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A Comparative Study of Han and Tibetan Views of Death

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Ever since the creation of mankind, there have been different cultures of funerals and burials for the deceased. At the same time, there have been several different perspectives on death. Any individual might be able to avoid some incidents and have exceptions, but no one can avoid death -- one's final destination. There are no exceptions when one's death comes. Therefore, here is the most famous deductive syllogism by Aristotle: All men are mortal, Socrates was a man; therefore Socrates was mortal. Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?-87 BC), the author of *Shiji* 史記 (*the Historical Records*) says: "Everyone must die, but some deaths are heavier than Mountain Tai, while others are lighter than a feather."

Death is one of the most central issues for all religions and superstitions to deal with, no matter how refined or how crude they are. In a sense, it is people's ultimate feelings toward death such as fear, mystery, wonder, and naïveté that result in various death-related fantasies, including rebirth, soul, transmigration, karma, doomsday, heaven, hell, eternity, and so on.

Mankind is doomed to encounter endless natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, flood, fire, famine, and virus outbreaks, as well as man-made disasters such as war, murder, crime, traffic accident, terrorism, and economic crises. Yet, the ultimate end of all these scenarios is death. In other words, without death -- the end of life's natural process -- there is no need for death-related beliefs or interpretations. Among all death and associated burial and funeral cultures, one of the most unusual is thought to be in Tibet, where it relies on a secret religion of Tibetan Buddhism as a major belief, and celestial burial as a practice.

This article will explore the mystery and truths of the Tibetan celestial burial culture, its death perspective, and its actual output by comparing it with other Eastern burial and funeral cultures and death views, especially with the Han 漢 tradition.¹ The main purpose

¹Han is the majority of the Chinese nation. According to a research report, the Han Chinese constitute approximately 92% of the population of Chinese mainland, 98% of the population of Taiwan, 74% of the population of Singapore, 24.5% of the population of Malaysia, and about 20% of the entire global human population, making them the largest ethnic group in the world. There is considerable genetic, linguistic, cultural, and social diversity among the Han, mainly due to thousands of years of immigration and assimilation of various regional ethnicities and tribes within China Wen, 2004, 302-5). The Han culture belongs to the world's oldest civilizations, boasting a lot of outstanding achievements in many fields including politics, military affairs, philosophy, literature, history, art and natural science, etc. The rich Han culture has given birth to many notable scientists, philosophers, artists and poets who, as the nation's elite, have had great influence on the course of Chinese history (See http://www.chinaculture.org/library/2008-02/05/content_23849.htm).

of our study is to examine and compare Han-Tibetan 漢藏 death views philosophically and theoretically.²

I. The General Characteristics of Eastern Views of Death and Funeral Customs

It is difficult to separate Eastern culture from Western with an accurate criterion. This is because there is a vague overlap between these two systems. For example, like Buddhism and Islam, one of the three major religions in the world, Christianity, the most fundamental faith mainstay in Western countries, also originated in Asia. For a convenient study, here we take Chinese and Indian cultures as two representatives of the Eastern culture. Accordingly, the burial and funeral culture and death perspective will also be based on several representative ideological systems within these two cultures such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, as well as some indigenous religions and customs that stem from these systems. It is interesting to note that traditional Tibetan culture and its burial culture are located right at the dividing line between ancient Chinese and Indian cultures.

I-1. The Basic Types of Eastern Burial Rites and Funeral Customs

In general, Eastern burial and funeral customs can be divided into the following seven types:

- (1) Burial in the earth. This is believed to be a result of earth worship. The fundamental thought is to find a final peace by interring a body into the earth. This culture still is most prevalent in Chinese Han areas and some Eastern Asia countries such as Japan, Korean, and Viet Nam that were influenced by Han customs and Confucianism.
- (2) Burial by fire. This may have come from a type of fire worship. The fundamental thought is to offer sacrifice to fire. This culture mainly prevails in Hinduism-dominated areas like India and Nepal. Hinduism worships fire to an extreme; they hold no rites without fire.

One of the three earliest gods in *The Four Vedas* was Agni, the god of fire. He finally runs through the duties of the following three gods (Trimurti): Brahma, the god who creates everything; Vishnu, the god who protects all the goodness; and Shiva, the god who destroys all the evils.

Hinduism believes that the only way for a soul to obtain a complete transmigration is to incinerate one's body by fire. Burial by fire has also prevailed in some minority regions in

²The Chinese word “漢藏” has three English translations: “Han-Tibetan”, “Sino-Tibetan”, and “Chinese-Tibetan”. However, all three are controversial and debatable, because not only are there academic issues, but also political issues. This article adopts the first one.

southwestern China. For example, in the Lagu minority area of Yunnan province, dead bodies are placed on a square pile of wood sticks. The are built in nine layers for male bodies, and seven for female bodies. If the ceremony does not proceed as it is supposed to, the souls of the deceased cannot leave the village, which will bring calamity to the villagers.

- (3) Burial by water. This may have come from a type of water worship. The fundamental thought is to clean up via holy water. This burial method is prevalent in Hinduism-dominated areas like India and Nepal, except when a few individual businesses that rely on water for living are present. Relating this with the aforementioned fire worship, Hindus believe that spreading the ashes of burned bodies into the holy river can help clean their souls; therefore, the souls can be better transmigrated or relieved. Chinese minorities also practice this ceremony. Tibetans adopt this method when they feel the deceased is not qualified for a celestial burial.
- (4) Burial by trees. This may come from a type of wood worship. The fundamental thought is to treat holy wood as a basis. Some minorities in Tibet and Yunnan used to place a body in some kind of container and hang it in a tree. They believe that this is the only way to assure the peace of the deceased's soul.
- (5) Burial by caves. This may come from a type of rock worship. The fundamental thought is to "be protected by holy rock."
- (6) Burial in the wild. This may come from a type of nature worship. This was popular in early civilizations, including ancient China. Part of it later was transformed into a more sophisticated ceremony: celestial burial. Burial in the wild has also been adopted in Inner Mongolia and some other minority regions in China.
- (7) Celestial burial, or sky burial. This is the type that we will be concentrating on below. This burial method comes from a type of celestial worship. The fundamental thought is to raise the soul to heaven.

Let it be noted that there are also some other unusual burial methods, but they are generally thought to be extensions or modifications of the aforementioned methods. Examples include the following: burial by tower, burial by cliff, burial by jar, burial by hanging coffin, burial by the surface, burial by water and fire, and burial by fire and earth.

I-2. The Basic Pattern of Eastern Death Views: Eleven Perspectives

These are the different death perspectives that are discussed in this article. Generally speaking, a death perspective is the theoretical basis for certain burial activities, while a burial method is a realization of a certain death perspective. Fundamentally, different Eastern death perspectives are influenced by the general culture, which is in turn composed of various natural and social elements, including location, religions, politics, and economics. These death perspectives can be summarized and combined into the following eleven categories.

- The first to be examined is the Perspective of Identity.

