

## Coping With Death and Loss: Confucian Perspectives and the Use of Rituals

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**Abstract** All of us must personally face and experience death and loss. Death and loss are sad events in our lives. But people living in different cultures and religions all have their own methods of coping. Chinese Confucianism has its own system and has evolved a set of mourning and burial ceremonies which have common characteristics. These mourning and burial ceremonies emphasize filial piety and the use of rituals as effective methods of coping with death. These beliefs and practices have deep meaning for the psychology of religion. They provide comfort and stimulate people to reflect on and promote spirituality. Through these interactions between relatives and ritualized behavior, Chinese find effective methods of coping with death and loss in culture. The mourning and burial ceremonies of Confucianism give the participants a comprehensive religious experience and personality integration so that their spirituality can be cultivated.

**Keywords** Death · Loss · Confucianism · Ritual · Spirituality · Psychology of religion

We must all face death and loss. Although we do not understand why human beings die, we all know that people surely will, which makes us ask: Since human beings are destined to die, what meaning is there in life? How can we make life more meaningful? Why do we fear death? Why do we feel sad when we see our relatives and friends die? How do we finally accept the pain of loss?

From the perspective of psychology of religion, death and loss are not just natural phenomena. They are cultural phenomena connected with each individual's life. However, because of different life circumstances and experiences, there are some differences among interpretations provided by different cultures and religions. How does Chinese culture give meaning to death and loss? Chinese culture is full of very rich and complex traditions. Confucianism is considered by many to represent the core values of Chinese culture. How

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does Confucianism understand and cope with death and loss? How do Chinese people grow spiritually when dealing with death and loss?

### Confucian views about death and loss

The meanings of death are different in medicine and religion. From the viewpoint of medicine, the criteria of death involve changes in function; just before death, cardiopulmonary function is lost, and after death, brain function is lost. There are four criteria of brain death: (1) the body has no response to various stimuli; (2) the spontaneous movement and breathing of the body disappear; (3) response to stimulus disappears; and (4) brain waves become smooth. But from the viewpoint of theology, death has different meanings, and there is no consensus. Is death the separation of soul and body? Specifically, if death is the separation of the immortal soul and mortal flesh, does the soul continue to exist when people die? Or is death the end of life, that is, the end of the body and soul? Religion seems to hold the former view. In the Christian view, death is the separation of the immortal soul and the mortal body. Therefore, the soul survives the body.

The concept of loss is given close attention in Western psychology and religion and also has a special meaning. Loss is the losing of one's possessions because of all sorts of life changes and also the emotional reactions caused by changes in life such as death, divorce, death of a spouse, and loss of property. All of these are called 'losses.' "Loss comes in many ways and is experienced in many ways. Death is not the all-inclusive experience of loss, but death is the focus of loss" (Moats 2010). From the view of psychology, loss is a psychological trauma and can be restored and treated. 'Loss' in this paper refers to the various related material, spiritual, and emotional losses caused by the death of relatives or friends.

As stated above, Confucianism still represents Chinese core values and still affects Chinese people's daily lives. The classic Confucian understanding of death can be summarized as follows.

Death and life are an integral whole and death is rest

In the ancient Confucian view, although life and death seems to be two kinds of states, they are an integral whole. The individual may think he or she owns life and death. However, to the universe, in the stream of all of life, death is a form of birth, that is, the death of one thing is the birth of another thing. Therefore, we should pay more attention to life than to death. If things can be dealt with well in life, the matter of death can be resolved. If people don't arrange their lives well, they can't understand death.

Confucius emphasizes that the meaning of life lies in this present life. When people are living, they should continue to do things until they die. "Zigong said, 'Death is great! Gentlemen can rest while villains' tricks can stop. Death, you are really great!'" (*Confucius Family Language*, 5:22). Zigong's words, "Gentlemen can rest while villains' tricks can stop," further articulates Confucius's view. Death is quiet rest. Zhangzhai's words illustrate the same concept: "Living in this world, I conform to the requirement of times and follow the developmental tendency of objective things. After death, I gain peace" (Chang Tsai, *Western Inscription*). *When comparing life and death, pay more attention to life.*

Generally, Confucius is considered to be a person who doesn't care about death. He thinks that when people are alive, they should only be concerned about life and not think about death. Chuang Tzu documented Confucius's thought that death and life are a single entity. "Confucius said: Do not use life to give life to death. Do not use death to bring death

to life. Do life and death depend upon each other? Both have that in them which makes them a single body” (Chuang-Tzu, *Knowledge Wandered North*).

