Death in Medieval Christian and Late Imperial Chinese Societies

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Introduction

Death is a powerful concept and its inevitability for everyone was a bond for communities in Late Imperial China and Medieval Christian Europe as death was the one certainty for everyone. So rituals and treatment of the dead became an important part of the people’s lives and it gives rise to two large questions: Do different concepts of afterlife affect the ritual practices of the two societies, and how do the death rituals reflect society and social values?

In both Late Imperial China and Medieval Christian Europe, I propose that the assumptions and concept of death largely affected ritual practices to reflect their respective social values. For medieval Christian society, the assumption that death has been conquered allowed the church to take full responsibility for the care and treatment of the dead. Furthermore, it reflected the importance of soul and spirit over the physical body and the relationship between the physical body and sin. However for late imperial China, the body was equally important as a physical representation of the spirit and thus the actions done to the corpse was much more valued in comparison to medieval Christian society.
Late Imperial China

James Watson lists nine standard requirements for rites being performed for funerals across Late Imperial China: Public notification, white as a symbol of mourning, ritual bathing of the corpse, burning of money and food for the dead, preparation of a soul tablet, employment of paid professionals, ritual music, the sealing of the coffin, and the removal of the coffin from the village (Watson, 12-15). I am going to focus on five key aspects of the rituals and explain them in further detail to relate to Medieval Christian Europe.

Public notification involved announcing to the neighbors and the rest of the village the death of an individual (Watson, 12). The participation of the public was one of the most important factors in the passage of the dead to his/her afterlife. The acknowledgement of the death and mourning in the entire village was a requirement for the dead to be satisfied in moving on. Watson states that “at Chinese funerals the general audience plays an active role, together with paid professionals, in creating a ritual performance.” (Watson, 6)

The ritualize bathing of the corpse was an act performed after which the body would be dressed in new clothing to prepare for the transformation of the body into the afterlife. “The was ... no radical dualism in Chinese thought-separating body from soul-similar to the central concern that governed European notions of life and death. In other words, the ‘moment of death,’ whereby body and soul were forever parted, did not have the same meaning among Chinese as it had among Europeans.” (Watson, 8) The physical body was closely paired with the spiritual soul and treatment of the corpse was equivalent to treatment of the soul.
Another key aspect was the burning of mock money, food, and goods to essentially transfer them to the dead (Watson, 13). By being equipped with these goods, the dead will be prepared to journey into the next life and have goods to bargain with. The act of burning was correlated to communication with the dead.

One aspect interesting with the Chinese was the use of money and employment of professionals that were experts of funerary rites (Watson, 14). Along with the involvement of the public, these professionals would ensure good passage for the dead making death a business. The business of death rituals would also arise in Europe as well but in a different manner.

Lastly, the removal or expulsion of the coffin from the village was a final step for the late imperial Chinese, also reflecting the physical passage of the dead to the afterworld (Watson, 15). The idea that the body and soul are intertwined persisted throughout the Chinese death rituals. More importantly, the social status that the person carried in life remained with the person in death (Watson, 8). The wealth and position of a person would be reflected in the afterlife.

**Medieval Christian Europe**

In talking about western attitudes toward death, Philippe Aries mentions the notion of Tamed Death in which many people of the Medieval period could foretell or expect a coming death (Aries, 2-7). He uses the example of Sir Gawain saying, “Know ye well that I shall not live two days” to predict his death and several other examples from literature that show the
common forewarning of death during this time period. “In the Middle Ages the dead were entrusted to or rather abandoned to the care of the Church, and the exact location of their place of burial was of little importance.” (Aries, 69)

The rituals of Medieval Christian Europe is defined in three steps: Confession, Unction and Communion, and Viaticum or “one for the road”, which is similar to the burning of money in the Chinese rituals (Binski, 32). The idea that Christianity challenged and defeated death with the crucifixion of Jesus is reflected in the division between the body and spirit, and the need for the spirit to overcome the weaknesses of the body (Binski, 10). The physical body and materialistic feelings were related to sin and corruption.

The distribution of property was directed in the person’s will and many of the dead would be buried within the tombs and walls of churches from which the spirit of the people will live among and watch over the community. For saints especially, churches or shrines might be erected with rumors of miraculous healing powers (Binski, 13-14) and in this sense, the holy dead were spiritually alive. It was also important that the site, although the location did not matter, was marked. “Those not properly honoured in death or memory could be angry or even dangerous” (Binski, 24). These church services were capitalized upon and became a big business for many of the clergy (Binski, 27).

The Christians also had the idea of “Good Death” in which alms-giving to the poor, doing good works, and saying Masses to strengthen the spirit and even in one’s will, the spiritual property would be addressed first in the church service description and the prayers to be said (Binski, 34). Good work would raise the spiritual social status, which could be different from
one’s social status in life. In this sense, the idea of Purgatory also developed for the ones not “wholly good nor wholly bad” (Binski, 25) and the spiritual status was not cut clear with boundaries of heaven and hell.

**Analysis**

The Chinese and European attitudes towards death and treatment of the dead had various similarities in the preparation of the site of burial, giving money or goods to the dead for their afterlife, and the idea of “ghosts” or the angry dead. Both viewed the act of burning as a means of communication with the afterlife but interestingly were not inclined towards cremation of the bodies, and death became a business for both societies.

However, more importantly there were clear differences between the two that made each society distinct with its own social values. For the Chinese, the public played a big role in funeral rites and were encouraged to participate. There was no division between the body and soul, and respectively the afterlife status of the spirit followed the status of the body.

With Medieval Christians, the church became fully responsible for the care of the dead and the spiritually strong survived among the living without being tied down to the physical world. Overcoming the body was a triumph over death and a fulfillment of Christianity in which the holy dead were living outside of the body. The idea of “Good Death” could determine the afterlife and the actions during life directly reflected the status in the afterlife. There were various degrees as well, and even in Dante’s Inferno we see various circles of hell by which evil men had been judged.
Conclusion

In late imperial China, there was an importance of physical action and the occurring of rituals in which villagers participated, while in Medieval Europe, the focus was on symbolism and the meaning or expression in the rituals and Masses themselves.

The concepts of afterlife affected the ritual practices in that the Chinese belief that there was no separation between the body and soul and no social status change put the ritual focus on the body and treatment of the corpse. As for the Europeans, the concept of the soul over the body and the spiritual status determined by the degree of division of the soul from the body led to the symbolism and the focus of good will of the person.

Social values are reflected in these rituals as well. For China, the rituals were a preparation for the person’s transformation into the next world, getting ready for the journey ahead. The money burning, soul tablets and the significance of ancestry and descendants show the generational process, and the removal of the coffin from the village is not a symbolic transfer of the body but rather the actual send off of the dead from the village to the afterlife.

On the other hand, Christians viewed the rituals as a preparation for a destination of eternity, showing ideas of the “Good Death” and the send off of the person to a goal of heaven. We see two distinct worlds of the living and the afterlife, and the tomb and burials became integrated with the community to become part of the society rather than a full exit from society.

While death rituals may be similar across the two cultures, the differences in the rituals themselves reveal the differences in social values.
Bibliography


