

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Cultural Governance of Death in Shenzhen

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Abstract

For decades, funeral reform has been a key concern for cultural governance in China as the state has attempted to manage “feudal” and “superstitious” practices and economize resources such as land devoted to cemeteries. We analyse the status of funeral reforms in Shenzhen, combining general observations with a case study of an urban village. We show how the business of funeral service providers mediates between cultural governance and grassroots-level needs and demands, resulting in distinct forms of ritual hybridization. In the case of native villagers, we observe the bifurcation of rituals at the central municipal parlour and at the home of the deceased. For understanding the adaptability of death rituals under the regime of cultural governance, it is essential to distinguish between funeral rites and their modular structure on the one hand, and rites for the disposal of the body on the other.

摘要

几十年来，殡葬改革一直是中国文化治理的一个关键问题，它以克服“封建”和“迷信”为目标，同时提倡节约墓园用地资源等。我们分析了深圳的殡葬改革现状，将观察结果与一个城中村的案例研究相结合。我们展示了殡葬服务提供的商业活动如何在文化治理和基层的需求之间进行调节，从而导致不同形式的仪式并存。对于本地村民，我们观测其在深圳殡仪馆和亡者家中仪式的分置。为了了解文化治理下死亡仪式的适应性，我们认为必须区分殡葬仪式及其模块化结构，以及遗体处置的仪式。

Keywords: funeral rites in Shenzhen; cultural governance; funeral reforms; urban villages

关键词: 深圳的殡葬仪式; 文化治理; 殡葬改革; 城中村

In current Chinese studies, cultural governance has emerged as a concept that bridges the domains of politics, economy and culture.¹ This covers both governance of cultural activities and the use of culture in governing society across various domains. One intriguing aspect is the mediation of cultural governance via the economy. In the context of cultural industries and tourism, culture has emerged as a resource in locational competition and business strategies, while cultural governance refers to the active engagement of authorities in guiding and sometimes constraining such grassroots-level activities.² Cultural governance in the wider sense refers to the efforts of authorities in designing and disseminating cultural practices that contribute to wider goals such as creating a “harmonious society.”³ This is salient, for instance, in the many ways in which the party-state promotes traditional values such as “filial piety” in society.

1 Perry 2013; Oakes 2019.

2 Oakes 2017.

3 Sigley 2006; Kubat 2018.

In the latter sense, cultural governance continued with the distinct form of “culturalism” as a form of governance in the imperial state.⁴ After the rise of neo-Confucianism in Song times, the imperial state created and implemented many channels through which society would be transformed according to moral precepts defined by the political and cultural elites (*jiao hua* 教化). Examples include the dissemination of village covenants, the editing of opera texts or the erection of stelae commemorating individuals who had devoted themselves to public service.⁵ However, these activities also had economic purposes, such as propagating standards for the management of lineage property.⁶

One of the areas where cultural governance manifests continuities across the 20th century revolutionary divides is in the governance of death rituals, funeral practices and cemeteries.⁷ In the Qing dynasty, the imperial government tried to restrain expenditures on funerals because China was increasingly perceived as suffering a drain on resources, so that any “luxuries” should be suppressed.⁸ This created a leitmotif that persists to the present day. Funeral practices were always evaluated in economic terms, particularly in reference to the ritual expenses and the land used for burials. Throughout the centuries, Chinese governments have been concerned with containing what is perceived to be the excessively high costs of traditional death rituals and have adopted various measures to cap these costs.

This economic focus has, however, always stood in contention with the equally important notion that funeral practices are at the core of what defines proper Chinese morality and cultural identity, namely Confucian notions of filial piety and ancestral worship.⁹ For centuries, this tension has been further complicated by the complex role of popular religion, which partly deviates from rationalist conceptions of elite Confucianism and more recently from modernist aspirations of societal transformation.¹⁰

As a result, the 20th century saw a continuous sequence of governmental initiatives aimed at the transformation of death rituals in China. One strong force was economic change and, most significantly, urbanization. Traditional death rituals were mainly a hotchpotch of elite standards and rural practices which started to break up in the move towards urbanization for the simple reason that rural traditions assigned a strong role to spatial structures in funeral rituals, especially burials determined by *fengshui* 风水 and the relocation of bones after a couple of years (a tradition mostly practised in South China). In an urbanized landscape, these practices can no longer be maintained, given the scarcity of valuable land. Hence, the economic conditions of urbanization have been primary drivers of the growth of cemeteries (which are different from unregulated tombs scattered across the landscape) and the propagation and adoption of cremation instead of burials. Today, the same factors motivate the government’s promotion of sea burials and other forms of “eco-burial” and the virtualization of death rituals.

These economic forces meet, and often clash with, the persistence of traditional moral conceptions about death. Certainly, on a more abstract level, the key is filial piety (*xiao* 孝) as the generic value in which many practices are anchored. Proper treatment of the dead is a universal value that must be respected in Chinese society and which is especially binding for descendants. As such, filial piety cannot be questioned by initiatives to reform funeral practices, especially in the current context of it being touted as the anchor of social stability and “harmony.” However, how this value is expressed is determined by complementary sets of beliefs and values. Most importantly, it is connected to ancestor worship, which is deeply embodied in the wide range of practices endorsed by most Chinese – even in urbanized conditions – such as lunar holidays and Qingming 清明节 (the “sweeping of graves”) in particular. In popular religion, ancestor worship aligns with many other practices which are less compatible with modernity, such as the idea that ancestors must be

4 Levenson 1968; Townsend 1992.

5 Watson, James 1988a.

6 Faure 2007.

7 Henriot 2016.

8 Zanasi 2020, 109.

9 Watson, James 1988a.

10 Clart 2012.

nourished by descendants in the afterlife. Hence, these beliefs are less widely shared among the population. Another important set of beliefs and values focuses on the notions of pollution and threat emanating from the dead body. After the mourning period, spirits of the dead who had not received nourishment from their ancestors would morph into evil ghosts. Again, such beliefs were once widespread but are retreating.