In *The Analects* (Book Eleven), there is the statement: “Tzu-lu asked how one should serve ghosts and spirits. The Master said, ‘Till you have learnt to serve men, how can you serve ghosts?’ Tzu-lu then ventured upon a question about the dead. The Master said, ‘Till you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead?’” These famous words express Confucius’s realistic attitude toward death. Confucius pays more attention to the problems of real life while he takes an indifferent attitude toward death. His purpose is to teach people not to be troubled by the problem of life and death.

### The concept of ghosts and spirits

Death is often connected with the idea of ghosts and spirits. What are ghosts and spirits? The chapter *Festival Justice* in the *Book of Rites* says, “All living things have to die. After they die, they will turn into soil. Those are the ghosts.” (In Chinese hieroglyphs, ‘ghosts’ refers to the monsters in people’s imagination that look like humans but are not humans.) In *Ways of Worship* in *The Book of Rites*, the author wrote, “Because common people and common scholars have no temple in which they are offered sacrifice by others after death, they become ghosts.” Some think that after people’s bodies die, their ‘souls’ exist as ghosts. Wang Chong, a thinker (in 27–97 C.E.) in the Han Dynasty, thought that ghosts were spirits of all things: “Ghosts are the spirit of old things” (*Scale Evaluating Speech Value: Correct Legends Of Ghosts*).

There is a more detailed passage in the chapter *Festival Justice* in the *Book of Rites*. “Zaiwo asked Confucius, ‘I have always heard of ghosts and spirits. But I don’t know why they are called ghosts and spirits.’ Confucius said: ‘The so-called spirits are the result of strongly believed-in spirits while the so-called ghosts are the result of strongly believed-in ghosts. Combining ghosts and spirits together is the result of moral enlightenment. After people are born, they have to die. After they die, they turn back into the soil. Those are the ghosts people talk about. Their bodies rot underground and become wild soil after they are covered by earth. The smell spreads in the air and light appears. The scattered smell makes people sad, which is the spirit of all things, and also they appear as divinities in people’s imagination. After all of these are specifically described and formed into an image with high status, they are respected as ghosts and spirits and taken as idols worshipped by people. They make people revere and obey them.’” In the Chinese people’s opinion, their dead ancestors are ‘ghosts’ who need to be offered sacrifices.

The Confucian attitude to ghosts and spirits is apparent in two respects. First, Confucians think that ghosts and spirits exist but they don’t talk about them. They stay at a respectful distance from these ghosts and spirits. For example, in *Analects*, “The Master never talked of prodigies, feats of strength, disorders or spirits” (*The Analects*, Book Seven). “He who devotes himself to following virtue and morality to determine what he should do, who by respect for the spirits keeps them at a distance, may be termed wise” (*Analects*, Book Six). Secondly, they clearly distinguish ghosts and spirits from human things and actively guide people to put their focus on human things. Confucius said, “Just as to sacrifice to ancestors other than one’s own is presumption, so to see what is right and not do it is cowardice” (*The Analects*, Book Two). When his disciples asked about ghosts and spirits again and again, Confucius didn’t avoid answering their questions but led them to change their concern to focus on the reality of life. “Till you have learnt to serve men, how can you serve ghosts?” and “Till you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead?” (*Analects*, Book Eleven).

## The concept of soul

Do peoples' souls exist after they die? This is the problem all religions inquire about and try to answer. Chinese Confucianism takes an ambiguous attitude. The most representative answer is that whether the dead have awareness or not, you will only know after your death. For example, in Liuxiang's *Shuoyuan*, Zigong asked Confucius, "Do the dead have consciousness?" Confucius answered, "If I say the dead have consciousness, I'm afraid their worthy descendants will perform excessive burial rituals and hinder the lives of the living. If I say the dead have no consciousness, I'm afraid unworthy descendants will not bury their dead. So should I tell people whether the dead have consciousness or not? I prefer to say that they will know after their death, and this is not too late." (*Shuoyuan*).

## Die to achieve virtue and die a worthy death

Although Confucians pay more attention to life when dealing with life and death, they don't avoid death. Instead, they have their own opinions about what the noble death is. What Confucius emphasized was whether people die a worthy death. In the section called *Tangong* in *The Book of Rites*, the author wrote that Tsengtzu was seriously ill and stayed in bed. Tsengtzu said, "I do not love you more than the houseboy. Gentlemen love people by their virtue while villains love people by satisfying their demands with little or no regard for principle. What do I need now? If my death accords with correct ritual, that's okay." That is, if a person dies, it doesn't matter too much, but their death must match up to a certain principle such as justice (*Tangong* in *The Book of Rites*).

