

Individual, Community, Society—A Metaphorical Study of Modern Funeral Ceremonies in the Guanzhong Region from the Perspective of Rituals

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ABSTRACT

Funeral ceremonies, as a form of ritual, possess a series of extensional functions beyond the ceremonies themselves. At the core of funeral ceremonies lies the handling of the deceased's physical body, continually implying transcendent spiritual values to the participants. The educative function of the symbols in funeral ceremony behaviors is realized in the form of non-verbal symbols, with content specifically manifesting on the levels of individual life consciousness and community relationship awareness. The landscape of burial sites, as a tangible outcome of funeral ceremonies, plays a crucial role in sustaining the functions of funeral rituals and contributes to the inheritance of culture and consciousness at the societal collective level.

【Keywords】 Ritual perspective; Funeral ceremonies; Life education; Community ties; Landscape narrative

Rituals are a product of human social civilization, serving as social activities that interpret human observations of nature and society and express emotions. The functions of rituals in human society are self-evident: Malinowski clearly interprets the “functional” significance of magic: magic can help people achieve goals that they cannot reach on their own (Peng, 2002). Rituals—a form of communal, community-based, locally valued functional performance—become the specific actions that realize this logical connection (Peng, 2002). As one of the most significant types of human rituals, funeral ceremonies are an important means of showcasing individual life values. It revolves around the burial of the deceased, with the transformation of the deceased's identity as the core through the ritual.

Unlike other rituals, the formulation of funeral ceremony rules and their functional significance have different effects on the deceased and participants. In the form of non-verbal symbols, funeral ceremonies convey implicit spiritual cores to the participants. Simultaneously, they carry out cultural education within the community, achieving the reintegration and reconstruction of community ties. The construction of the cemetery, in a tangible physical landscape form, becomes the tangible outcome of funeral ceremonies. The construction of cemetery landscapes breaks the time limitations of funeral ceremonies, extending their functions and inheriting societal collective cultural concepts, achieving its unique narrative function.

Funeral ceremonies in the Shaanxi Guanzhong region have a strong secular color and do not show a strong sense of magic (Li, 2018). They tend to emphasize the iterative renewal of clan connections, marking the rearrangement of family roles. The focus is on the potentiality of the living in the real world rather than the inevitability of the deceased in the afterlife. Therefore, the contradictions and entanglements between traditional and modern funeral ceremonies in urban areas of the Guanzhong

region are not sharp, presenting a situation of inclusiveness and universality across time periods. Based on the life perspective of modern science, the funeral ceremony process in the Guanzhong urban area has undergone significant simplification, with modern burial practices becoming more common. The deceased remains at the center of the ceremony, but the emphasis on the afterlife is diminished; the ceremony serves more as an opportunity for the living to communicate and exchange emotions. As a form of ritual, its various implicit functions, with the deceased as the foundation, are directed towards the living and act upon the living.

I. Individual Life Consciousness: Implementation and Construction of Life Education

The reproduction and continuity of human civilization are inseparable from a high regard for life itself. Although within the Confucian cultural sphere, deeply influenced by Confucian rituals, there is a concept of "un known life, how can one know death," encouraging people to actively focus on the "living" in the present world. It cannot be denied that the establishment of folk views on life often begins with "understanding death." Funeral ceremonies, more intricate and time-consuming than the process of birth ceremonies, play a significant role in this. Death education serves as a derivative of life education, and this is affirmed in the field of academic development. Originating in the 1920s in the United States, death education is an academic branch of education that, through a reevaluation of death, aims to instill correct concepts of life and death, cherish life, and promote life development. This leads to the formation of "life-and-death education" and "life education." By the end of the 20th century, developed Western countries had largely popularized life education in primary and secondary schools. Confronting death, fostering a scientific perspective on death, and even participating in funeral ceremonies are pathways to realizing conscious and specialized life education in the modern era. According to communication studies, in a sense, interpersonal relationships must rely on interpersonal communication to be established; interpersonal communication is a prerequisite for forming interpersonal relationships (Xue & Yu, 2007). In social relationships, information exchange is a means of maintaining social connections, and the extent and authenticity of information transmission reflect and alter the density of the social relationship network. Ritual behaviors enhance the scope, intensity, and authenticity of information transmission. The dissemination of information after a death event is also a manifestation of the functional aspects of funeral ceremonies. The groups participating in funeral ceremonies and those receiving death information do not completely overlap. Typically, the number of people receiving death information far exceeds the number participating in funeral ceremonies. However, individuals receiving the same information about death have varying levels of understanding.