The diversity of beliefs is manifest in the often-stark difference between urban and rural society when it comes to funeral practices, which is in contrast to the essential unity of death rituals in imperial times. The divergence in rural and urban rituals emerged out of China's distinct development model after 1949.¹¹ Social transformation measures were vigorously and rapidly implemented in the cities, whereas the government proceeded cautiously in the rural areas where beliefs about ancestor worship were key values in forming the identities of rural people. This raises the intriguing question of what happens when rapid urbanization and rural–urban migration result in the spatial fusion of the “two societies.”¹² This is the question that we pursue in this paper. We show that cultural governance by the state interacts with cultural creativity at the grassroots level via three main mechanisms. One is the institutionalized role of the shareholding cooperatives, the management units administrating urban villages, which are factually lineage-based organizations. The second mechanism is the duality of funeral rites and rites of disposal of the body, as seminally analysed by James Watson.¹³ The third is the role of professional funeral service providers. These mechanisms work differently for the majority of the sojourning population in Shenzhen 深圳 without *hukou* 户口, often from rural areas, and the native villagers.

Our paper analyses the funeral policies and funeral practices in Shenzhen, both as they are applied generally and also how they manifest in one urban village, Fenghuang 凤凰社区. Located in Bao'an district 宝安区, Fenghuang underwent a rapid transformation from a rural area into an urban district. It is the native village of a branch of the Wen 文 (Man in Cantonese) lineage, which was investigated by Rubie and James Watson in the neighbouring New Territories 50 years ago. There are few precedents in the literature, which has mostly focused on Shanghai and Hong Kong in the urban context¹⁴ or on rural areas.¹⁵ Anne-Christine Trémon's seminal study on Shenzhen does not focus on death rituals as a topic but uses the cemetery issue as a litmus test for investigating the moral economy of lineages in Shenzhen.¹⁶ Our research focuses on death rituals and funeral practices.¹⁷

We build on three main sources. First, our research forms part of a long-term sequence of projects in Shenzhen that have been exploring urban villages since 2016 and which provide in-depth contextualization.¹⁸ One of the authors is a Shenzhen resident and has conducted interviews and participant observation over the entire duration. Death rituals became a subtopic in late 2019 when we conducted interviews with government officials and representatives of the organizations managing funerals. Second, we conducted an exploratory questionnaire survey of 200 respondents in Fenghuang (both Wen and non-Wen).¹⁹ We also gathered rich supplementary data from government documents, news reports and web content. The topic was a sensitive one for many of our respondents for various reasons ranging from political judgements to privacy concerns. We therefore often had to collect and evaluate information through indirect means and needed to contextualize incomplete information.

11 Whyte 1988; 2010.

12 Kipnis 2017a.

13 Watson, James 1988a.

14 Wah 2003; 2016; Aveline-Dubach 2012; Fokdal 2019; Bellocq 2021.

15 Oxfeld 2004.

16 Trémon 2015.

17 Kipnis 2017b.

18 Herrmann-Pillath, Guo and Feng 2020.

19 The exploratory survey was carried out October–December 2021. We approached respondents in three places, Fenghuang “old town,” residential areas and the mountain temple.

The paper proceeds as follows. Next, we provide an overview of public policies in the domain of funeral practices and cemeteries. We then describe the funeral practices of the Wen in Fenghuang and go on to present an analytical summary. The final section concludes.

Governing Funeral Rituals between the State and the Market

When analysing government policies, it is important to distinguish between official regulations, which are motivated by central government policy precepts and translated into local norms, the various informal agreements achieved in recurrent negotiations between administrators and local actors, and the tacit leeway left for local practices. The second level is most interesting, as this often reflects the ingenuity of local actors in interpreting regulations and co-opting related policies for their own purposes. Trémon's study is a case in point.²⁰ The villagers protected their interests by building a memorial site on the place where the remnants of their high ancestors were located and then moved their urns to this site, thus creating a columbarium as a substitute for their cemetery, which had been removed. Memorial sites can be contextualized within a different frame, namely as embodiments of local culture and as markers of the historical depth of Shenzhen urban identity. The villagers were able to circumvent the official prohibition on establishing "lineage burial sites" on cemeteries, even creating an exclusive site for depositing urns and conducting ancestral rituals. However, this should not be interpreted as mere "deviance": the local actors assumed a constructive role in arranging ritual practices that were considered legitimate by both government and concerned citizens.

This mediation comes close to the notion of "brokerage" in Prasanjit Duara's concept of cultural nexus.²¹ Although the government pursues an agenda to centralize death management and standardize practices, it allows local actors a degree of discretion to adapt these measures and express their own preferences. This is especially important in Shenzhen, a melting pot of regional subcultures with idiosyncratic funeral practices and a large migrant population. In Shenzhen, the most visible incorporation of centralization is the centrally managed funeral parlour in Longgang district 龙岗区 (Central Parlour hereafter).²² On first sight, this organization manages all funerals in the city, which means that it also offers all related services at centrally administered prices. In 2020, it processed about 18,000 funerals with a total of 1.2 million mourners.

This number is surprisingly low, even when considering the abnormal demography of Shenzhen.²³ The *Shenzhen Statistical Yearbook* does not give detailed demographic information. Available data show that the mortality rate is far below the Chinese average – 1.63 compared to 7.11 in 2017.²⁴ The reason is straightforward: the continuous inflow of young workers and other migrants results in a low average age of the Shenzhen population. It was about 32 years in 2021.²⁵ In addition, only those under 45 are eligible to apply for a Shenzhen *hukou*.²⁶ Thus, the number of people approaching the age of natural death is artificially depressed by the institutional setting. In May 2021, authorities published the results of the Seventh National Census, giving the numbers for 2020 as follows: *hukou* residents 5.87 million and permanent residents 17.56 million,

20 Trémon 2015.

21 Duara 1988.

22 "Shenzhen binyiguan" (Shenzhen Central Parlour), <http://mzj.sz.gov.cn/cn/zsdw/sbyg/gk/index.html>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

23 For a comparison, Fokdal 2019 cites the Hong Kong authorities, who give the number of deaths in 2010 as 42,700.

24 "2018 nian Shenzhen renkou, changzhu renkou zeng liang, chushenglü ji siwang lü qingkuang fenxi yuce" (An analysis and forecast of Shenzhen's population, increase in resident population, birth and death rates in 2018). *Chanye xinxi wang*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.chyxx.com/industry/201805/637145.html>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

25 "Shenzhen changzhu renkou pinjun nianling 32.5 sui" (The average age of the permanent population of Shenzhen is 32.5). *Ru hu zhitong che*, 11 April 2021, https://www.szhztc.com/p/318.html?ivk_sa=1024320u. Accessed 19 December 2022.