Mencius emphasized that "people should sacrifice their lives to gain justice":

"Fish is what I want. Bear's paw is also what I want. If I can't gain both of them at the same time, I will give up fish and take bear's paw. Life is what I want. Justice is what I want. If I can't gain both of them at the same time, I will give up life and choose justice. Life is what I want. But I desire to gain something more than life. Therefore, I don't live just for the sake of remaining alive. Death is what I hate. But I hate something more than death. Therefore, I don't avoid certain suffering." (*Mencius: Gaozi*, Vol. 1)

In the view of Confucianism, the best state for living is 'benevolence.' Confucians in every generation think that a lofty moral ideal is more important than a person's life values. People should have the courage to die to realize their lofty moral ideal. "In the morning, hear the Way; in the evening, die content!" (*The Analects*, Book Four). "Neither the knight who has truly the heart of a knight nor the man of good stock who has the qualities that belong to good stock will ever seek life at the expense of Goodness; and it may be that he has to give his life in order to achieve Goodness" (*The Analects*, Book Fifteen). Luo Lun (in 1431–1478), a scholar in the Ming dynasty, said, "Everyone has to die after his birth. Saints are not different from common people. But only the saints can live in people's hearts after their death. Their spirit can stay as long as heaven and earth and is as bright as the sun and moon" (*Selected Works of Yifeng*). Although saints die, they still don't disappear from people's lives because they led moral lives. Their ideals, personality, and stories are passed from generation to generation.

## Dealing with death is just like dealing with life

There are different terms for the deaths of people of different rank. "The death of emperor is called *beng*. The death of feudal kings is called *hong*. The death of senior officials is called

zu. The death of scholar is called *bulu*. The death of common people is called *si*” (*The Book of Rites: Specific Etiquette Norms*, Vol. 2). After people die, how does one treat them according to the Confucian ceremonial sequence? The ancestors have known the ceremonial sequence for a long time. If the rulers want to manage society well, they must pay attention to the mourning and burial ceremonies after people die. They attached chief importance to people, a person’s food, the duties of mourning, and sacrifices (*The Analects*, Book Twenty). From this, we can see that mourning and burial ceremonies and customs have an important position in the rulers’ hearts. The section *Explanation of the Five Classics* in *The Book of Rites* explained this better: “If mourning and burial ceremonies are abandoned, officials will forget the emperor’s grace and the children will forget their parents’ grace. Thus, people who betray the dead and forget their ancestors will increase.” Obviously, mourning and sacrificial ceremonies are given high value in daily life, and this is reflected in clearly defined rites and ceremonies.

Sacrifices must be done respectfully and in person. In *The Analects*, “Of the saying, ‘The word “sacrifice” is like the word “present”’; one should sacrifice to a spirit as though that spirit was present,’ the Master said, If I am not present at the sacrifice, it is as though there were no sacrifice” (p. 31). From Book Three of *The Analects*, we know that burying the dead and sacrifices must be done according to specified social and behavioral norms. “While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual” (*The Analects*, Book Two).

Confucians attach great importance to the relationship between ritual and life and death. In *Analysis of Rituals*, Hsun Tzu wrote, “Social norms address the problems of prudently dealing with life and death. Birth is the beginning of life while death is the end of life. If people deal with the end and the beginning well, the road of life is completed. Therefore, gentlemen treat the beginning of life in awe and the end of life with prudence. No matter what they do, they always use the same criteria, which is the requirement of conducting themselves in the society and the representation of following rituals. People’s ideal behavior involves respect for the beginning of life and carefulness regarding the end of life. That’s the way of a gentleman’s behavior.”

Everyone has compassion

Confucians think that life and death are natural phenomena. “Birth is the beginning of people’s life while death is the end of people’s life” (*Lilun in Xunzi*). However, after people die, their relatives and friends feel sad, which is also a normal emotional response. Book Eleven of *The Analects* records that “when Yan Yuan died, the master wailed without restraint. His followers said, ‘Master, you are wailing without restraint!’ He said, ‘Am I doing so? Well, if any man’s death could justify abandoned wailing, it would surely be this man’s!’” This normal emotion comes from compassion, which everyone has. In the book, *Mencius*, the author said, “Everyone has compassion” (*Mencius: Gaozi*, (Vol. 1).