The Hindu "*Brahman-Atman*" and the Confucian "Heaven-Man" are two major manifestations. Hinduism believes that behind the entire universe, deities, and everything is the ultimate reality called "*Brahman*." Similar to the Daoist *Dao* in China, *Brahman* has no time and space, no beginning and end, no place, and no shape, yet it presents the extreme realm and highest ruler of the universe. *Atman* refers to the spiritual self or soulful self, rather than the physical self or experienced self, and it is an incarnation or a part of *Brahman*.³

The Chinese Confucian Heaven-Man emphasizes that a man of virtue who continuously perfects himself will eventually unite under the mandate of heaven, which presents the highest spiritually dominating force. A person who emphasizes Heaven-Man also does not fear death.

Mencius separates Daoism into "Dao of heaven" and "Dao of humans." He favors the consistency of the two. Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BC) advocates the "Harmony of Heaven and Man" and he believes that the "Will of Heaven" should form the basis of the world. Heaven creates the look of human beings, based on its own face, so human beings are doomed to belong to heaven. Cheng Yi tries to modify Dong Zhongshu's proposition in order to unite two into one by applying the Object-Self to prove the "Heaven-Man" approach instead. He believes that "the sages will unify Heaven, Earth, and All Things As One"; in other words, heaven and man are one entity from the beginning, and there is no need to artificially unite them. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) further confirms Cheng Yi's theory that "Heaven and Man must be unified as one, and Inwardness and Outwardness must be combined as one."

³The process of *Moksha* (the final liberation) means that a human being through transmigration (*Samsara*) is in a process of continuously approaching *Atman* toward *Brahman* via religious practices, with the two united in the end. This realm of *Brahman-Atman* absolutely detaches the painful transmigration of souls that is brought by the ordinary individual's physical death; thereby we are achieving the truest, kindest, and most beautiful spiritual freedom. One that pursues this kind of *Brahman-Atman* does not have any fear of death.

These aforementioned theories all try to demonstrate the inter-linked and harmonious relationship between heaven and man and hence provide deeper meaning to Confucianism's death perspective.

- The second addresses the Nihilistic Perspective.

Buddhism emphasizes “Three Signs of Being”: Anatta (No Atman or No Self), Anicca (Impermanence), and Dukkha (suffering or dissatisfaction). Sakyamuni created a brand new religion after criticizing Hinduism. One of the Hindu thoughts he strongly disagreed with was the aforementioned *Atman*. For this reason, he brought up an opposite thought called *Anatman*, or *No-Atman*, which can also be seen as “I am empty,” “Man is empty,” “Life is empty,” “Dharma is empty,” and “All things are empty.” Every ordinary human being is formed with the following five components: color; feeling, thinking, moving, and knowing, therefore it is impossible for such an eternal *Atman* to exist.

To a universal world, there exists no such man as an earliest creator. Similarly, there exists no dominant self or soul. Just like the notion that everything or every object is empty, man's soul or self does not exist, as well; hence, there is no need to talk about *Brahman-Atman*. Fundamentally speaking, the physical body of man is unreal. It comes from the void, and it will certainly return back to the void. Life and death are simply "nil to nil" and "empty to empty" in the end, there is nothing left to think of or fear.

What Confucianism has been advocating is to archive the ultimate freedom realm *Nirvana* through the final realization. *Nirvana* is actually the most thorough Sunyata (emptiness) after getting rid of the color realm.

- As the third we have the Perspective of Transmigration.

Hinduism's *Samsara* and Confucianism's release of souls from purgatory are the two major manifestations.⁴ Buddhism, in its latter form, accepts the concept of *Samsara* with a new and different explanation. It believes that every human being, no matter who he/she is and what class he/she belongs to, has an equal opportunity for a better next life.

However, whether or not a person can achieve this goal depends on his practice and kindness. In the original Buddhism, individuals with different Karma in this life Was seen as obtaining a different next life because of causal retributions. Birth, age, illness, and death are four miseries; affectionate lives originate from fate and keep on in their endless cycles; greed and naïveté result in wickedness, and they will be miserably punished. The

⁴For Hinduism, society consists of four basic classes: Brahman (sacristan), Sardili (royalty), Vaisya (peasant and small business class), and Sudra (slave). Other classes such as lower class servants or untouchables belong to certain substandard classes. According to religious doctrine, among all four classes, only the highest class Brahman can have opportunities to become part of *Brahman-Atman*, while other classes can only stay in *Samsara*. Individuals within the higher classes that have good religious practices might obtain better next lives, while the lowest-class servants do not even have a chance to reach *Samsara*. Hinduism believes that every life, including human beings, has a soul, and soul has an invisible Karma that is determined by affectionate activities. Affectionate souls can transmigrate from one dead affectionate body to another.

result of the punishment, in return, will produce another wave of wickedness and causal retributions. The alternation and repetition of wickedness and causal retributions result in an endless life-death, death-life, life-life, and death-death circulation.

In general, the concept of life and death can be divided into the following two levels: (1) the lower level with the current world's "separation between life and death," and (2) the higher level of a pure world in which the variation involving life and death is really incredible. Human lives are confined in a life-death world that consists of the so-called three kingdoms: desire, color, colorlessness, as well as the "six Dao": heaven, human, Asura, hell, hungry man, and beast. They rotate endlessly like a wheel.

- Fourth is the Perspective of Naturalism.

This is mostly demonstrated by Daoism's "let life and death run their own course" and Zen Buddhism's "life and death are controlled by fate." Different from Daoism as a religion, Daoism, as a philosophy, encourages nature and inaction. Death is a natural process that cannot be altered by any wish or power. It should be faced with calm and ease.

Laozi believes:

In looking at the people, we might see that in the space twixt birth and death -- one third follow life, and one third death, and those who merely pass from birth to death, constitute also one third of those we see.

The universe is the center of his world, so in the inner world of he who lives within the Tao there is no place where death can enter.

Coming into life and entering death, the followers of life are three in ten. Those whose life activity is their death ground are three in ten. Why is this? Because they live life grasping for its rich taste.

Weapons find no place to receive their sharp edges. Why? Because he has no death-ground. (Dao De Jing, Ch. 50, Stan Rosenthal's Translation)

Laozi's concept of "death" is close to the common interpretation. In other words, death is the final destination of a life. Zhuangzi emphasizes that "death and life are the same state," "life and death are a natural phenomenon such as day and night," and "Dao (the Way) does not have a beginning and end, but *Wu* 物 (Matter) really has life and death," "Where there is birth there must be death; where is death there must be birth," "Emptiness leaves no trace; change signifies no form. There is no life or death. Dao coexists with the heaven and the earth and communicates with both the internal and the external."

He regards life and death as the aggregation and dispersion of *Qi* 氣 (vitality): life as the aggregation of *Qi*, and death as the dispersion of *Qi*. For this reason, life is not happy, and death is not sad. While Zhuangzi was dying, his disciples intended to prepare many things to be buried with him. When he learned of this, Zhuangzi said, “The heaven and the earth will be my coffin. The sun and moon will be my jade rings. The stars will be my gems. Everything in the universe will be buried with me. Don’t I have a complete list already? Anything else will be redundant” (*Zhuangzi*, Ch. 33, 579).