Using a funeral activity in X community, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, as an example, individuals with different relationships to the deceased M (a lung cancer patient) have different perceptions of death. The 52-year-old husband witnessed the entire process of M's illness, treatment, and passing. His understanding of the causes of lung cancer deepened during various experiences with M. During the funeral ritual, he engaged in conversations with those offering condolences, revealing a deeper understanding of the meaning of life and life itself. He conveyed thoughts of cherishing life and loving life to others. In his daily life, he consciously avoided factors such as car exhaust and smog that could lead to respiratory diseases, and he enhanced his awareness of regular check-ups.

"Don't get sick no matter what. I haven't been to work in a year, just accompanying visits to the hospital. I don't know how M got lung cancer. Life passes quickly, and you never know what accidents may happen, so I'm telling you, keep your spirits up every day and do whatever you want."²

The social dissemination of M's death information is mainly limited to the community where M lived. These individuals are on the periphery of the funeral ceremony, not taking on tasks within it. It was observed that residents in the same community as M mainly focused on collecting and organizing information about the event.

A: "Lung cancer, XXX also had lung cancer, but XXX smoked. It seems that not smoking can also lead to lung cancer. M didn't smoke, used her own chopsticks when going out, and still got sick. I don't know the reason for this."

B: "I've noticed something wrong with her movements for a long time. Her speech and expressions were strange. Look, I said M's mind is not right, she must be sick. My wife told me not to talk nonsense, but it seems I wasn't wrong."

C: "Heard it's not painful, unlike XXX who was in pain until the end. They say she didn't feel pain; it seems cancer doesn't always cause pain."

D: "Once it was diagnosed, it had already spread, it was in the late stage. She managed to hold on for two more years, which is quite long. I haven't seen that before. It's enough."³

It can be seen that people from different circles have varying levels of understanding of the same death event, forming a "cognitive ladder" resembling concentric circles. The deceased is at the top and center of the ladder, being the firsthand witness to the death event. The degree of understanding of the cause of death radiates outward from the deceased as the center, gradually

² Interview Date: February 13, 2022 Interview Location: Xi'an, X Community Interviewees: Mr. Zhao

³ Interview Date: February 13, 2022 Interview Location: Xi'an, X Community Interviewees: Mrs. Luo, Mr. Guo, Mrs. Zhao, Mrs. Dong.

decreasing in layers. In other words, in the process of disseminating death information, the farther away from the center, the shallower the recipient's understanding of the cause of death. Information receivers downstream in the cognitive ladder, influenced by both curiosity and self-protective psychology, will seek information about the cause of death from higher-level receivers, enriching their existing knowledge of death and subconsciously constructing and reinforcing a "psychological barrier against death." All receivers of death information will continuously reproduce this "psychological barrier" in subsequent social verbal and non-verbal communications and further transmit this "barrier." The distance from death information receivers to the center of the "cognitive ladder" and the strength of the "psychological barrier against death" are directly proportional: the closer to the center, the deeper the understanding of the cause of death and the stronger the awareness of preventing death causes. Those who have experienced the death of a close companion will have a strong sense of vigilance against the cause of death, even avoiding approaching that particular cause.