Confucians think that since people only die once, we should respond to each death with ritual, especially the deaths of monarchs and fathers. If people want to express the feelings of loyal officials and dutiful sons, they have to hold a solemn ceremony, the so-called “elaborate funeral.” Xunzi said, “When serving living people, if someone is not loyal, honest, and kind and doesn’t respect civilization, he/she is rude. When burying the dead, if someone is not loyal, honest, and kind and doesn’t respect civilization, we say he/she is neglectful. Gentlemen disdain rudeness and feel shame if they neglect” (*Lilun in Xunzi*). That is to say, an elaborate funeral serves to express the emotions of loyal officials and dutiful sons and explain a human’s life to groups of people.

Loss is a kind of gain, and misfortune and good fortune can change into each other

Death is the loss of life. When coping with death, Confucians think that people should “die in accordance with ritual” and die a worthy death. Apart from that, the Chinese are concerned about another Chinese philosophy which is about loss and gain, that is, the philosophy that misfortune and good fortune can change into each other. There is a Chinese saying, “A loss may turn out to be a gain.” In the book of *The Writings In Dongxuan*, Weitai<sup>1</sup> in the Song Dynasty wrote, “A friend of Lu Gongliang was an official. But he was demoted. So Lu Gongliang wrote a letter to comfort him, ‘Just as Saiweng lost his horse, maybe demoting your position is a good fortune for you. So don’t be sad. If you have virtue and morality like Sun Shuao, you will have good luck one day.’”<sup>2</sup> This means that loss and gain and misfortune and good fortune can change into each other in certain circumstances. Therefore, we should treat loss and gain dialectically.

Above, I have listed some major points of view in terms of how Chinese Confucians treat gain and loss, life and death. To sum up, these views show that Confucianism teaches Chinese to attach importance to life and not to be afraid of death. Humans have to die one day. But they should treat death with caution, lay down their life for a just cause, and die to achieve virtue. The method of dealing with death is to place one’s hope on the continuation of families and undead spirits. Although individuals die, they can let their offspring take their place, and thus they can go on “living”, making their souls eternal in memorial tablets and history. This view is vividly embodied in the mourning and burial ceremonies of Chinese Han people.

### Chinese mourning and burial ceremonies are deeply influenced by Confucian thought

Strictly speaking, the mourning ceremony and the burial ceremony are two different ceremonies. Mourning ceremonies are the activities that people who are alive carry out to mourn the dead. The mourning ceremony understood by pre-Qin (the period before the year of 221 B.C.E.) Confucianism is different today from what was in the past. Kong Yida said, “The mourning ceremony is to hold a memorial ceremony in the central room in the early morning or at night. On Shuo Wang day, that is, the first day and the fifteenth day of the lunar calendar, people will hold a memorial ceremony in the place where the coffin is buried.

<sup>1</sup> The dates of his birth and death are not clear. During the years of 1102 and 1110, a minister tried to give him an official position. He refused.

<sup>2</sup> Saiweng lost his horse: Near the frontier fortress there lived a person who was good at predicting good or ill luck and knew astrology. His horse fled to the northern barbarian tribes for no reason. Therefore people came to comfort him. Instead, the old man said: “How do you know that will not be a blessing?” After a few months, the horse returned home with good horses from the northern barbarian tribes. People came to congratulate him. The old man said again: “How do you know that will not be a problem?” There are a lot of good horses at the old man’s home. His son loved to ride horses. As a result, he fell off a horse and broke his leg. People came to express sympathy. The old man said: “How do you know that it will not become a good thing?” After a year, the northern barbarian tribes invaded the frontier fortress. Robust men had to take weapons to fight. Nine out of ten people near the frontier fortress died. The old man’s son didn’t join the army because he had a limp. The father and the son could live.

The prime minister in Chu kingdom killed the snake: Sun Shuao, the prime minister in Chu kingdom in the Spring and Autumn Period met a snake with two heads when he was a child. He was afraid that others would see it. So he buried it. But he felt frightened and told his mother, “I have always heard if someone sees a snake with two heads, he will die.” His mother said, “Don’t be afraid. You will not die. I have heard if someone does a good deed to the doer’s credit in the next world, God will bless him.” This story means that if you do something good, you will get a reward.