26 "Zishen de zhe sange tiaojian jue ding ni rushenhu de nandu" (Three conditions for determining the difficulty of obtaining Shenzhen *hukou*). *Ruhu Shenzhen yidiantong*, 22 November 2021, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1717109288519003532&wfr=spider&for=pc>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

which corresponds roughly to an estimated 28,000 deaths, considering the mortality rate.²⁷ At the same time, the official population data have been questioned by many informed observers. For example, 20 million is a reference for the authorities implementing COVID-19 measures,²⁸ so that we would end up with a rough estimate of 32,000 deaths in 2020. Hence, we surmise that the Central Parlour does not manage all funerals in Shenzhen. Indeed, as our informants suggest, there are two factors at play. One is that access to certain official services is limited by registration status, the other is that the families of migrants mostly want to transfer their dead family members back to their hometown, and the death is recorded at the place of *hukou*, thus reducing the number of deaths registered in Shenzhen.

Indeed, the business of funeral services includes companies specializing in transporting the dead, including over long distances.²⁹ Although the base price is low, customers can choose between various types of cars and accompanying services. As shown below, there is a regular pattern where the government policy pursuing equity in death translates into low, administered baseline prices, but the complementary items allow for any kind of luxury. The cars are equipped with cooling systems, which reveals that corpses (and not urns with ashes) are sent back to home villages.

This pattern is also true for other aspects of funerals. The Central Parlour offers the basic services, but not the full range, and outsources many of them.³⁰ The organization is at the centre of a large network of business entities that offer funeral services to suit all tastes and all prices.³¹ These intermediaries meet societal needs and demands beyond and sometimes even in conflict with what is determined by the political actors and often verge on the illegal. The “black intermediaries” intervene at the earliest point, when a death is formally confirmed in the hospital, the first necessary step in starting funeral procedures. For example, hospital personnel might hand over the business card of a funeral service provider who promises a “one stop service” (*yitiaolong* 一条龙).³² Owing to traditional anxieties about handling the dead, the bereaved are usually more than happy to hand over this burden to a third party. As we explain in the next section, they come under pressure to organize the entire funeral while at the hospital where the death certificate is issued and from where the corpse is immediately sent to the Central Parlour to be cremated. The bereaved may end up with bills that far exceed those of the standard service offered by the Central Parlour, including for items that the Central Parlour offers for free, such as transport of the corpse.

It is, however, misleading to describe the intermediaries as tricksters. The new Five-Year Plan for the funeral sector endorses the plurality of service providers and explicitly refers to a market for funeral services.³³ In our exploratory survey, more than 70 per cent of respondents said that they would consider a professional service provider for a funeral. Officially, there are only three public

27 “Shenzhen shi diqi quanguo renkou pucha zhuyao shuju jiedu” (Interpretation of the main data from Shenzhen’s seventh national population census). *Shenzhen tongji*, 1 May 2021, http://tj.sz.gov.cn/ztl/ztszsdqcqgrkpc/ggl/content/post_8772304.html. Accessed 17 January 2022.

28 Yang, Kai, et al. 2020.

29 See the various information items provided on the portal at “Shenzhen baishi fuwu” (Shenzhen funeral service). *Shenzhen baixing wang*, <https://shenzhen.baixing.com/binzang/>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

30 “Shenzhen binyiguan binzang fuwu xiangmu shoufei biaozhunbiao” (Shenzhen Central Parlour funeral service price list), <http://mzj.sz.gov.cn/zsdw/sbyg/fwxx/index.html>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

31 For similar observations on Nanjing, see Kipnis 2017b.

32 See, e.g., “Banchang putong sangshi yaohua 2 wan yuan? Shibin yiguansuo: ban jian dan sangshi keyi linghuafei” (20,000 yuan for a funeral? Central Parlour: maybe no charge). *Shenzhen News*, 1 August 2019, https://www.sznews.com/news/content/2019-08/01/content_22322812_0.htm. For a Shanghai experience, compare “Shanghai shimin diaoru binzang yitiaolong xianjing jie zhe jie bei hou heimu” (Shanghai citizens fall into the funeral “one-stop service” trap, the reporter exposes the secrets behind them). *China News*, 5 April 2016, <https://www.chinanews.com/sh/2016/04-05/7823385.shtml>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

33 “Shenzhen binzang shiye fazhan shisagwu guihua” (Shenzhen 5-year plan for funeral sector development). China Funeral Association, 5 December 2017, <http://www.chinabz.org/zcfg/qtzfgf/5880.html>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

service providers apart from the Central Parlour.³⁴ In reality, and as is the case with transport companies, there are many others. Funeral businesses that operate nationally and which also offer their services in Shenzhen include the Fushou wandai 福寿万代, which is headquartered in Suzhou and promotes its services in the districts of Bao'an 宝安, Longgang 龙岗 and Luohu 罗湖,³⁵ and the Shenzhen chuanyi hong shengming wenhua corporation 深圳市创艺鸿生命文化有限公司, which (according to the company website) was established in 2005 and is registered as a funeral service company with the relevant authorities, including a branch registered in Hong Kong.³⁶ The growth in private providers has apparently even gained in dynamism. In 2021, one even listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange, which also suggests governmental endorsement.³⁷ That company is also a member of the China Funeral Association, which was established in 1989 and conducts many activities in establishing industry standards and professional training, thereby bolstering public recognition of the industry.³⁸

There are two main factors that explain the growing role of intermediaries. First, the Central Parlour outsources the production of services and funeral paraphernalia, and second, the market provides for services and types of products that are not offered by the Central Parlour. One key selling point of the intermediaries is their emphasis on traditional culture and the diversity of funeral traditions they cater to – some even incorporate various surnames (clans) in their proceedings, which touches upon the sensitive issue of “feudal customs” and so must be avoided by public bodies.