The Book of Huainanzi 淮南子 inherits Zhuangzi's views of life and death, and points out that “life and death make all things,” and “life is like staying at a place temporarily, and death is like going home.” Accordingly, the life only comes out of a visible shape of *Qi*, and it will return to its invisible realm. An individual's life and death has absolutely no impact on nature; life does not enhance nature, nor does death.

Liezi 列子 also believes in a naturalist view of life and death, which is reflected in his phrase: “The life from those things which have life and death must die, but those things which produce living things will not end.”

Some Confucian key figures have their own natural life and death views. For example, Xunzi 荀子 says: “Life is the death of man; death is the end of man.” He thinks that life and death cannot go against the rule of nature. In addition, some neo-Confucian scholars such as Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi also treat life and death as a natural process, so there is no need to be fearful.

- The fifth perspective describes the Perspective of Morality.

This is mostly represented by Confucius: “die to preserve morality,” “valiant spirit and martyrdom,” “die to achieve virtue”, “rather die than surrender”, and so on. To Mencius, the perspective of life and death is built purely on the basis of ethics and morality. Morality is higher than life itself. Disobeying morality is worse than death.

Some such concepts are expressed through an awe-inspiring righteousness like Laozi's “People are not afraid of death, why make them fear death?” Zhuge Liang's 諸葛亮 (181-234) “Bend one’s back to a task until one’s dying day,” and Wen Tianxiang's 文天祥 (1236-1283); “No one can live forever; let me die with a loyal heart shining in the pages of history.”

Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-1151) said “One should be a hero among the people during one’s lifetime, and after death one should also be a hero among the ghosts after one’s

death,” while Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898) observed that “I do not regret my death, I am really very happy for it,” and Xia Minghan 夏明翰 (1900-1928) declared that “A head being cut does not matter, as long as I have the truth.”

Some people have advocate certain rules based on feudal ethics; examples exhort us to "rather die of hunger than beg for food", and "it is more important to preserve morals than to die of hunger." In Chinese traditional culture, there is also a saying that "the civil officials should die for a remonstrance, and the military generals should die in a fighting" This perspective is pushed to an extreme by Japanese's Bushido spirit, and became the spiritual mainstay of the fascistic militarism there.

- The sixth category involves the Perspective of Fatality.

As explained by Confucius' student Zixia 子夏, it is basically represented by the observation that "life and death are determined by fate, wealth and rank are made by heaven.” In Chinese Han traditional culture, people generally believe that their own life, death, happiness, and misfortunes are all pre-defined by fate. The king of hell, or *Yama*, determines the answers to questions such as how long one can live; when, where, and how to die; how long one should stay in hell; what kind of punishment one should suffer; when one can achieve *Samsara*; and what fate one will encounter in the next life.

- The seventh is the “Perspective of Eternity”.

Daoism's declaration that "flesh becomes a holy body after death" and "live forever" are its major manifestations. Chinese Daoism may be the only religion to believe that human beings can become deities and achieve immortality, and therefore escape death. This thought actually reflects people's fear towards death from a different dimension.

- The eighth type of view is the Perspective of Hierarchy.

This is mainly represented by Hinduism's Four Castes and Confucius' status hierarchy.

In ancient China, burial arrangements such as the funeral ceremony, coffin material, grave size, and even the title of the deceased are all dependent on the deceased's social class. According to *The Book of Rites*: "the death of the emperor can be called *Beng* 崩, the death of princes can be called *Hong* 薨, the death of high ranking officials can be called *Zu* 卒, the death of educated people can be called *Bulu* 不祿, and the death of the common people can be called *Si* 死.”

- The ninth is the Perspective of Contempt for Life.

This happens among ordinary people. Due to their weak mental ability, some cannot face reality and thereby opt for the negative attitude by escaping from this physical world.⁵ In general, Confucius allows suicide in the service of loyalty, filial duty, morality, and righteousness, as does Christianity, but Buddhism objects to the idea of suicide.

To Buddhists, suicide is considered a betrayal of their religious doctrine and a result of a lost, or lacking comprehension. Therefore, those who commit suicide cannot achieve the realm of nirvana.

- The tenth approach is the Perspective of Life Importance.

This is summarized by Confucius when he asks "how can you know death if you do not know life?" He thinks that one should concentrate on life, not death, as long as one is alive, and avoid such questions as the next life and soul.

- Finally, the eleventh category is the Perspective of the Fear of Death.

Its basic example is when one opts to "drag out an ignoble existence."

Other examples include "do not even mole crickets and ants want to live, let alone human beings?" and "rather live humbly than die of honor."

II. Tibetan Tantric Buddhism's Death View and Funeral Culture

Milarepa, a famous Tibetan poet saint, recites: "My religion is to live—and die—without regret." Generally, the religious doctrine of Tibet Buddhism or Lamaism combines Mahayana Buddhism, Hinayana Buddhism, Exoteric Buddhism, and Tantric Buddhism; but it considers Tantric Mahayana as its main stream. Early Tibetan Buddhism had different Sects, such as Red sect, Holy Sect, Flower Sect, White Sect, and so on. It was dominated later by Geluk (Yellow Sect).

Relevant Tibetan documents, Padmasambhava's *Book of the Dead* and Sogyal Rinpoche's, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* provide deep and detailed discussions about death. Most significantly, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* is a guide for the dead and dying. The first part, called *Chikhai Bardo*, describes the moment of death; the second part, *Chonyid Bardo*, deals with the states which supervene immediately after death; the third part, *Sidpa*

⁵This is especially true in the so-called "super suicide country"--Japan. Japan has one of the world's highest suicide rates, especially amongst the industrialized nations, and the Japanese government reported the rate for 2006 as being the ninth highest in the world. In 2009, the number of suicides rose 2 percent to 32,845 exceeding 30,000 for the twelfth straight year and equating to nearly 26 suicides per 100,000 people. (See *The Mainichi Daily News*, December 26, 2009.) This amounts to approximately one suicide every 15 minutes. Many cited depression, economic hardships and job-related concerns, according to the annual report by the National Police Agency.

Bardo, concerns the onset of the birth instinct and of prenatal events. Rinpoche dedicates his book “to all beings, living, dying, or dead. For all those who are at this moment going through the process of dying, may their deaths be peaceful and free of pain or fear.” (Rinpoche 1992, 366)

From the teachings of Tibetan tantric Buddhism and the two aforementioned documents, we can delineate the following five aspects of philosophical meanings of death.

II-1. The Ontological Significance of Death

According to Waddell, Buddhism is a highly philosophical religion, and Lamaism, though deeply tinged with non-Buddhist beliefs, still retains much of the loftier philosophy and doctrines of Primitive Buddhism and its earlier development. So, we must, in considering the metaphysical basis of the Lamaist doctrine, glance at the metaphysics of Buddha himself, as well as that of the Mahayana and later developments.