And according to proper ritual, if a scholar's parents die, there are 43 different rituals from the time when they die to the time when they are buried. Confucians in the pre-Qin dynasty thought that the mourning ceremony is reasonable because the premise is that its theories must be constituted to comply with filial piety. Only in this way can people fully express their nature of filial piety through mourning ceremonies. According to the *Analects*, Mencius, and books about rituals which record Confucianism in the pre-Qin dynasty, we know that Tsengtzu's theories pay attention to principles of loyalty, forgiveness, and "filial piety." In regards to loyalty, sincerity within the heart was emphasized, while forgiveness was about how to treat things and get along with others. Tsengtzu thinks that filial piety is the use of loyalty (*Dadai's Book Of Rites*) and clearly considered the virtue of filial piety as the most fundamental moral quality as human beings. Filial piety is the foundation of all virtue and the root of indoctrination (*Classic of Filial Piety*, Chapter One). The reason is that to humans, life is the final thing and life is what parents give. So the things people do in their lives are connected with their inherent nature through the virtue of filial relationships.

Confucius and his scholarly followers, especially Tsengtzu, attach fairly high importance to the mourning ceremony, which has a direct relationship to their thinking about the way of inner growth. In *Dadai's Book of Rites*, the author clearly pointed out, "Paying attention to the ceremony of mourning, burying and sacrifice can train people to be kindhearted." A series of normalized ritual activities of the mourning ceremony can fully express and promote people's feelings of filial piety. 'Filial piety' is a form of kinship ethics. The Confucians in the pre-Qin dynasty thought that the feeling of sadness is the external form of filial piety in the mourning ceremony and the revelation of one's true feelings. Just as Kong Yida said in *Annotations of Book of Rites*, "Human's nature is the human person's heart. When people of filial piety lose their parents, their sorrow will come from their heart and thus they will wail. They will feel sad and can't control these feelings, which is caused by their essential nature, that is, the heart of filial piety." But when people reveal their true feelings, there are some regulations for them to follow in order to grasp the "degree" and know how to "control" their feelings. These regulations are the rituals. So in the *Book of Rites*, the author said, "In the mourning ceremony, people should control their grief and adapt to the accident. If people can control themselves, that becomes ritual" (*Tangong 2 in The Book of Rites*.) Based on this idea, people's sad emotions should be revealed naturally in the mourning and burial ceremonies. The purpose is not to hurt their bodies, or else they will violate their parents' original idea in giving birth to them, which is not in accordance with filial piety. A series of etiquette rules for the funeral should be universal regulations made according to people's moral sentiments.

The mourning and burial ceremonies are one of the most important of Confucian rites; it shows the basic Confucian view of death and loss. The following is the ritual structure of a traditional funeral and the key elements after integration of traditional funerals in different places of China.

### Notification

After a person dies, there will be many ways to give notice to the living relatives, friends, and those in heaven (dead souls and ancestors), such as the immediate family members' first wail when they hear of the death (wail loudly), hanging paper money (hanging marks on the door), and setting off firecrackers (in places where firecrackers are prohibited, use funeral music instead). To notify distant relatives, the family will ask someone to send messages. When announcing a person's death, the immediate sons personally do it or other family members do it, according to whether the relationship is close or not. After receiving the message, relatives and friends usually send some gifts, money, or funeral supplies.

### Washing and preparing the corpse

After death, people should leave the world clean. Therefore, family members should wipe, clean, and dress the dead neatly and then put them on a specially prepared board on the ground. Cleaning the body, dressing the body in new clothes, and putting their favorite objects beside them are the preparation for sending them out on their journey. All of these have specific regulations and procedures according to Confucian customs.

### Setting up the pre-burial ritual area and creating the soul tablet

In the past, after someone died, generally the corpse would be placed in the home for 3 days so that relatives and visitors could view the body and express their grief. Therefore, family members would choose a place to put the corpse or set up a mourning hall. They make a soul tablet using a narrow strip of wood and also make a sacrifice. They strike a light and burn incense to worship. Generally, the dead person's sons and daughters are required to guard the body day and night.

### Assuming mourning status

After a person's death, his/her children and other relatives should wear mourning apparel for the dead for a certain period to show their grief, according to the mourning ritual customs. When deciding what kind of mourning apparel they should wear, they must consider their relationship to the dead (whether they are an immediate blood relation or distant blood relation), whether they are an elder or younger generation, and whether they are old or young. There are some differences as to when people should consider mourning apparel and adornment and how long they should wear this apparel and adornment; there are many customs. This is referred to as "wearing mourning apparel according to ritual." In the section on Great Events in the *Book of Rites*, "There are six principles for people to wear mourning apparel. The first is *qinqin*; the second is *zunzun*; the third is *ming*; the fourth is *churu*; the fifth is *zhangyou*; the sixth is *congfu*." The meaning is probably as follows: *Qinqin* is the standard of wearing appropriate mourning apparel according to blood relationship with the dead; *zunzun* takes identity and status as a standard; *ming* means that people wear mourning apparel for the dead although they have no blood relationship with the dead; *churu* means there are different standards for unmarried women and married women (if the women are married, the standard of their mourning apparel will be lower than that of unmarried women); *zhangyou* means that if children die, the standard of their parents' mourning apparel will be different than when adults die (the standard will be lower); *congfu* refers to wearing mourning apparel according to certain relations with the dead. The above are six principles of wearing mourning apparel in ancient times. Appropriate mourning apparel in the old rules were divided into five levels determined by whether the kinship was distant or close.