The central group of the "cognitive ladder" is highly likely to become participants in the funeral ceremony, needing to decode the symbolic behaviors of the ceremony and reshape their own perceptions. While ceremony participants collectively create the ceremony context, each participant's contribution and degree of decoding of ceremonial symbols vary. Compared to lower-level groups in the "cognitive ladder," the central group often plays more important ceremonial roles, undertaking more and more critical ceremonial behaviors. Simultaneously, the ceremonial behaviors themselves have significant symbolic implications and an indoctrination function, affecting ceremony participants differently based on their positions in the ladder. The higher the participation and attention of the ceremonial behavior subject, the more symbolic implications and indoctrination functions the ceremony has on them. Funeral ceremonies—a series of ritualized behaviors centered around a departed life—through the intricate rules presented during the process, continuously reinforce the symbolic meaning of the funeral ceremony: life. It continually prompts the behavioral subjects to review the life experiences of the deceased, reflect on the meaning of life, and generate a sense of awe for life, thereby achieving the goal of life education. The audience of life education includes everyone participating in the ceremony, and it can even be said to include everyone receiving death information. In the same death event, there is a gradient difference in the depth of life education among groups. The deeper the understanding of death, the more profound the impact of life education.

2. Group Relationship Awareness: Sorting and Maintaining Group Bonds

Funeral ceremonies disrupt the familial and social relationships in the real world, thoroughly overturning the social status within families and communities in the Guanzhong region. The subversion of family status in modern Guanzhong funeral ceremonies is evident in the following ways: Participants in funeral ceremonies revolve around the maternal family blood relatives, with the ritual demands put forth by the maternal family taking precedence and holding a very high status. Non-blood relatives participating in funeral ceremonies are usually positioned on the periphery, relinquishing their rights to the maternal family/uncle's family. Specifically, if the deceased is female, her maternal family members should be treated with special respect during the funeral ceremony; if the deceased is male, then his uncle's family (the maternal grandmother's family) should be accorded special respect (Li, 2018). Maternal family blood relations surpass all other status relations, and the diminished maternal family ties in secular life are revived and strengthened during funeral ceremonies.

Social relationships are also reset during funeral ceremonies, giving way to kinship ties centered around blood relations. The family sees itself as an independent entity, and the ceremony is the most evident sign of the family's exclusivity (Yang & Zhang, 2012, 87). The "social position" of funeral ceremony participants is reconstructed during the ceremony and can only return to its original state after the ceremony concludes. Turner believes that in the ritual state, people's social relationships are a ritual state different from everyday social life and social relationships. The ritual is a phenomenon of 'anti-structure' at the stable structure boundary (Xue, 2003). It presents a thorough reversal of normal social relationships during the ritual. In the Guanzhong region, members within the kinship group have the right, and one might say an obligation, to exhibit extreme grief for the deceased. In funeral ceremonies, the emotions displayed by the kinship group of the deceased and the emotional expressions of this group become the focal point for other ceremony participants. In the ritual of raising the spirit and bidding farewell to the deceased, emotions serve as a window to express kinship relations, with more intense grief possibly bringing individuals closer to the core of the kinship group. If the emotional state of kinship group members is not sufficiently sorrowful, they may face criticism from others.

The departure of the deceased creates a gap in the network of kinship relations, and to minimize the impact of the deceased on the future of the kinship group, these relationships need to be reintegrated. This makes the reproduction of kinship bonds possible. As a typical example of a ritual, funeral

ceremonies symbolize the completion of the deceased's transition from a worldly identity to a non-worldly one, from the living to the ancestral. It also marks the transfer of the kinship responsibilities borne by the deceased during their lifetime. Other members of the kinship group will now share these responsibilities, and the kinship order has been restructured. In modern Guanzhong memorial services, the number of participants is considered an honor. The process of participants bidding farewell to the deceased and consoling the family not only serves to comfort the family's emotions but also indicates that the reconstruction of the kinship order is witnessed by individuals outside the kinship group. Outsiders play the role of witnesses, ensuring the persuasiveness of the reconstruction process and its results. The reconstructed kinship relations undergo noticeable changes: on the one hand, the departure of the deceased may elevate individuals who were originally on the periphery of the kinship network due to the transfer of kinship responsibilities; on the other hand, it may lead to changes in the relations between two different kinship groups, previously linked by the deceased.