“And as Buddha’s philosophy is based upon his working theory of the Universe, our subject will fall conveniently under the headings of (a) Buddha’s Theory of the Universe, (b) his Metaphysics, and (e) the Metaphysics of the Lamas.” (Waddell 1971, 76) Waddell points out that the first link of the Ontological Chain begins at the instant when the mortal envelope is thrown off or changed, that is at “death.” This was termed by Buddha the stage of *Avidya*, which literally means “Want of Knowledge.” (Waddell 1971, 113) According to the legend, when he was very young, Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) was inwardly propitiating *Manujushri*. *Manujushri* is the ultimate reality and a bodhisattva associated with transcendent wisdom (*dharmadhatujnana*); his form as the “Destroyer of Death” is the incarnation of critical genius in its most adamant form. For him, “The ordinary world of naïve realism is summed up as ‘death,’ and this genius transcends it to reach the realm of the ‘deathless,’ enlightenment.” (Thurman 1991, 71-72)

Tibetan Tantric Buddhism emphasizes "causality from original emptiness." This means that all karma and dharma are from principal and subsidiary causality; it is in itself empty. It unifies "mystical language," "mystical body," and "mystical consciousness" of the early Indian Buddhist Tantric religion into a "mystical three-in-one," and changes the Hindu "unity and identity of Brahman and Atman" to "unity and identity of body and mind."

In its view, the universe, the natural world, human society, and even Buddha himself are formalized by the “Dharma of the Big Five Forms”, which covers “Earth,” “Water,” “Fire,” “Wind” and “emptiness,” and also by the “Dharma of Big Mind,” which is “Consciousness.”

The first Big Five and the second one together make “Big Six.” The first Big Five include “reasons,” “causes,” and “original perceptions,” and the second Big One includes “wisdom,” “effects,” “applying perceptions,” and “self-certification.” The realm of Dharma of form and the realm of Dharma of mind cannot be separated. Dharma of form

and Dharma of mind not only control the external world but also penetrate into the internal world of all people. Life and death of human beings are determined and dominated by Dharma of form as well as Dharma of mind. Therefore, the human body is dead, but his or her soul can be liberated in “unity and identity of form and mind.” The human body has the “external Big Five,” and also the “internal Big Five.” The two “Big Five” sets can interact with each other. Thus, the mind has the nature of Big Earth, and has inclusivity for various experiences. The mind has the nature of Big Water, and has continuity and plasticity. The mind has the nature of Big Fire, and has clarity and sensibility; it has the nature of Big Wind, and has non-stop activity. Finally, the mind has the nature of Big Emptiness, and has infinity.

According to Sogyal Rinpoche, the human body is developed by the mind via the “Big Five”; human beings can understand the external world which is formalized by the Big Five through the unity and identity of mind and body. In Tibetan teachings, life and death can be regarded as a whole, and they exist in the essential nature of mind truly and fundamentally. The mind can be divided into two fundamental states: a cloud level of the mind and an intrinsic nature of the mind. In the first state, we have birth and death, but in the second state, we are beyond birth and death. The second can be called the deathless, the unending nature of the mind. When one knows this deeper mind, one is in many ways beyond birth and death. When one is not mindful, he must be afraid of death.

Milarepa asserts that in the horror of death he took to the mountains, and meditated on the uncertainty and the hour of death. Now capturing the fortress of the deathless, the unending nature of the mind, all fear of death is done and over with. According to Rinpoche, from the Tibetan Buddhist point of view, we can divide our entire existence into four continuously interlinked realities:

- (1) life,
- (2) dying and death,
- (3) after death, and
- (4) rebirth.

These are “...known as the four *bardos*: (1) the natural *bardo* of this life, (2) the painful *bardo* of dying, (3) the luminous *bardo* of *dharma*, and (4) the karmic *bardo* of becoming. By this point you will have enough knowledge to be able to enter confidently the heart of the book: a comprehensive account, drawn from many different sources, of all of the four *bardos* and of all of the different stages of death and dying.”

The *bardo* teachings show us precisely what will happen if we prepare for death and what will happen if we do not. (Rinpoche 1992, 12-13) The word “*bardo*” connotes an intermediate state between death and the rebirth. *Bardo* also means different states of consciousness in life and death. The different *bardos* address the nature of the human mind. There are three different states of *bardo*: dying-death-rebirth.

In the process of dying, the clear light or the fundamental luminosity is called the bardo of dharmata. After death, the next state is the bardo of becoming. The bardo of dharmata is a subtle state of consciousness that only someone who is really trained in the advanced practice of meditation will become aware of. The bardo of becoming falls before rebirth in the transition period.

Bardo as a term covers the transition and the intermediate state of death and reincarnation, or can also be regarded as the continued transformation of a transitional entity between life and death. Bardo continues to involve the interchangeability of life and death. It is impossible to achieve enlightenment and salvation without the appearance and function of the bardo. Bardo offers the chance to achieve transmigration.

From the Tibetan Buddhist ontology of life and death, existence can be divided into four interrelated and mutually transforming processes, namely: birth, dying, death, after death, and reincarnation. Thus, these four transitional entities are known as: 1) the natural bardo of this life; 2) the suffering bardo of dying; 3) the bright bardo of Dharma; and 4) the karma bardo of getting rebirth. The first is the best stage to meet death in order to grasp the teachings and employ meditation practice as the way; the second serves to reveal the dying moment of the Mind, or "the light of the Earth"; the third is the experience of the light nature of mind, along with accompanying sound, color and light; the fourth is the process of rebirth and transmigration. In addition, there are two additional bardos: namely, the dreaming bardo and the meditative bardo. The former is a yoga practice in the night, while the latter is the practice in the day. In the bardo state, the body is completely abandoned and does not have any fear of dying, death, and after death. At this time, the "non-body" cannot be harmed.

People's fear of life and death, in fact, is based on an illusion, that is to believe there is an unreal self and an entity of the flesh attached by this "self." This illusion is the root of all the suffering. If this illusion cannot be eliminated after death, it will continue to cause suffering. This is why if people cannot get relief, they will continue to be trapped in the state of *samsara* (suffering).

II-2. The Epistemological Significance of Death

"It has been noticed that there is no direct connection between Mahayana epistemology and the bodhisattva doctrine." (Thomas 1933, 289) Thurman maintains that Sakya Pandita (1182–1251) rejects the tendency to relegate logic and epistemological teachings to the plane of mundane knowledge, and he has clearly linked the understanding of the thought of Dignaga (480-540) and Dharmakirti (7th century) with the path of liberation. By contrast, Tsongkahpa says that the contemporary view of logic as being of no use for liberation shows that such discrimination has persisted. (Thurman 1991, 58)

Waddell maintains that ignorance is the source of all misery. He says that knowledge of the nature of life is the only true path to emancipation from re-birth or Arhatship; and

practically the same dogma is formulated in the well-known stanza by Europeans “the Buddhist Greed.” (Waddell 1971, 133) Rinpoche continues in this line of thought: “Ignorance will rob us of the basis of the journey to enlightenment, and trap us endlessly in the realm of illusion, the uncontrolled cycle of birth and death, that ocean of suffering that we Buddhist call *samsara*.” (Rinpoche 1992, 14)

For Thurman, the “inner science” of Buddhism is based on a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of reality, on an already assessed, deep understanding of self and environment. In other words, it rests on the complete enlightenment of Buddha. “In my examination, the death view of Tibetan Tantric covers many epistemological issues.” (Thurman 1991b, 55) Further, while the dark room represents the traditional Buddhist mystical knowing process, the bright room represents the classic Western empirical knowing process. Visitors who have experienced two different rooms can sense what Niu Bo’s installation means through both knowing processes.