### Offerings and preparations for the spirit journey

Chinese folk society is deeply influenced by Confucianism. Most people believe that people's souls will exist after their death. There is a custom of the spirit journey in the Hubei rural area. According to the diviners, after death the soul will break away from the body and temporarily stay in a floating state. It both needs comfort and needs to be led to "the place it should go." Therefore, people should provide him/her with some "articles for use" and prepare for the journey.



### The hiring of death and ritual specialists

The mourning and burial ceremonies should be directed by special technicians or experienced seniors. Generally, they are of noble character and high prestige. They are familiar with all the ceremonial rules and at the same time know the dead person. In southern China rural areas, there are special diviners who are also familiar with these ceremonies. Generally, they are also invited to choose the gravesite or help guide the ceremonies. In addition, in the countryside, there are special musicians or bands. In some places, some women who know how to wail will be invited to wail at the funeral. Funeral music must be used in the ceremony.

### Put the corpse in the coffin and seal the coffin

In the past, in the Chinese tradition, the dead had to be buried in the ground after their death (bury the coffin after the corpse is put into the coffin). So people pay great attention to dressing and laying the corpse in the coffin, which are generally divided into *Xiaolian* (which refers to wearing a shroud) and *DaLian* (which refers to putting the corpse into the coffin). Today the Chinese government stipulates that the corpse must be cremated. Generally, in the countryside, the dead are dressed before cremation. Then, people put the cinerary urn into the coffin, seal the coffin, and bury the coffin in the ground.

### Bring the coffin out of the house and fall into the procession line

After sealing the coffin and before the burial, there is particular care in the ceremony concerning how to fall into a procession and proceed with the coffin. The dead person's spirit tablet is in the front and his/ her picture follows it. Then follows the coffin. Behind the coffin are mourners. The mourners should be lined up according to their position in the family hierarchy and their relationship to the deceased. There is a particular care for this because if the order is not correct, it is "impolite." During the process of sending out the coffin, there are some steps and ceremonies, such as offering sacrifice to the dead, bowing to the coffin before leaving, sacrificing along the route of the funeral procession by scattering paper money, and so on.

### The burial

There are ceremonies where burying the coffin along with the corpse or ashes is directly guided by diviners. Burial location is investigated in the field and burial date is calculated by the geomancers, which is a part of Chinese traditional Confucian culture. Whether Chinese people believe in geomancy or not, generally they will follow the traditional pattern.

### The funeral feast

After the burial, there will be a funeral feast. All the guests and helpers are invited to take their seat at the feast. Everyone in the feast will be welcomed whether they take part in the funeral ceremony or not, even strangers. Of course, order is stressed in the feast; 'ritual' must be paid attention to. The feast is both to express appreciation and to display the host's wealth and etiquette. Therefore, it is very grand. Although it is a funeral, laughter can be heard at the feast.

## Dispersing the ritual area and eliminating pollution

After the feast, the funeral ceremony is nearing the end. Some constructions used in the ceremony need to be torn down and the ritual area should be cleaned. The spirit tablet and the dead person's photo need be sacrificed. As people accept the fact that their loved one is dead, they slowly recover their sense of calm and begin their normal life.

## Post-burial rites

After burying the dead, the bereaved family must obey some taboos during mourning. These customs after burying are very important as an expression of Chinese filial piety and family love. Those who don't obey will be thought unfilial. For example, generally in Chinese funeral culture "towards the seven" is stressed. After people die, the seventh day and its multiples are special days. The family has some taboos to obey, especially on the occasion of the third seventh day, the fifth seventh day, and the seventh seventh day. The family should burn paper money and incense near the tomb to hold a memorial ceremony.