The transformation of the deceased's identity triggers psychological elements such as ancestor worship, spirit worship, and soul worship, which are latent in the order of secular life. Funeral ceremonies provide a context to release these worshipful emotions, transforming inner worshipful psychology into formalized ritual behavior. The behavior and emotions of kinship group members are rationalized within the funeral ceremony context. Ritual behavior and accompanying emotions in the ceremonial context produce metaphors, suggesting a hidden connection between the deceased and the living. By virtue of their relationship with the deceased, the living receive blessings from the spirits of the deceased in the afterlife and have the opportunity to establish a connection with the unknown world. The periodic worship behaviors after the funeral ceremony also provide an opportunity to strengthen the ties between the living and the deceased.

Funeral ceremonies not only serve the function of maintaining bonds within the kinship group but also play a role in sustaining relationships between kinship group members and other funeral ceremony participants. From this perspective, funeral ceremonies share similarities in function with other rituals (weddings, birth ceremonies, coming-of-age ceremonies, etc.). Funeral ceremonies offer an opportunity to maintain bonds within and outside the kinship group, with non-blood relatives uniformly attending as "guests" to express condolences to the deceased or the living, thus reenacting and reinforcing their relationship with the "host." The impactful colors of the memorial hall, the continuous mournful tones, and the solemnity of the ceremony create an immersive funeral ceremony context, making it easier for all participants to be drawn into the vortex of personal memories. In memory, they reevaluate their relationships with the "host" or "guest," and personal memory is often a sensory reproduction that does not require textual support. As Yang and Wang (2004) pointed out that in the oral transmission phase, the expansive context needs to be more formalized than in advanced written cultures, and generally has ritual characteristics. Celebrations and rituals are the most typical forms used by non-textual societies to institutionalize the expansion context of cultural meaning. Rituals ensure the re-recording of information, making the meaning of culture manifest in a mediated way. It ensures the 'ritual bond' of culture (Yang & Wang, 2004). Based on psychological closeness in social groups, individuals exhibit overt behaviors that bring them closer to the core of the blood-related kinship group, strengthening the bond between the "host" and the "guest."

3. Collective Cultural Consciousness: Narration and Preservation of Ritual Outcomes

Diverging from other rituals, after the conclusion of funeral ceremonies, it becomes challenging to locate the subjects whose identities have transformed in the real world. To preserve the memory of the deceased, eliminate the temporal constraints of the ritual, and perpetuate the results of the ritual's function, it is necessary to create a narrative landscape in the real world with memory-evoking capabilities. Burial is the preferred choice for the people in the Guanzhong region, and the prevailing thought is still "peace in the soil." While it seems like "burial" is creating well-being for the deceased, its fundamental purpose is still the consideration for the future of the family, with the primary beneficiary being the living.

Under the strong psychological suggestion of alertness, regular visits to the cemetery become a key to eternal well-being for descendants and a landscape that narrates the meaning of life and family stories. Basu (1997) believes that whether on a large scale like a region or a specific place, or on a small scale like a road sign or symbol, they all have memory characteristics. The cemetery is not only the actual place that houses the departed but also serves as a landscape narrative that reinitiates the memories of the viewer. The cemetery maximizes the significance of the funeral ceremony, providing a tangible entity that can be recalled and recreates a rational context for the concentrated release of emotions for the living. During the three major ghost festivals, collectively visiting the cemetery remains the primary form of ancestral worship for modern Guanzhong residents, and they may even inquire about others' plans for memorial services, criticizing those who neglect to perform them. Visiting the cemetery is a cyclical opportunity to express ancestor worship, spirit worship, and soul worship, forming a unique cultural phenomenon. The numerous tombstones in the cemetery and the indelible inscriptions on them collectively tell the story of the deceased's life, triggering a profound understanding of life and death concepts for any worshipper in the cemetery. If the earlier funeral ceremony was conducted with the witnessing of acquaintances and

relatives, then the memorial service at the cemetery during specific festivals is carried out with the accompaniment of the public society collective in Guanzhong, showcasing the kinship bonds and cohesion at the societal level. For individuals and groups alike, within the specific context of the cemetery, the realization of the memory of the deceased by the living still continues to serve the functions of understanding the value of life and maintaining kinship bonds.