Government regulations restrict the range of activities and products permitted in funeral services owing to the demand for frugality and because of concerns about feudal customs and superstitions. The regulations governing funerals in Shenzhen follow the central template laid out in the State Council Directive of 2010.³⁹ The State Council regulations emphatically stipulate that cremation is the universal norm in China, with exceptions allowed only for minorities and for a transitory stage. This conforms with the direction of funeral reform throughout the 20th century, which focused on combatting “feudal” practices and promoting frugality. Reforms were further developed in Shanghai, resulting in the emergence of a new form of death ritual, the memorials, which are now the standardized format for Party members and government employees and which emerged from the funeral practices promoted by the Communist Party after 1949.⁴⁰ However, the situation in Shenzhen was very different, as evident from a watershed document released by the Shenzhen government in 1997. This document painted an alarmist picture of deviant funeral practices and pointed to growing and serious problems with the management of death in the metropolis.⁴¹

34 “Binzang fuwu danwei mingdan” (Funeral service providers). Shenzhen Bureau of Civil Affairs, http://mzj.sz.gov.cn/cn/ywzc_mz/byfw/bmxx/content/post_10326016.html. Accessed 19 December 2022.

35 See the company website at <https://www.fushouwandai.cn/>; “Fushou wandai” (Company homepage), <https://shenzhen.baixing.com/binzang/a2306279738.html?from=vip>; “Binzang yitiaolong fuwu” (Funeral one stop service). *Shenzhen baixing wang*. Accessed 19 December 2022.

36 “Shenzhen chuanyihong shengming wenhua youxian gongsi” (Homepage of Shenzhen Chuanyihong Life Culture Company), <http://www.szbinyi.com/gsgk>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

37 “You yijia binzang qiye jiang fugang shangshi” (Another funeral company is going to get listed in Hong Kong). *59 Xing xuanmu wang*, 7 October 2021, <http://www.59xing.com/zxdt/4068.html>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

38 “Minzhengbu 101 yanjiusuo dao Zhongguo binzang xiehui jiaoliu zuotan” (Bureau of Civil Affairs 101 Institute has conference in China funeral association). Accessed 19 December 2022. For a list of members, see “Zhongguo binzang xiehui huiyuan danwei mingdan” (Member list of China Funeral Association), <http://www.zgbzxx.org/index.php/Special/listing>. Accessed 19 December 2022. Many of these organizations operate beyond their place of registration.

39 “Guowuyuan binzang guanli tiaoli (2012 xiuzheng ben)” (Regulations on funeral administration). Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 11 March 2013, <http://www.mca.gov.cn/article/gk/fg/shsw/201507/20150715849122.shtml>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

40 Whyte 1988; Liu 2021.

41 “Shenzhen shi zhengfu guanyu shenhua binzang gaige he jiaqiang binzang guanli de tongzhi” (Notice from Shenzhen Government on deepening funeral reform and strengthening funeral administration). *Shenzhen Government Online*, 23 September 2008, http://www.sz.gov.cn/szst2010/zdlyzl/ggsy/mzxx/bzgl/zcfg/content/post_1320007.html. Accessed 19 December 2022.

At the centre of government funeral policy is the issue of cemeteries and the promotion of alternative forms of burial, particularly those labelled “land-saving eco-burials” (*jie di shengtai ancang* 节地生态安葬). It is provincial policy (which applies in Shenzhen) to vastly expand the role of land-saving eco-burials. By the end of the last Five-Year Plan, about 60 per cent of burials already followed these alternative schemes, which are supported by investment in the relevant infrastructure. For example, although the province originally planned for only ten units, it set up 56 memorial sites for sea and tree burials. The construction of columbaria, on the other hand, was kept within the plan.⁴² A new trend is to move memorial sites to the virtual domain.⁴³ This is indirectly pushed by the limited size of cemeteries.

There are two types of cemeteries in Shenzhen: public cemeteries (*gongyixing mudi* 公益性墓地) and “commercial” cemeteries (*jingyingxing mudi* 经营性墓地). Owing to urbanization, public cemeteries have a distinct and complicated role, since legally they are administered by villages and village committees. This legal position was maintained in Shenzhen until only recently.⁴⁴ In principle, it means that the cemeteries can only be used by “villagers,” which would suggest a ritual dualism between the rural and the urban. The term “villagers” refers to the native villagers in the Shenzhen territory, who today are associated with the so-called “urban villages” and who represent less than 1 per cent of the *hukou* population. When the villages were transformed into urban communities in 2004, the villagers retained their rights to manage the cemeteries, although theoretically access was extended to all residents of the community with Shenzhen *hukou* at this location. Yet, as in our case study, the village still must grant this access. The key institution is the shareholding cooperative at the community level, which thus adopts the role of a broker of cultural governance.

In comparison, the five commercial cemeteries are basically market-oriented, with three of them managed by companies.⁴⁵ These cemeteries are open to everyone and offer a wider range of choices regarding burial slots and complementary items such as tombstones. However, they cannot expand in area and so the only way to accept more burials is to reduce the size of burial plots and introduce new forms of burial, such as erecting walls with urn containers or tree burials without tombstones, which are all endorsed in the provincial development plan. The growing scarcity of burial sites has led to a rapid increase in prices in recent years. The commercial cemeteries owned by the municipality keep their prices relatively low, but the number of sites is limited. For example, Jitian muyuan 吉田墓园 is designed to hold about 36,000 burial plots, each smaller than one square metre, but when the space needed for alleys, greenery and so forth is added, they amount to about eight square metres.⁴⁶ At a price of about 10,000 yuan for a right of 20 years, slots opened to the public rapidly sold out. Prices at other cemeteries are considerably higher, up to 80,000 yuan or more if various services, such as luxury tombstones or preferred locations, are added,

Government regulations strictly forbid the trading of burial sites and buyers of plots must always present all necessary documents certifying the death of the person to be buried. Prices have, however, inflated recently owing to the limited supply of plots. In addition, commercial cemeteries offer many optional extras, which add to the basic price, so that total costs of a burial site may reach

42 “Jiedi shengtai anzanglü chao 60%” (Land saving ecological burial rate exceeds 60%). *Guangming News*, 3 April 2021, <https://m.gmw.cn/baijia/2021-04/03/1302208231.html>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

43 Again, Shanghai is most advanced in these efforts. See Bellocq 2021.

44 “Binzang fuwu fangmian changjian wenti” (Frequently asked questions about funeral services). Shenzhen Bureau of Civil Affairs, 6 June 2022, http://mzj.sz.gov.cn/cn/xxgk_mz/mzxxg_mz/bzglxx_mz/bzgg/content/post_2918541.html. Accessed 19 December 2022.