Generally, Mahayana Buddhism can be divided into two types: the Exoteric and the Esoteric.⁶ In contrast with the exoteric, the esoteric school emphasizes the Three Mystical Things: the body, the voice, and the mind of the Corporeal Buddha (*Tathagate*), which are universal, all things being from this mystical body, all sound from this mystical voice, and all thought from this mystical mind. All creatures are only individualized parts of the Corporeal Buddha, but illusion hides their Buddha Nature from them. The esoteric attempts to realize his Buddha Nature by physical signs and postures, by true words and meditations, so that “He may enter me and I Him,” which is the self-perfection, self-purification, self-transition, and self-salvation through the mystical understanding of *The Vairocana Sutra* and *The Diamond Sutra*. The three mystical things are associated with the Six Great Elements, i.e., the mystical body is associated with earth, water, and fire; the mystical voice with wind and space; and the mystical mind with cognition. The three mystical things are identical for all the living, so that even the fleshly body born of parents is the Dharmakaya (Essential body of Buddha). As one of the Esoteric Sects, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, from doctrine to practice, emphasizes a very unique mystified form, going between the internal and the external, spiritual and material, psychological and physical, and magic and natural powers. Its literature and its arts also fall under the esoteric cloak. For this Buddhism, *viññana* (consciousness) has very many implications; it may refer to wisdom, intelligence, knowledge, understanding, identification, cognition, perception, learning, intellect, reason, mind and so on.

For Chinese Buddhism, especially for the Consciousness-only school 唯識宗, there are “Eight Types of Consciousness (*viññana*).” These types include (1) “Eye-consciousness or seeing,” (2) “Ear-consciousness or hearing,” (3) “Nose-consciousness or smelling,” (4) “Tongue-consciousness or tasting,” (5) “Body-consciousness or tactile feeling,” (6) “Mind-

⁶The Exoteric is a so-called open school, comprising all the sects of Buddhism, except the esoteric sect. The Esoteric can be called the closed or Yoga school. Two basic Sutras of the esoteric school are *The Vairocana Sutra* (*The Great Sun Sutra*) and *The Diamond Sutra*.

consciousness or conceptualization (cognition)," (7) "Unpurified mind consciousness," and (8) "Storehouse consciousness."

The first five types of consciousness relate to the five senses; the sixth one is a combination of the perceptual and rational (cognitive) processes; the seventh one contains egoism and passionate individuality, such as selfish desire and foolish ignorance with which it pollutes the first six types of consciousness; and the last one is the final source or the fundamental root of the other seven. These eight interact and transform. Obviously, they have been applied to develop the Tibetan Tantric death view.

Tibetan Tantric Buddhism contemplates the immediacy of the uncertainty of death. When one starts to think that death could really happen at any moment, whether today or tomorrow, we are uncertain as to which will come first. When one starts really looking into death, one is looking into life itself. When the process of death begins, there is the outer as well as an inner dissolution of the human body. For Tibetan Buddhism, death is only a changed form of life. Life continues without interruption and it is always in a continuous state of change, from death to regeneration.

Shakyamuni (Buddha), founder of Buddhism, created a new religion by criticizing Hinduism. According to the legend, he, as a young prince, got the "*Four Passing Sights*": an aged man, a sick man, a dead man, and a homeless holy man. He realized that nobody could avoid old age, sickness, and dying. So, he decided to give up his secular life. He put forward a trilogy "*Three Signs of Being*" or "*Three Marks of Life*" to express his basic ideas. For him, all phenomena experience *Anicca* (impermanence), *Anatta* (no self), and *Dukkha* (suffering). Human life is *Dukkha* (unhappiness or dissatisfaction), which has two causes: ignorance and desire. Ordinary persons are bound by three fetters: passion, hatred, and stupidity; therefore, we need wisdom and love (or compassion) to break these fetters.

Since common people are ignorant and retain delusions about life and death, they put themselves into the suffering ocean of *samsara* (rebirth), and they adopt a confused and foolish attitude towards life and death. If one wants to be completely free and liberated, one must achieve the wisdom of Buddha and a deep understanding of the true meaning of life and death.

"Man is in the flow of life and death because of stupidity, ignorance and darkness....." This is one of the famous reflections of Padmasambhava. Tibetan Buddhism, like most Buddhist factions, recognizes that death is a natural, normal, inevitable process of cause and effect, but also states that it is not an absolute end. It emphasizes the practical experience of death, and calls for the inner experience of the dying process through meditation. A gradual dying process is an interruption of life by death in a constant process of enlightenment; in fact, it is the beginning of the highest state of liberation.

Some eminent monks continue to seek a particular path to enlightenment, to merge their own inner nature and truth of the void into one. The dying consciousness of dharma

through death is one of the highest mystical experiences to achieve enlightenment. In fact, even at a very young age, everyone should face death, and begin to explore the true meaning and connotation of death. To understand death deeper is to realize salvation closer. Tsong khapa notes the dissonance between the knowledge that everyone will eventually die and the universal conviction that “I will not die today.” With such an attitude, he claims that one will “concern oneself only with the affairs of this life and will not engage in religious practice.” (Lopez 1997, 423).

The understanding of death enlightens the mind. The process leading to release is the process of facing death, which constantly relates to one's own nature of mind. If one does not understand the nature of the mind, or has only daily experiences, surely he will know nothing about his own death and afterlife. Understanding the nature of the mind is the deepest understanding of the inner nature of reality.

The truest mind is the complete enlightenment of the Buddha mind, which was passed down from Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Arhats, and all ancient *eminent* monks. One must know this mind of Buddha to achieve the final state of Nirvana. Only when free can the mind completely abandon the physical body. Bardo experiences are also possible even in one's lifetime. In fact, every stage and period of life can be called bardo. Wisdom and ignorance frequently appear simultaneously in the human mind. One must constantly choose the wise mind, and freed from death, but if one chooses the foolish mind, he will still be in the sea of *Dukkha* (suffering) and *Samsara* (rebirth). Wisdom is the experience and knowledge of the light, which is acting in every moment during one's lifetime. Bardo -- in the dying process -- will appear in all manifestations of the mind, such as in dreams.