## The psychological significance of the funeral: enhancing spirituality

Death is a core issue in any religion. Any individual's death is a loss to his/her family and society. And at the same time, it is a loss of former order and even brings loss of property and money. Different cultures have their own understanding of death. In response to the inevitable death and loss, people also have their own personal response. What we investigated above was the concept of death and the way to deal with it within Confucianism as traditional Chinese culture. I think that the ideas of Confucianism regarding death have created traditional mourning and burial ceremonies and provided the Chinese people with a programmed tradition for dealing with death. After analysis, we can clearly know its psychological sense. Not only can Chinese bereavement emotion be eased and released through these ceremonies, but also the ceremonies themselves can help participants gain spiritual growth.

According to the psychology of religion, the connotation of "spirituality" is slightly different in Western culture than it is in Chinese culture. In Western scholars' opinions, spirituality refers to the tendency of people to seek the meaning of life through self-transcendence, or the requirement that individual wants to be connected with the other which is higher than himself (Zinnbauer et al. 1999). Theologians and religious practitioners use a broader definition. They think that spirituality is the living reality of religion as experienced by an adherent of a tradition (Nelson 2009).

In China, some think that 'spirituality' is something about 'spirit.' 'Spirituality' is a comprehensive summary of the unique characteristics of individual personality in non-traditional religious believers and common people, which is related to the secularization of religious belief. In China, the non-traditional religious believers are those who believe in religion but are not Protestant Christians, Catholics, Buddhists, Muslim, or Taoists, or who may believe in one of these faiths but without formal membership. The four elements of spirituality are "belief in divinity," "transcendent experience," "morality pursuit," and "open participation" (Liu 2010). Personally, I think that 'spirituality' is the dimension of one's personality which is open to the transcendent or the sacred. According to this understanding, spirituality is found not only at the level of religious believers' spiritual lives, but also is a dimension of non-religious believers' spiritual lives—which is to say, everyone has spirituality.

### The funeral is a kind of psychological treatment

Why do we say that the mourning and burial ceremonies can promote every participant's spirituality? First, every adult knows that people will die and the body will finally disappear. Whether they believe that the dead person's soul exists after he/she dies is not as important as knowing that everyone will die, because there is no conclusive evidence of the afterlife. According to psychological analysis, in general, people have a fear of death. When a family member suddenly dies, on the one hand, they will feel it is hard to accept and have a feeling of helplessness; on the other hand, they will feel sad and find it difficult to part with him/her. The concepts about death in the culture may not come to mind and have an effect at that moment. But the funeral ceremony can help people overcome the fear of death, and the mood of bereavement can be relieved. The Confucian mourning and burial rituals I listed above have been internalized as habit and custom in Chinese folk life. Although there are some differences in the details, and the ceremonies may be complicated or simple in different regions of China, the basic links and steps are common. Whether the participants understand or not, this set of ceremonial activities helps people see the processes of human life and death, along with its consequences. In the ceremony, someone will guide people to act and do things according to their roles. It is in the busy ceremony activities that people accept the fact of death, and in the collective activity people's sad feelings can be communicated and relieved.

Second, because of the death of a person, people come together and experience that their mutual support is enhanced. In the funeral ceremony of rural Chinese in Hubei or Hunan, musicians or an evening theatrical troupe are invited to add atmosphere. Now, because pop music is fashionable, some people also invite a Western music group to sing, and yet other people even rely on CDs for music. Some wealthy families let off fireworks at night to show off their wealth. These activities are increased as people's education increases, their ideas are renewed, and their lives are modernized. The mourning and burial ceremonies in the cities are simpler. Generally, some relatives and friends or colleagues gather together to hold a farewell ceremony. On the one hand, the process of holding a memorial ceremony for sacrificing can strengthen the idea of 'filial piety.' On the other hand, many people gather together at the same time, and especially people from the same village and relatives and friends who have not seen one another for a long time now have the chance to get together, which is helpful for the integration of the village and strengthens people's emotional links with each other. As Watson and Rawski note: "Death does not terminate relationships of reciprocity among Chinese, it simply transforms these ties and often makes them stronger." (Watson and Rawski 1988, p. 9).

### Mourning and burial ceremonies are a form of death education

In modern Western education, many scholars put forward the idea that attention should be paid to death education. Death education not only helps people to know about death and deal with death; it also helps people to reflect on the meaning of life, attach importance to life, and lead a good life. As I have discussed, the mourning and burial ceremonies of Confucianism contain the Confucian concept of death, which can help people accept traditional ideas of death and transmit their own cultural values in the process of ritual behavior. This kind of education does not require audiences to have a high culture. The ceremony is a very effective way of receiving one's cultural inheritance.