45 See, e.g., “Shenzhen longshan yongjiu muyuan” (Longshan cemetery homepage), <http://www.szlongshan.com/>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

46 “Shenzhen xianyou 5 jia jingyingxing mudi, zuipianyi mudi yiwanduo neng maida” (There are five commercial cemeteries in Shenzhen, and the cheapest are about 10,000 yuan). *Nanfang City News*, 3 April 2019, <https://page.om.qq.com/page/OyK6qh6DXZQ8N4liQxCfVIdQ0>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

130,000 yuan.⁴⁷ Spiralling costs are one reason why those without a Shenzhen *hukou* may prefer to be buried in their native places.

Faced with such exorbitant costs, many people feel compelled to accept the new alternative forms of burial, especially sea burials, which Chinese leaders have long promoted. A major policy concern is the provision of affordable funeral services for the entire population and thus such burials are supported by a policy of generous subsidization. This move must be placed against the context of old China when a substantial share of the urban population was unable to afford even elementary forms of burial, especially for poor migrants or children.⁴⁸ Catering to the needs and aspirations of migrants therefore remains a key policy issue, which is especially salient in Shenzhen. The government therefore has a dedicated policy of providing free or subsidized funeral services for all citizens, regardless of *hukou* status. The new Five-Year Plan for Guangdong province (2021–2025) states that during the previous five-year period, the province managed 2,230,000 funerals with financial support of 2.7 billion yuan. In 2018, Shenzhen municipality announced a policy to offer the following services for free: transportation of the body; keeping the body at a parlour for up to three days; the hiring costs of a simple farewell hall; the costs of a simple cremation; the costs of storing the urn for up to ten years or a free eco-burial; cleaning the body; a simple urn (50 yuan) and a shroud for the body.⁴⁹ This policy is actively promoted via the pertinent media. The government also publishes lists of benchmark prices for many services, according to which the list of free services amounts to a total subsidy of 2,200 yuan per burial.⁵⁰ This subsidy is paid directly to the Central Parlour, which can offer the services to the family of the deceased for free. Alternatively, the family can opt for other services, which must be paid for.

In sum, there is a “no frills” basic option for funeral services, which, however, does not extend to ritual demands. This is salient when considering one case in more detail. The starting point is an important distinction introduced by Rubie Watson, namely between funeral rites and rites for the disposal of the corpse.⁵¹ In considering this case, it is important to note that we focus on native villagers who make up a small proportion of the total Shenzhen population. As mentioned above, many non-native residents return their dead and fulfil their ritual obligations in their native places.

Funeral Rituals in a Shenzhen Urban Village

James Watson argues that rites of disposal manifest a much larger subcultural variety across China and allow for more flexibility than the funeral rites.⁵² The reason is the distinction between body and soul: rites of disposal mainly focus on the body while funeral rites centre on the soul. This may explain the important role given to burial practices in the reforms. In contrast, reforming funeral rites is more sensitive, as these directly touch on the fundamental values of filial piety and the resulting obligation to ritually support the smooth transition of the soul to the afterworld so as to prevent it morphing into a ghost that might haunt later generations. The persistence of these beliefs is evident in the findings of our exploratory survey: 69 per cent of respondents affirmed

47 “Shenzhen tui 1,38 wan A4 zhi daxiao mudi, Zhongshan shunde xiangou” (Shenzhen promotes 13,800 A4 size cemeteries, Zhongshan Shunde has “limited purchases”). *Sohu News*, 3 April 2017, https://m.sohu.com/n/486240519/?pvid=000115_3w. Accessed 19 December 2022.

48 Henriot 2016.

49 “Shenzhen mianchu binzang jiben fuwu feiyong shishi banfa” (Notice from Shenzhen Civil Affairs Bureau on the implementation measures for the exemption of basic funeral service fees in Shenzhen). Shenzhen Bureau of Civil Affairs, http://www.sz.gov.cn/zfgb/2017/gb1018/content/post_4955344.htm. Accessed 17 January 2022.

50 “Shenzhen shi mianchu binzang jiben fuwu feiyong shishi banfa zhengce jiedu” (Interpretation of the implementation measures of Shenzhen on exemption of basic funeral service fees). *Shenzhen Government Online*, 4 July 2022, http://www.sz.gov.cn/zfgb/zcjd/content/post_9932724.html. Accessed 19 December 2022.

51 Watson, Rubie 1988.

52 Watson, James 1988a.

that a large funeral should be held for the deceased; 65 per cent were convinced that ancestors' souls live in the netherworld; and 83 per cent believed in reincarnation.⁵³ The persistence of traditional beliefs is also salient for more specific issues: 42 per cent of respondents believed that contact with the dead body is dangerous; 45 per cent believed that the location of the grave impacts on the fortunes of the family; and 95 per cent thought that paper money and other paper replicas should be burnt ritually. Another telling result is the differential attitude towards eco-burials. Whereas 73 per cent of respondents considered this to be an option for themselves, the number dropped to 53 per cent when considering it for their parents.

Our case is intriguing because the urban village is a single-lineage village of the Wen clan (Man in Cantonese), which has six other branches in the region, including in Hong Kong. The branches in Cantonese) were the subject of an in-depth study by Rubie and James Watson between the 1960s and 1980s, which included detailed analyses of funeral practices.⁵⁴ We therefore have a unique reference for judging the extent of the changes in Fenghuang and the impact of different regimes of cultural governance. In the New Territories, the colonial government entered into agreements with the local lineages so as to maintain social and political stability after the riots of the 1960s and as a bulwark against Communist infiltration. Hence, funeral practices and tombs were protected. In Shenzhen, after the launch of reforms, the rapidly growing affluence of native villagers gave rise to the revival of many traditional practices that were suppressed previously, especially during the Cultural Revolution.