Padmasambhava asks us to repeat the following verses: when the Uncertain Experiencing of Reality is dawning upon me here, with every thought of fear or terror or awe set aside, (one should say) “May I recognize whatever [visions] appear, as the reflections of my own consciousness; May I know them to be of the nature of apparitions in the Bardo. When at this all-important moment [of opportunity] of achieving a great end, may I not fear the bands of Peaceful and Wrathful [Deities], my own thought-forms.” (Padmasambhava 1957, 103)

The cognitive methods of understanding life and death greatly depend on the “perspective of *Karma*,” which can bring awareness of diversity and complexity. You may regard this world as paradise; you can also see it as hell.⁷

Padmasambhava then suggests: “Let knowledge and mind be a road to verify the enlightened consciousness, to put my awareness into the void of the original sensation,

⁷For example, by six different constraints, the six types of lives would have completely different perceptions: human beings regard a river as a source of water for drinking and washing; fish sees it as home; gods perceive it as the nectar or good wine which can bring happiness to them; Asura attributes it to the tears; starved devils treat it as sepsis; prison ghosts say that it is the melting of the magma. Therefore, we know that all "Perspectives of Karma" are illusory. If so, what is the reality of life and death? Human beings must be rid this illusion which is accumulative and enhanced from one generation to another.

when I leave this flesh body integration; then, I will know it is a temporary illusion." (Padmasambhava 1957, 284)

In *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Padmasambhava combines "consciousness" and death. For him, the process of death is actually a "transformation of consciousness." Accordingly, if when dying, one is familiar with this state, the wheel of rebirth is stopped and liberation is instantaneously achieved. However, such spiritual efficiency is so very rare that the normal mental condition of the dying person is unequal to the supreme feat of holding on to the state in which the Clear Light shines. There follows a progressive descent into the lower states of the Bardo existence, and finally rebirth.

Immediately after the first state of *Chikhai Bardo* comes the second stage, when consciousness leaves the body and says to itself. "Am I dead, or am I not dead?" without being able to determine. The believers should apply a method of self-transmigration through the observation of death, and examine the signs of dying. After doing this, they should immediately move to the transformation of consciousness, and also memorize this process, and then they can realize liberation.

After the last breath, the vitality or spiritual power of the dead falls into the wisdom of the *chakras* (wheel). The knower of the spirit may understand the fundamental lights. When this life force or spiritual power is back to the left and right channeling pulse, the bardo immediately appears. The dead person's light is shining, its nature is empty, and it reaches pure consciousness. At this moment, there is neither life nor death, which is the infinite light of *Amitabha*.

II-3. The Ethical Significance of Death

For Buddhism, desire or greed is one of the two predominant causes of human suffering. *Karma* is one of the most important concepts of Buddhism. There is the "universal karma" and also the "individual karma." The former is the nature of human beings, the latter is "self" with a vastly different personality. Common people normally do not know their identity, because of greed and ignorance; they regard the false identity as the real identity that is called "self". For this reason, humans are concerned with the "self" as the final definition of life and death. What is called life becomes a life of "self"; similarly, what is called death becomes a death of "self." This is the reason why the human being cannot be freed from *samsara* (rebirth).

In order to be released, individuals must purify their *karma*, that is, they must eliminate negative karma or bad karma. As we pass from life to death, we find a continuous process of rejection of the illusory self and the purification of karma. Padmasambhava claims: "Now dying has come to me, I will give up all desire and dedication." According to Tibetan Buddhism, death with a peaceful mind will stimulate a virtuous seed and a fortunate rebirth, but death with a disturbed mind will stimulate a non-virtuous seed and an unfortunate rebirth. D. S. Lopez says: "...the death that Tsong khapa considers is not

the death of a noble savage or the cultured despiser, but the death that is the end of a life lived within easy access of the soteric dharma, a life but rarely lived and, once ended, unlikely to be encountered again.” (Lopez 1997, 423)

II-4. The Esthetic Significance of Death

For the followers of Tibetan Buddhism, the exercise of death in religious practice can achieve a sense of beauty from the dying process, which can be an extremely wonderful enjoyment. Passing away (*Parinirvana*) for eminent lamas is a symbol of the final liberation or complete awakening from the dirty, ugly world.

Parinirvana originally means "complete quiescence," which implies a release from karma and samsara. It is synonymous with Nirvana, which is regarded as the highest ideal of Buddhism. Accordingly, the death of Buddha was called Nirvana.

The followers of Tibetan Buddhism do not celebrate the birthday of the master monks, but rather they celebrate their “passing away”- - the moment of the most profound enlightenment.

Buddha-nature is concealed by the flesh; once the body gets abandoned, the Buddha-nature certainly would be illuminated. This is the realm of the highest truthfulness, goodness, and beautifulness. For Buddhism, there are Six Paths of Reincarnation or Six Paths of Rebirth, which is a key concept of the cycle of death and rebirth stemming from Hinduism.

Accordingly, the first is The Realm of Hell; the second is The Realm of Hungry Ghosts; the third is The Realm of Beasts; the fourth is The Realm of Demons; the fifth is The Realm of Humans; and the sixth is The Realm of Heaven.

The Realm of Heaven is filled with pleasure; the Deva or deities are powerful; some govern celestial kingdoms; most live in delightful happiness and splendor; they live for countless ages, but even the Deva belong to the world of suffering (*samsara*) -- for their powers blind them to the world of suffering and fill them with pride -- and thus even the Deva grow old and die; some say that because their pleasure is greatest, so too is their misery. According to Tibetan Buddhist sutras, the Realm of Heaven is most beautiful -- there are many gods living in this place, they are very arrogant, voluptuous, extravagant, and dissipative, but they never pay attention to moral and religious practice. As a result, when death comes, their bodies begin to rot. The gods’ wives and concubines fear and despise the ugly dying process of their husbands; at most, they stand far away and throw flowers to them; and perhaps they pray for them to be reincarnated as a god again in order to revive the old scenery. However, all efforts are hopeless and useless, which can only make these gods more painful, lonely, and ugly until they die completely.

Although the Realm of Heaven seems far from the realm of “direct suffering,” it cannot help gods get their own authentic nature. Despite being so beautiful, the Realm of Humans

can only offer a real understanding of authentic nature from *Dukkha* (suffering), and can let the spirit be sublimated, and then one can be inspired to realize the ultimate beautiful light. The “beauty” of death is based on the cognitive truth and moral goodness.

II-5. Logical Significance of Death

More importantly, one of the Tibetan innovations, which probably was started by certain Buddhist masters and continued by Tsongkhapa, was “the use of the dialectical (prasanga) type of argumentation even in logical or ethical philosophical realms, instead of the formal, positive syllogisms that were traditional in India.”

Accordingly, Tsongkhapa concentrated on the logical and epistemological teachings of Dignaga and Dharmakirti. He memorized “their several thousand verses, devouring their vast commentarial literature, as well as learning the methods of using the analytic teaching in forensic debate in the great schools of the Sakyas and Kagyas.” (Thurman 1991, 57-67)

For Buddhism, the twelve-fold chain of causation examines the existence of human beings as the outcome of a many dimensional process which explains the formation and transformation of life, death, and rebirth. This law of causality can be applied to determine the cause of *dukkha*.

