different from ‘surplus value’, measured more in quality than in quantity”.\(^{37}\) For instance, paper products folded by hand are commonly believed to be more valuable than their machine-produced counterparts.\(^{38}\) The work of folding, Blake suggests, “is

\(^{30}\) Blake, *Burning Money*, 85.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.

\(^{32}\) Kong, “No Place, New Places, 431.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) For a description of Chinese paper offerings, their variety and uses, see Scott, *For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors*.

\(^{35}\) Blake, *Burning Money*, 123.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 124.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 126.

\(^{38}\) Chanting scriptures is also sometimes done to add value to paper products. See ibid., 133.
sensual work, pure work, the work of devotion, of sacrifice, of self-sacrifice”.

In the processes of “shaping… and preparing them for their departure from the visible world…the papers lose their commodity or exchange value as mere things or utilities and become a sensual, transcendent value in the donor’s hands”.

“The paper money custom allows persons… to make a true sacrifice, not of paper per se, or of blood per se, but of toil”. Much the same can be said of the energy that goes into the preparation and presentation of food offerings. In both cases, it is difficult to see how picture-offerings could possibly match the value of offerings that are physically handled.

As for its place in “the canonical order of the common ritual service”, the gift of paper money acts as way to say goodbye to the deceased. It denotes one’s immanent departure in much the same way that, in Chinese culture, taking one’s leave from living relatives might be marked by the transfer of money wrapped in a red envelope from one party to another. By now, the

39 Ibid., 138.
40 Ibid., 124.
41 Ibid., 140.
importance of the temporal arrangement of offerings should be obvious. Candles and incense create a sense of sacred time and space and establish communication with the ancestors. When food is presented, communion is achieved and mystical experience, although not sought in popular religion, is made possible. Burning paper signals one’s immanent departure and lighting firecrackers, if permissible, would seal the door. Making offerings in a single, five-photo unit with the single click of a button does not come close to matching this powerful structure.

Before closing, I would like to make clear that the performance of these rituals is not entirely a serious business—although it is most certainly a sincere one from start to finish. The discussion above might have made it seem that these rituals are conducted with straight faces, in great solemnity, and that people, therefore, would only find a platform that invokes such a mood to be appealing for online worship. However, such a memorial service would be providing practitioners with only half of what they are accustomed to receiving from worship experiences. As just about anyone can attest, climbing mountains, burning paper offerings, setting off firecrackers, and picnicking with family are greatly enjoyable experiences, even exciting ones. Indeed, the veneration of ancestors is often as fun as it is grave and the IMS’s failure to produce either fun or gravity could make people hesitant to embrace the platform. Certain memorial sites in the mainland, for instance, have been accused of “not lend[ing] sufficient solemnity” to online activities.42 I do not believe this to be the case with the service in Hong Kong, however. The

42 Kong, “No Place, New Places”, 429.
layout, the images, the music all work together to produce a desirable effect in this regard. What the site does lack, perhaps, is a space for fun and merrymaking.

**CONCLUSION**

Bell remarks that “frivolous changes can undermine qualities that make [a] ritual aesthetically moving or authoritatively reassuring”.43 This seems to be precisely what has happened with the IMS’s attempt to facilitate ancestor worship. Although the government’s move to create this platform is commendable in that works to save land, eliminate pollution, and recognizes the constitutive and instrumental value gravesites have for many Hong Kongese, the multisensory experience that *real* candles, incense, food, and paper offerings create is not easily replaced. As a result, people, if they use the site at all, are tending to use it only to memorialize—not to worship.

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CONCLUSION

This work has contemplated what we might call the recent space-saving and pollution-reducing mortuary practices of Hong Kong, their introduction and promotion by the government and their reception by the citizenry, particularly those who practice popular religion. I began by focusing on the shift from ground burial to cremation, demonstrating that the transition was relatively smooth in no small part because of state promotional strategies and the region’s preexisting religious beliefs and practices. Unlike certain instances in the mainland, where cremation was introduced quickly and coercively as part of a nationwide campaign opposing popular religious practices and traditional family structures, the government of Hong Kong took a rather passive approach, its method being to subsidize cremation and to make ground burial unaffordable for the majority by putting a halt on land provisions for permanent graves. In doing so, it failed to foster the same kind of defensive attitude among the populous that was often provoked when and where cremation was made mandatory in the People’s Republic. I have also proposed that certain cultural-religious factors made the Hong Kongese more receptive to cremation, namely popular beliefs regarding fire, rotting flesh, and bones. Decaying flesh had long been viewed both as a danger and as a nuisance. Being a powerful pollutant made it a hazard and it was a nuisance because the custom of second burial required descendants to wait until flesh completely disintegrated before they could retrieve ancestral bones, put them to final rest, and begin to receive fengshui benefits from their progenitors’ graves. The practice of second burial also set a precedent for interring bodies that were not wholly intact. Fire, for its part, was seen simultaneously as a purifying agent and as medium for transferring things from this world to the world of the dead. This meant that cremation could be seen as having the potential to quickly rid the living of polluting flesh while leaving behind the desired osseous parts. At the same time, it could be understood as playing a positive role in the dead’s transition to hades.