In 2019, Party and state central organizations released a document on rural governance.⁵⁵ Apart from a wide range of institutional reforms, one key point centres on cultural governance. While clearly endorsing traditional practices such as “family precepts” (*jiaxun* 家训), the document also emphasizes the need for further transforming lifecycle rituals, including funerals. The document demands the widespread use of “pacts” (*minyue* 民约), continuing a long tradition reaching back to imperial times.⁵⁶ A main organizational element is the *hongbai lishihui* 红白理事会, the council of weddings and funerals, literally “red and white matters.”⁵⁷ In Fenghuang, this council was established in 1997 in response to the municipal government’s policy initiative targeting all kinds of misbehaviour in this area.⁵⁸ Since then, the shareholding cooperative has assumed this function, with leading cadres signing vows to advance funeral reform. As mentioned above, this does not imply that the shareholding cooperative simply implements government policy locally. Since almost all of the shareholders are members of the local lineage, the organization adopts the role of a broker and, as in Trémon’s case study, may develop and endorse semi-autonomous forms of cultural governance of death rituals.⁵⁹

The brokerage role transpires when we distinguish between the rituals of ancestor worship and the funeral rites in the narrowest sense. Ancestor worship reflects the fundamental value of filial

53 Of the 200 respondents, 63% were male, 36% were younger than 30, 66% had finished higher secondary school or higher, 23% were local villagers, 16% were Party members, 42% had already taken part in a funeral.

54 Watson, James 1988b; Watson, Rubie 1988.

55 “Guanyu jiaqiang he gaijin xiangcun guanli de zhidao yijian” (Guiding opinions on strengthening and improving rural governance). Baidu, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%85%B3%E4%BA%8E%E5%8A%A0%E5%BC%BA%E5%92%8C%E6%94%B9%E8%BF%9B%E4%B9%A1%E6%9D%91%E6%B2%BB%E7%90%86%E7%9A%84%E6%8C%87%E5%AF%BC%E6%84%8F%E8%A7%81/23361155>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

56 Anagnost 1997.

57 “Hongbai lishihui” (Wedding and funeral council). Baidu, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%BA%A2%E7%99%BD%E7%90%86%E4%BA%8B%E4%BC%9A/18184814>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

58 “Shenzhen shi renmin zhengfu guanyu shenhua binzang gaige he jiaqiang binzhang guanli de tongzhi” (Notice from the Shenzhen Government on deepening funeral reform and strengthening funeral administration). *Shenzhen Government Online*, http://www.sz.gov.cn/szzt2010/zlyzl/ggsy/mzxx/bzgl/zcfg/content/post_1320007.html. Accessed 17 January 2022. Anagnost 1997.

59 Trémon 2015.

piety and therefore is ambivalent in the political context. This is especially true for the Wen in their relationship to their high ancestors (*tai gong* 太公), in particular Wen Tianxiang 文天祥.⁶⁰ During the traditional holidays to commemorate ancestors, Qingming and Chongyang 重阳, the Wen lineages of Hong Kong join with the Shenzhen Wen branches to jointly engage in ritual activities, such as presenting fruit and a whole roasted pig to the ancestors as well as burning paper money for them. The activities are organized by the shareholding cooperative. According to the lineage rules, only Wen males may carry out these tasks.

Ancestral rites are conducted at various levels, centring around the ancestral tablets. As such, various subbranches of the Wen clan pay tribute to their closer high ancestors rather than to the shared high ancestor of all Wen, but they are not necessarily fully autonomous branches. In Fenghuang village, there is a library where several Wen groups have set up small altars with ancestral tablets where they regularly place offerings and burn incense. These practices are rooted in household-based rituals. Most households have altars where deceased elders are revered and which are often combined with other artefacts such as shrines devoted to the goddess Guanyin 观音 or the Earth God. The ancestral tablets follow household divisions. When a household divides, the son will get his own tablet. This matters greatly for maintaining the solidarity of the family when younger members move to find work in other places. Their natal family has not been divided and therefore the unit still shares important economic projects and concerns.

Funeral rites remain close to traditional precepts, as our interviews confirmed. The following description draws on information from several sources. We must distinguish between two stages in the changes to funeral customs. The first stage is the revival between 1978 and 1997, with loosening cultural governance in the rural areas, and the second is the enforcement of cultural governance between 1997 and today. This distinction is important because the first stage reveals the benchmark for assessing functions and meanings of adapted rituals. For some rituals, 1997 clearly marks a rupture. For example, until then the villagers still followed the ritual of relocating the bones after several years to finally place the deceased in the most auspicious place. This practice is non-existent today, owing to the growing scarcity of land. In 2001, the public cemetery was moved to a new location along with all the remains of the deceased, thus revealing a compromise between funeral reform and tradition. The new cemetery, however, is still controlled by the shareholding cooperative and priority is given to members of the Wen clan.

In this section, we take the traditional rituals as a reference frame and reveal, step-by-step, the changes in current practices.⁶¹ Villagers still recognize the need to follow the proper sequence of rituals because this acknowledges that the soul continues and that the living must show filial piety and support the transition. The modular nature of the traditional ritual allows for much flexibility in adapting to the demands of funeral reform. According to Watson, there are nine modules, which he regards as indispensable: (1) notification of the death to the community; (2) the wearing of proper mourning clothes by relatives; (3) washing the corpse; (4) sending offerings (food, money etc.) to the dead; (5) the installation of a tablet (which is later to be kept at the household altar); (6) abiding by special rules on the handling of money given to various parties involved in the funeral, such as the carriers of the coffin; (7) the appointing and playing of a music band; (8) sealing the corpse in an airtight coffin; and (9) the removal of the coffin from the community (the procession).⁶² We can identify the same modules today.

Once a person dies, the family announces the death (module 1) and prepares for mourning to take place at the home of the deceased elders; if a child dies, the mourning takes place at the child's parents' home. Today, death announcements are mainly made via electronic media. Providers of digital services

60 On the significance of high ancestors, see Trémon 2014 and Cohen 2017.

61 The recently compiled Fenghuang chronicle has a brief chapter on funeral customs.

62 Watson, James 1988a.

related to funerals closely follow traditional precepts in designing their products.⁶³ One important factor behind changes to the death rituals is that most people today die at hospital and not at home – sometimes simply because only the hospitals can issue the necessary death certificates needed for all other procedures. This has repercussions on all other stages of ritual – for example, the procession stage of carrying the coffin from home to the cemetery (module 9) is no longer appropriate. However, the technicalities of transport allow for an adaptation to this ritual. Now, the Central Parlour sends a van to the hospital to collect the body for free, first moving it to the mortuary where it is kept cool. When the body is then sent from the mortuary to the mourning hall of the parlour, the bier will be carried by the eldest son and pallbearers from the parlour, who together arrange the body in the coffin.