The twelve links are:

- 1) Ignorance or Darkness;
- 2) Volitional Fabrications;
- 3) Consciousness;
- 4) Name-and-Form;
- 5) Six Senses (the five physical senses and the mind);
- 6) Contact;
- 7) Feeling, Awareness or Experience;
- 8) Craving or Desire;
- 9) Clinging;
- 10) Becoming;
- 11) Birth or rebirth; and
- 12) Old Age and Death.

Significantly, the twelve-fold chain of causation establishes the connections between action (karma), rebirth and causality, and it helps us to understand the wisdom of deathlessness. In general, Buddhism regards life and death as a whole, two links of a continuous cycle of cause and effect.

“Death” has Impermanence and multiple dimensions. It is the beginning of another life form, but also it is a mirror reflecting the overall meaning and significance of life. For the followers of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, “death” has different levels and styles. Some

people die painfully, some die peacefully and quietly, and some die with "the freedom of movement."

To Tibetan Tantric Buddhists, human consciousness upon death is one of the causes for the development of a new *skandhas* (aggregation). Right after the death of a person, a new one comes into being. This is like the flame of a dying candle; it can serve to light the flame of another. The consciousness of the new one is a causal continuum from the old one. Transmigration is the effect of *karma*.

II-6. Overview of Death

Tsong khapa provides an exposition of how to cultivate the mindfulness of death, considered within the rubric of "the three roots and the nine branches." First is contemplation of the certainty of death. Second is the fact that The Lord of Death will come and cannot be avoided. Third, our lifespan cannot be prolonged and diminishes unceasingly. Fourth, there is no time for religious practice. Then, too, contemplation as to the time of death is uncertain and our lifespan in our world is uncertain.

Moreover, the causes of death are very many and the causes of remaining alive are few. The time of death is uncertain because the body is very fragile. Contemplation at the time of death is not of benefit except for religious practice. Friends provide no benefit at the time of death; neither does wealth nor one's body. (Lopez 1997, 424)

So Tsong khapa gives us a complete, complex view of death based on metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical perspectives. The first of the three roots begins with the consideration of the fact that death cannot be avoided, that no matter who one is or where one hides or when one lives; death cannot be escaped by strength, by wealth, or through magic.

The second root is the most important of the three. The first branch stemming from this root is the fact that our lifespan in this world is indefinite. According to Buddhist cosmology, the universe consists of four continents surrounding a central mountain. Our world is the southern continent, called Jambudvīpa. In the other three continents, Videha in the East, Kuru in the north, and Godaniya in the west, lifespan is a definite. However, in our world lifespan is indefinite. At one point in the far distant past, lifespan on our "continent" was measureless, but today it is one hundred years. It is gradually decreasing for us such that eventually the longest life will be but ten years in length. The final root addresses the benefits of religious practice. "Only religious practice provides a defense against death." (Lopez 1997, 425)

III. Comparisons between Han and Tibetan Funeral Cultures

III-1. Han Funeral Culture

Due to the influences and restrictions of a specific background, the Han practices, for the majority of the Chinese nation, possesses the following five characteristics of burial:

First, there is “Burial by Earth”. In ancient China, there were originally two different viewpoints toward souls after death: one of which maintained that the dead physical body can bind ghost souls. For those with this view, the body was to be quickly rid of in order to let the ghost souls go to hell. Thus, they preferred methods such as burial by earth, by water, in the sky, or even by eating them to leave no physical body behind. Mencius claimed that in ancient times, some people discarded the bodies of their dead parents in ravines, a kind of burial out in the open. Mozi also mentioned that people in the Yiqu region in Western Thailand liked to burn the bodies with firewood.

Another viewpoint held that the ghost souls will remain with their bodies after death, so the bodies should be carefully settled down and preserved with coffins made by different materials such as wood, jar, or rocks. China during the latter Han period generally accepted this viewpoint. The perspective rested on the five elements; that earth is the central element among the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth.

Ancient Chinese ideology was relatively limited, thinking of the sky as round and the earth as square. People thought that souls might be raised to the height of the sky while bodies remained where they lay. The ancient Han belief was that, except for those very few saints who could attain immortality, all others are destined to go to the nether world. In a sense, it was natural to them that people would live in this world after birth and live in the nether world after death.

According to a theory of Daoism, heaven has 36 layers and hell has 18. Ordinary people will all go to the nether world after death but then they might be treated differently and have alternate opportunities of being transmigrated. The good can move to higher levels, but the bad go to lower levels, and the worst will be forced to the 18th level of hell and will never be reincarnated. In that sense, Daoism promotes burial by earth.

Confucians favor this method as well because their economic ideology is based on agriculture; they believe that earth is the ultimate source of everything; and they value the patriarchal clans that stemmed from geographic territories and blood lineage. The method of burial by fire has also been popular since Buddhism was first introduced to China. Rulers of the Ming and Qing dynasties banned this method, however, forcing it to decline gradually. As a result, most Buddhist groups have accepted the burial by earth method. In Chinese traditional culture, one of the worst curses is "dead without a place to stay".

There is also the method of "Burial with Luxury". The Chinese burial culture has been influenced by various ideological sects, but mostly by that of Confucianism. In general, Confucius favors burial with luxury. This has been criticized seriously but reasonably by Moism. In addition, Xunzi荀子 also opposes the idea of a luxurious burial for a luxurious rebirth. Confucius stresses etiquette and rite. *The Book of Spring and Autumn* says: "Li禮 (propriety) is the teaching of Heaven, the justice of Earth, and the practices of People".

To Confucians, this rite should exist anytime, anywhere, for all people. Confucius maintains that during a person's lifetime, it is important to follow *Li* (propriety); after death, the burial and the memorial are also to follow *Li*. Both etiquette and ritual ceremonies are of great importance. They are time-consuming, and they call for expensive arrangements in the whole process of funeral and burial. The rules apply to both emperors and ordinary people.

These etiquette and rite ceremonies include more than twenty different steps such as final valediction, shower, obituaries, filial meals, soul recall, crying the spirit, and funeral lamps. In the distant past, people emphasized that "when a parent dies, the children should go into mourning for three years." Therefore, the three-year sacrificial ceremony is divided into the small style and the big style, in which the former takes one year while the later takes two years. *The Book of Rites* defines the funeral rules and regulations exactly and systematically. During the Tang Dynasty funeral activities required that children are banned from attending any weddings or entertainment without wearing their filial clothes. The offenders are considered to be anti-filial, which is one of the ten listed evil behaviors. If someone gives birth to a child during this period, the person will face a one-year sentence.

One interesting and important criterion of the luxurious burial is the coffin and outer coffin. The coffin is the final resting place of the deceased and the outer coffin is used to protect the coffin. *The Book of Changes* claims that in ancient times the dead were buried in the wild, and it is reported that later sages changed this by using coffins. According to some historical records, tile coffins prevailed during times of early antiquity, such as those represented by Yao 堯 and Shun 舜.

Back in the Xia dynasty, people used to lay bricks around a coffin. The coffin material was gradually changed to wood during the Shang dynasty. The rank of the coffin is determined by the rank of the deceased. It is said that the rank of emperor is the highest - - level four; dukes or princesses under an emperor -- level three; senior officials -- level two, and literati and officialdom -- level one. "The grave tells the richness levels" is a very serious phrase among the Han nationality.