In addition, death is not an end if we consider it from the perspective of the soul and ancestors or from family lineage. The mourning and burial ceremonies are an activity that

the family performs, and they thereby act as a cohesive force in the face of the family member's death. Through a single death, it is clear that a person's death only brings his/her family sadness for a short period of time. If the old die, people would rather treat it as a "white happy event"<sup>3</sup> and think that the disappearance of a person's body is just the end of human life and that the soul will continue living a better life in another world, which offers a kind of relief. But the family's continuation is not affected by death.

The mourning and burial ceremonies can help people accept reality in a short period and return to order

The Confucian death concept and ceremonies shape the views of ordinary Chinese about death and the specific ceremony surrounding death. As we have stated above, death is like returning, which means that people return to a world completely different from the world in their living state. After death, the body turns into a 'corpse' and the consciousness turns into 'soul' and 'spirit.' The 'spirit' is attached to the 'corpse' which changes into soil, and the 'soul' goes to heaven or hell. Therefore, people become a 'ghost' after they die. 'Ghost' and 'return' in Chinese are both pronounced *gui*. In this sense, we can say 'ghost' means 'one who returns.' The death event breaks the normal routine of a family or a group. Some people even become ill or break down. But, life will continue after living people experience loss. The mourning and burial ceremonies help those who experienced loss accept reality and return to normal life soon. The individual's death helps the group or family gain a new life through adjusting the order again. The reunion of family and group reinforces Chinese collective ethics and moral strength, which helps people accept death and regain meaning in life.

### Significance of mourning and burial ceremonies

The most direct consequence of death is to destroy the meaning of life: since people eventually die, what meaning does life have? Since ancient times, countless people have felt confused by this question. When people face death and seek the significance of life, the significance they regain is one of spiritual ascension. Because we will die one day, life is meaningful and we should lead an active life. The rebuilding of meaning greatly affects people's attitude to life and thus enhances their quality of life.

To Chinese people, the concepts of filial piety, family or collectivism, ethical order, and family continuation are the meaning of life. "Filial piety," the core value in Chinese traditional culture, penetrates the way people deal with death and the mourning and burial ceremonies. The family idea, ethical order, and ethics are expressed in "filial piety," and the entire mourning and burial ceremony expresses the primary virtue of Confucianism, that is, "filial piety." Observing mourning for one's parents requires behaving according to certain rituals. Mourning and burial ceremonies that are strictly carried out according to filial piety can deepen Chinese people's sense of the meaning of life. Today, with changes in society, many details and forms of the Confucian mourning and burial ceremonies have changed. But the basic link hasn't disappeared. And even when the forms are simplified, their symbolic meaning and core value still exist. Death and loss are a crisis that people meet in their life process. They give the living the chance to reflect on the meaning of life, which is the

<sup>3</sup> When people die, their families and relatives must wear white clothes. The house in which the coffin is put should be decorated with white cloth. People are forbidden to wear red clothes and red shoes. White means sadness while red means happiness in Chinese culture.

important link to or way of spiritual transformation. Therefore, in the life of every one of us, opportunity comes from crisis while meaning comes from death.

## Reflections and conclusion

Through this analysis of Chinese Confucian thoughts on death and the related ceremonies (mourning and burial) for dealing with death, I think that on the whole, Chinese Confucianism pays much attention to the sociality and a social value orientation toward death. In terms of the various possible views concerning an individual's death, ethical significance is highly stressed, that is, the need to sacrifice for the group. The concept of filial piety penetrates the funeral ceremony and, at the same time, the filial piety of Confucianism is core to the identity of the Chinese personality. Relative to inner reflection, when Chinese people face death and loss, they seem to pay more attention than others to the expression of ceremonial behavior and show their grief through it. During the performance of the ceremony, Chinese people attach more importance to social evaluation and expectations. Therefore, they pay attention to the details of the ceremony to ensure that everything is perfect. From the view of Western psychology, the mourning and burial ceremonies of Confucianism give the participants a strong experience from theatre, but at the same time it is a part of real life. These combined effects reinforce the meaning of psychological treatment which is deeply concealed in the process of ceremonies. Through the ceremony, people deeply experience that death makes people's bodies disappear, and at the same time the mourners truly face misery and think about the meaning of life.

In a culture full of religiosity the Chinese people find a way to deal with death and loss through social relationships and ritualized behavior. While the mourning and burial ceremonies of Confucianism make its participants face death and loss, they also can give people a comprehensive religious experience and personality integration so that their spirituality can be further promoted.

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