Another step affected by the spatial change from home to hospital is the changing into proper mourning dress (module 2). If a person dies at home, the closest male relatives will immediately put on white clothes, whereas when the death occurs at hospital people only change into white mourning dress at the Central Parlour, or when conducting other complementary rituals.

One important hidden aspect of the early stages of the funeral rituals is the provision of funds. Those who inherit the greatest share of the deceased's estate should also pay for a matching share of the expenses. This also applies in reverse. When reaching agreement on the shared funding of funeral expenses and the relative shares, families also ritually confirm the specific arrangements for the inheritance across several parties. The one who provides the funding for the funeral is usually the one who makes the arrangements with the Central Parlour. Normally, the eldest son will negotiate the terms, including confirming the details, such as which hall is rented for the vigil and for how long, and which paraphernalia such as wreaths and flower arrangements are added. He will also collect the contributions of related parties (friends, work unit and so on). In practice, all these preparatory activities take place at the hospital when the close relatives gather together. This occasion also allows for another essential traditional ritual, the washing of the body, which is only done by the closest relatives (module 3). The relatives remain involved in the handling of the body after it is transferred to the Central Parlour.

Money continues to play an important role in funeral rituals, in the form of “white envelopes.”⁶⁴ Relatives and other mourners present money gifts to the family of the deceased at the funeral and the ensuing banquet to which they are invited. According to Hong Kong Wen practice, mourners present the family with white envelopes containing uneven amounts (mostly 100 + 1 yuan). The other important financial aspect is the payment to the funeral workers, such as the pallbearers. Traditionally, these workers were seen as being tainted by death and therefore were only recruited from the lower classes.⁶⁵ The money handed over to them was seen as a social distancing. Today, mourners still give white envelopes to workers (module 6) who are, however, no longer stigmatized.

In traditional rituals, the funeral would be orchestrated by a *fashi* 法師, a layperson knowledgeable in Daoist and Buddhist matters. The *fashi* guides the bereaved family members during the ritual and is responsible for performing the tasks that will ensure a smooth transition of the deceased's soul to the afterworld. Today, it is up to the mourners' discretion whether they ask a *fashi* for help or an employee of the funeral parlour. In fact, the role of a *fashi* was traditionally a part-time one for certain villagers who had the requisite skills and knowledge. As young people show less interest in adopting this role today, it is harder to find a *fashi*, despite it being a relatively well-paid job (for example, it is said that young women shun people closely associated with death rituals).

Traditionally, most rituals are conducted at the home of the family, which is transformed into a mourning hall where the family can fulfil the ritual duty of holding a vigil next to the coffin (module 5). The leader of the ceremony reads the eulogy, and the prepared corpse is laid out in the coffin. The deceased's shoes are placed in front of the coffin, together with all kinds of fruit and meat

63 See, e.g., “Tiantang wang” (Heaven online), <http://www.tiantang6.com/>. Accessed 19 December 2022.

64 Watson, James 1988b. For a rare comparison, see Toulson 2013.

65 Watson, James 1988b.

offerings and the memorial tablet with a picture of the deceased. The ceremony traditionally takes place over two days. The rites on the first day focus on commemorating the deceased and “opening the throat,” including offering a freshly slaughtered pig. “Opening the throat” refers to the dead person being ritually enabled to digest the offerings on the way to the afterworld. The second day focuses on exorcizing evil spirits, usually with firecrackers, if possible, and a music band. Rites on the second day also include the burning of paper models of all kinds of objects from daily life so as to provide the deceased with the necessary equipment for continuing life in the afterworld.

This tradition cannot survive, given the radically changed logistics of death. However, there is a functional substitute enabled by the ritual distinction between the tablet and the corpse. Today, families continue with ritual activities in parallel to the formal procedures at the Central Parlour. They set up a second mourning hall at the home of the deceased (*ling tang* 灵堂) where an altar with a picture of the deceased and an ancestral tablet are erected (module 5). It is at this site that the traditional offerings are made, including various food items and the burning of paper money and models (module 4). It is important to note that offerings can also be made at the Central Parlour. This is where the funeral services come into play. The Central Parlour offers a wide range of services and options that can be booked by the mourners. As mentioned above, there are pricing schemes for basic items and for a wider range of options, which are market based. Mourners can refer to these pricing schemes to adapt the actual ritual to suit their preferences and circumstances, for instance with regard to the type of hall they wish to rent, how it is furnished or the paper flower arrangements. Published prices are only for guidance and leave much leeway to express individual ritual needs.

In other words, funeral rituals are bifurcated into the mainstream track and the traditional track, thus also reflecting the distinction between funeral rites and rites of disposal. Funeral rites can be conducted independently away from the presence of the body, but they must also be conducted in the presence of the body before the final stage of the interment. This is reflected in the fact that one key element of the traditional rituals, the vigil, is held at both places simultaneously for at least for 24 hours, with candles kept alight and incense burning throughout (and cats and dogs prevented from entering the house lest they lead the soul astray). The Central Parlour strives to emulate traditions in many other ways. For example, firecrackers are today shunned or even prohibited, even though they are deemed essential in certain traditional ceremonies. The Central Parlour offers an alternative: mourners can book the “ritual canons” in front of the parlour and pay for the number of shots.

In traditional funerals, the next stage is the procession (module 9). Before that, the *fashi* would orchestrate the various ceremonies involving the family and the guests, such as the reading of eulogies. Each family in the village sends a representative who presents offerings and bows in front of the coffin and then later joins the banquet. The male family members carry the bier with the coffin around the house, led by the *fashi*, and sing the famous poem by Wen Tianxiang, the *Zhengqi ge* 正气歌. The evening is replete with live music and fireworks to keep the evil ghosts away (module 7). Traditionally, a procession then follows, which passes by the houses of relations who present offerings, until the cemetery is reached. The time for the burial is determined by a *fengshui* master who calculates the most auspicious day after considering the birthdays of the deceased and nearest relatives. The master also determines the exact burial site.