Thereafter, I dealt with the practice of using columbaria to store ancestral remains and explored the ramifications this has had with regard to fengshui, the cult of Houtu, and the performance of grave-sweeping festivals. It was recognized that most columbaria are designed to meet general fengshui specifications and that, although personal graves no longer exist, the
transition has not meant the complete loss of geomantic considerations at the individual level. Another major problem with columbaria is that they do not allow for ancestors to “enter the earth to be at peace”. I have observed, however, that the architectures of these structures tend to avert patrons’ gazes away from the ground, focusing their eyes, instead, on the sky above. In the same way, these structures divert attention away from the fact that columbaria sites lack a space for the worship of the earth god(dess), Houtu. Even though columbaria seem to shift emphasis away from the earth, the tutelary functions of this deity have, nevertheless, remained important for some individuals, which, in certain cases, has resulted in resistance in the form of raising makeshift shrines. As for grave-sweeping festivals, most columbaria were originally designed to accommodate such occasions and their attendant practices as best as possible. However, the FEHD and BM CPC are currently taking decisive action to eliminate candles, incense, and burnt paper offerings from columbaria spaces, which has been met with significant opposition from the sites’ visitors, likely because worship without fire is not in keeping with their ritual sensibilities.

In “Green Burials”, I reiterated many of the same issues surrounding sea and garden burials already noted by Lily Kong and others. Most importantly, these forms of disposal are unappealing from a popular religious perspective because they result in grave-lessness and are believed to be disrespectful to one’s ancestors. Beyond the contributions of these scholars, I have shown that the government, too, recognizes these challenges and is taking active measures to alter popular notions surrounding ancestor worship, corpses, and life after death. Their campaign promulgates the idea that a person is returned to nature through scatter burial, which allows him or her to live on in peace and free of the constraints that would otherwise be imposed on his or her soul by a grave or niche. At the same time, the FEHD suggests that descendants are conieved by scatter burials in that they are liberated from grave-duities and able to commune with their ancestors whenever and wherever they please.

Understanding that having a specific location to visit the dead is important for the Hong Kongese, however, the government has provided citizens with a free internet memorial service, which allows a space to be created for the departed online. I have provided a description of the IMS and considered the implications of it being used for ancestor worship, proposing that, when it is employed as such, the site seems to act at once as an altar, a transmitter of offerings, and a soul-seat. Yet, given that the platform is only used for popular religious activity by a small minority, I devoted much more attention to exploring why this might be the case. In the end, it was conjectured that the platform’s lack of religious appeal is due to the fact that making
offerings online is in disaccord with people’s ritual sensibilities. The main issue is that using the internet memorial service requires ancestors to be worshiped without real candles, incense, food, and spirit-money, all items which would normally engage the physical senses of practitioners and provide them with feelings of sacred time and space, communion with the departed, and genuine sacrifice. By contrast, the IMS’s photo-offerings do little to affect the senses of users, making online worship liable to feel inauthentic and, therefore, inefficacious.

Although, the situation in Hong Kong is complex and many factors come into play, we have seen that the attitudes that people hold towards emergent practices are largely dependent on the cultural-religious framework and sensibilities onto which the new practices are introduced. We have also seen that when and where new practices fail to jibe, practitioners of popular religion are not always passive. Indeed, many instances of resistance have been noted. Of course, the power dynamics between the state and the citizenry are severely lopsided (and increasingly more so as the expiry of the Sino-British Joint Declaration approaches); however, as new mortuary practices have been introduced, some type of dialogue has taken place, which, at times, has forced the government to make concessions.\(^1\) In the end, whatever form death rituals in Hong Kong eventually take, their new shapes, when acted out and reflected upon, will inevitably affect the beliefs, ritual sensibilities, and bereavement process of those who choose to engage them. And, for this reason, the situation in Hong Kong will remain of interest for some time to come.

**Future Research**

Due to time and space constraints, I have dealt only with issues related to cremation. However, future research might also wish to consider the host of funerary practices that are conducted prior to cremation as numerous changes have occurred in this sector, as well. Indeed, with regard to these rites, Peter Ka Hing Cheung laments, “everything [has been] simplified and shortened”.\(^2\) New ways of demonstrating filial piety have also emerged and modern laws have put an end to things like banging gongs at overnight vigils and scattering brook money (*xiqian* 溪錢) during processions.\(^3\) In addition, hospitals, funeral parlours, and crematoria (institutions that, together, strictly control corpses) often function inharmoniously, causing funerals to become

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\(^1\) The Sino-British Joint Declaration will expire in 2047.

\(^2\) Cheung, “‘Letting Go’ and ‘Holding On’”, 78.

\(^3\) Wilson, “Chinese Burial Customs in Hong Kong”, 118. I have observed, however, that brook money (also called *baiqian* 白錢 or *mailuqian* 買路錢) is still scattered on Cheung Chau Island.
fragmented affairs.\textsuperscript{4} Besides the reception of these changes by practitioners of popular religion, of interest is also how present-day mortuary practices (including the ones discussed herein) are affecting the bereavement process. The thoughts and opinions of religious professionals towards the current state of affairs should also be collected and considered. Finally, since, at present, the practices associated with the government’s green burial campaign are only in their infancy, follow up research should be conducted after a period of time to record and contemplate developments.

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