As a common consideration for Guanzhong families and social collectives, the choice and planning of cemetery design are indispensable aspects of urban planning and development. Influenced by both traditional views on life and death in Guanzhong and urban-rural planning and construction, suburban areas far from urban residential areas are the preferred locations for cemetery land. Collective cultures in the East and West exhibit significant differences in the location of burying the deceased, simplified as the difference between "graveyards" and "cemeteries." In the *Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition)*, "graveyard" means "a place for burying the dead; a burial ground," and "cemetery" combines "grave" (meaning "tomb") with "yard" (meaning "a place for growing vegetables, flowers, fruits, or trees; a place for people to entertain or visit"). Both serve the basic function of providing a dwelling place for the deceased, differing in the degree of "park-like" features and the variety of functions provided for society and collectives, as well as the ability to reuse and reproduce cemetery resources. In the perspective of Western landscape designers, the ideal of a naturalistic park is consistent with modern cemeteries (Zhang, 2009), and the new American landscape type—romantic rural cemeteries has a high degree of integration into American social life, with large public gatherings choosing cemeteries to enhance their real societal value, such as "seasonal bird watching and programs" at Oak Hill Cemetery (Zhang, 2009). From the perspective of architectural landscape, modern cemeteries in the Guanzhong region attempt to continuously adopt park-like features but struggle to assume the function of providing recreational space for the public. Besides regular memorial activities, it is challenging for Guanzhong cemeteries to realize social gatherings of the public, and the core role of "people" is often missing after the "cemetery park" transformation. This indicates that, in the social and cultural consciousness of the Guanzhong collective, the social roles played by "graveyards" and "cemeteries" are consistent.

The completion of funeral ceremonies in the Guanzhong region signifies the delivery of the deceased to the afterlife, resulting in a thorough transformation of the deceased's identity. The imagined structure and function of the afterlife are consistent with the real world, and the deceased in the afterlife also has demands consistent with their lifetime. The cemetery, as a special area dominated by the deceased, serves as a gray zone between the afterlife and the real world, playing a pivotal role in connecting the Yin and Yang worlds, a reasonable place for "interpersonal" communication between the living and the deceased. However, everything in the afterlife is built on the imagination that the living cannot confirm. The fear and awe of death and the unknown by the living also extend to the landscape of the "cemetery." The presence of the living in the "cemetery" landscape metaphorically signifies proximity to or even contact with death, ghosts, and the afterlife, giving rise to the psychological aspect of "not going to the cemetery unless necessary," manifested as behaviors like "group memorial services" and "regular memorial services."

4. Conclusion

At the culmination of life, the deceased initiates the occurrence of ritual behaviors, and the presence of rituals maximizes the manifestation of the deceased's value. Funeral ceremonies not only signify a respectful farewell to the departed but also, in the form of a non-verbal, firsthand experience, provide an educational function for the personal worldview of the living in the real world. Additionally, they serve the purpose of reconstructing kinship bonds within the community. The tangible and realized outcomes produced by the funeral ceremony, following its conclusion, contribute to the cultural narrative of the collective society in the Guanzhong region and sustain the significance of ritual behaviors.

In Shaanxi Guanzhong's funeral ceremonies, the juxtaposition of traditional intricate rituals and modern approaches reflects the contemporary emphasis of Guanzhong residents on the meaning of life and kinship relationships. This is an embodiment of the positive value orientation towards inheriting the modern worldview of the people in Guanzhong and consolidating collective strength.

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