Today, the bifurcation of ritual applies. Many families continue with a procession through the village, but without the coffin, which allows for activities such as burning money. At the same time, they can negotiate with the Central Parlour to allow for some similar activities related to the various stages of handling the coffin (module 8). Handing over a little money to the employees helps towards the performance of individual practices, although under supervision. As mentioned, relatives are involved with the carrying of the body from the mortuary to the mourning hall. The same applies with the following stages of moving the body from the mourning hall to the crematorium, and from the Central Parlour to the cemetery. At all stages, relatives are involved, dress appropriately and add accoutrements such as wreaths. There is also some latitude to decide which accoutrements may be incorporated. For example, burning paper imitations of diverse luxury

items, as is common in tradition funeral rituals, may be now avoided, but burning paper money is still widely practised in many contexts and may be done at the cemetery.

A final word on *fengshui*. *Fengshui* was central to traditional rituals and remains so until today. *Fengshui* is mostly conceived as a “quasi science” and beyond the scope of superstition, which is why official interventions remain weak, as long as the practice is pursued without much publicity. It is no longer used to determine the location of burial sites in the open landscape, but the location of gravesites in the cemetery also requires meticulous consideration of *qi* 气 flows in the surroundings. This works on various scales. The Wen graves occupy the centre of the public cemetery, which is seen as especially auspicious for the lineage, and within that area individual sites are chosen.

Analysis

For interpreting our observations of death rituals in Fenghuang, it is essential to consider the wide adaptability of practices to contexts while maintaining certain basic principles and functions of death rituals. We identify the following functions:

- the embodiment of sincere grief, respect and care paid to the deceased as ancestors, including lending support to their future transitions (this is the *xiao* 孝 complex);
- the demonstration of individual social status in the various activities surrounding the funeral (the *guanxi* 关系 context);
- gaining recognition in the wider community in which the mourning group is located (the political context);
- arranging trade-offs between normative demands and economic constraints and interests (the economic context).

Cultural governance cannot simply eradicate funeral traditions without creating functional substitutes. In Shenzhen, we found that the political efforts at funeral reform work together with the demands of various social groups in creating the specific forms within which legitimate ritual is enacted. This is mainly mediated by economic actors and, in the case of urban villages, is supplemented and endorsed by shareholding cooperatives. Ritual activities are supported and enabled by economic activities such as the production of funeral paraphernalia by service providers and vice versa. These activities depend on the economic domain for expressive functions.

Cultural governance by the state mainly centres on the rites of the disposal of the physical body, whereas other agents assume the role of broker in respect of funeral rituals. At first sight, this is radically transforming traditional rituals in changing specific forms of the materiality of those rituals. This is especially true in Guangdong where the burial and later relocation of ancestors' bones were key elements of death rituals. But, as we have seen, if we consider the wider framework of ancestor worship and the complicated social ontology of body and soul in Chinese tradition, forms of materiality can change while still leaving the functions of funeral rituals intact.

Expressing sincere grief and care for the souls of the deceased is a prime concern when conducting a proper burial. Here, the value of material items is a key expressive means. Government policy offers “no frills funerals,” which fail to meet this criterion. Therefore, funeral service providers fulfil a strong and varied demand for other means of expression. In so doing, a close connection to traditional concepts is important. For example, coffins remain an essential item and allow for any kind of luxury, despite being finally cremated with the body. The same principle applies to the other funeral accoutrements, sometimes even transgressing the norms of cultural governance, for example when burning paper replicas. Here, the ritual bifurcation between the Central Parlour and home is a ritual innovation that allows for the coexistence of the official and the deviant form of ritual. This bifurcation is directly visible in the local practices of native villagers. For many migrants, the key ritual activities take place in their native places according to their local norms.

The value of funeral services is also a way of portraying social status. However, many traditional forms of status signalling are today frowned upon or simply blocked by the new logistics of death, which is especially true when it comes to the key stage of the public funeral procession. However, at this point the wider context of ancestor worship must also be considered. In the case of lineages, ancestor worship and related forms of reviving tradition are partly endorsed by cultural governance, visible in the (re)construction of ancestral halls and associated temples. Here, signalling status is about the native community in the political sense, embedding individual status in local identity politics.

All actors face economic constraints, either enforced by public policy or by individual household budgets. Indeed, invoking tradition should heed attention to the stark fact that in the past, most Chinese were not able to afford even basic funeral ceremonies. Economic constraints deeply shape actual practices and partly render ritual as an “instituted fantasy.”⁶⁶ Accordingly, there is much space for ritual innovation, such as virtualizing care for ancestors by appropriate ritual actions in cyberspace, which, after all, allows for much entrepreneurial creativity in reshaping the ritual economy of death.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Our picture of funeral rituals in Shenzhen is fragmented and incomplete, and our case only serves as an illustration. The social ecology of this huge metropolitan area is vast and complex and includes subcultural variation (such as significant Hakka groups), the presence of second-generation migrants, and the vastly diverging socioeconomic and educational status groups. But this also means that Shenzhen is a laboratory for studying cultural governance in China. Funeral rituals are one of the most significant indicators when it comes to judging the interplay between tradition and modernity in China’s ongoing urbanization.

This is especially true for the question of how far rural society influences the future social forms of urbanity. In the past, observers mostly kept within the framework of a rural/urban dichotomy, conceptualizing the interaction in terms of migration from rural to urban, or in terms of rural reconstruction and transformation. Shenzhen is an important case in point for the incorporation of the rural into the urban without extinguishing the rural. On the contrary, villagers even gained substantial resources and started to actively shape urban society. The fascinating constellation is that in the recent call for cultural self-confidence, much of what constitutes Chinese tradition is alive and well in ritual practices, and less in the world of globalized business. This creates a peculiar dynamic of cultural governance in China, since entities such as the shareholding cooperatives take on brokerage functions which combine top-down and bottom-up movements in eventually determining legitimate forms of death ritual.

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⁶⁶ Sangren 2013.

⁶⁷ On the concept of ritual economy, see Herrmann-Pillath 2017 and Yang, Mayfair 2020.

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