A grave is specifically built for the peace of the deceased. A tomb is a projecting label or symbol in front of the grave. Based on historical records, the ancient deceased in Yin-Shang times had only tombs. Graves emerged gradually after the Zhou dynasty, but the specifics of the graves were determined by the deceased's ranks: graves of the nobility were built as a hillock; other officials' graves were *Feng* (Sealing).

Graves and tombs only are not enough in the Han tradition. The family members must plant trees, set up a tombstone, even a memorial gateway and rooms, and they must burn paper currency specifically made for the deceased to show their respect and to assure that the deceased live comfortably in another world. The custom of burial by luxury was blindly respected by everyone, from emperor to ordinary people. All wanted to possess a private and designated graveyard before they died. Extreme examples can be found at the imperial graves of different Chinese dynasties: the 13 emperors' graveyards in the Ming Dynasty extend to 156 *li* (78 km) long; the dimension of the Qing Dong Ling in Hebei Zunhua 遵化 contains 125 x 20 square km. Any economic and productive activities were absolutely forbidden within these areas, which resulted in a huge waste of resources.

The custom is still respected by ordinary people, but on a much smaller scale. The size of an acceptable grave is usually three by two square meters. People believe that whatever they enjoy in this life can continue after death. Therefore, the more luxurious the funerals and burials are, the more beneficial to the deceased. The results are a vast waste of productive lands, and of human, material, and financial resources spent on building these cemeteries and ancillary facilities. Additionally, many valuable and precious objects are buried with the dead, and thus wasted; plus, there is time spent uselessly on extensive funeral ceremonies and after-death mourning, which impacts the family's normal life and career. Finally, there is the use of different after-death technical arrangements among different ranks, including make-up, clothing, and anti-rot applications. Funerals and burials are an especially heavy burden on the poor.

Many sad stories, for instance, are told of those who have to sell themselves to bury their father or mother appropriately, as can be seen from ancient Chinese literature.

Finally, there is the issue of "Burial with Family Ancestry." The most important concept in Chinese Han traditional patriarchal culture is "ancestry". This concept is actually a type of divinization of the feudal clan authority. "Ancestry", as an idol of "ancestry worship", can bless and protect the continuity of the family's younger generations. "Ancestry" involves the family's blood relationships, financial relationships, each family member's status, honorable and respectable relationships, plus the origin, spread, evolution, and extension of these many relationships. "Ancestry" uses a fixed surname as a symbol of generation extension.

Accordingly, an "ancestry grave" is the most important concept in Han traditional burial culture. The ancestry's graveyard is the gathering place for all generations. The level of its size, scale, location, and maintenance directly reflects the status of the family's younger generations. The attitude of descendants towards the ancestry grave also is a token of their fundamental filial pieties.

Based on the Han tradition, the first thing done when a person becomes rich is to rebuild or repair his ancestry's grave. The worst humiliation to anyone is a digging out of his ancestry's grave. The ancestry grave and its ancillary facilities become to many Chinese an intersection between traditional and worldly cultures. They convey a series of rules in funeral, burial, and sacrificial ceremonies, and they therefore provide a direct guidance to different utilitarian relationships such as blood lineage, honorability and respectability, and family seniority. An American scholar pointed out sharply that all aspects of Chinese traditional culture, especially the burial fashions, are shadowed under the ancestry.

Next, there is the concept of "Burial with a Whole Body." The Chinese Han traditional culture believes that one's body and hair comes from heaven and parents, so neither can or should be damaged. One of the worst possible deaths is to separate the head from the body. According to a superstitious tale, the dead with broken parts results in a broken soul, hence cannot be transmigrated. There has been an important custom: if a deceased, for some reason, is missing certain part(s) of the body, his family members have to pay for an experienced craftsman to fix it with wood or porcelain or other materials in order to bury him with a whole body.

Finally, there is a belief concerning "Returning the Body Home." An important issue in the Chinese Han funeral culture is that "Falling leaves finally return to their roots." This means a "return home after death." One's body should be returned to one's homeland no matter where he passes away. Otherwise, his soul cannot achieve peace and be transmigrated.

III-2. Tibetan Funeral Culture

Tibetan burial customs are almost directly opposite to these Han customs.

Here we find different perspectives and practices.

A first concerns the Celestial Burial. Opposite to the earth burial of the Han Chinese, Tibetan burial culture promotes celestial burial. As a matter of fact, in early Tibetan history, the royal and nobles used earth burial. With the advent of Buddhism, however, their burial method was gradually changed. Because of the dual influences of Tibetan spirituality and Buddhism, plus certain specific cultural and geographical conditions, celestial burial gradually became the most important burial method in Tibet.

A second difference involves the perspective of Burial at Ease. Compared with earth burial, it is impractical to have a luxurious celestial burial. Celestial burial need not waste

any fixed piece of land for the deceased; secondly, it need not waste any human, material, and financial resources to build a tangible graveyard; thirdly, it need not waste any valuable objects to be buried with the dead; fourthly, all the technical procedures, despite the rank of the deceased, are the same and simplistic in nature; and lastly, its burial ceremony is not at all complicated and tedious.

A third difference is the Tibetan view on the Extermination of the Body. Opposite to Han burial culture's "perspective of whole body," Tibetan celestial burial culture promotes the extermination of the deceased's body. The more complete the better. The whole purpose of the celestial burial operator is to assure that every piece of the body gets eaten up and consumed by flying eagles. Any remains mean that the soul has not yet become rid of the bounds of the body, and it needs to be helped by the lama's ceremony of transmigration.

Fourth, we find a difference in the Tibetan perspective of Non-Ancestry. In Tibetan culture, except for certain nobles, ordinary Tibetans do not have inherited surnames. As a result, they do not make divine their own family ancestries as the Chinese do. Finally, the perspective of Local Burial differs from that of the Chinese. In Tibetan culture, there is no such sense as a "return home after death." Since the ultimate purpose of the burial is to let the soul rise to heaven, and since heaven is enormous, there is no need to have to return the body to a specified homeland.

Thus, a comparison of Han and Tibetan burial cultures shows that the former possesses man-made, utilitarian, and heavy material constraints, while the latter contains natural, unconventional, and plain, spiritual tendencies.

III-3. The Practical Meaning of the Death View of Tibetan Tantric as Shown in the Practice of Celestial Burial

Any burial culture and its associated death perspectives are tied to its nation's natural existing conditions, patterns of economic activities, and its corresponding world and religious outlooks. The adoption and practice of a certain burial method is also a result of a long-term psychological adaptation.

The Tibetan nation, whose members live on the world's rooftop all their lives, can be considered a nation that is close to the vault of heaven. Due to its vast and open plateau, the plain and unsophisticated agricultural and grazing activities, and the area's poor and difficult living conditions, the Tibetans gradually evolved to their own unique burial cultural and death perspective.

A popular Tibetan fairytale says that the graves of all seven kings were originally in heaven, not on the ground. This is because their bodies were unified with heaven once they were dismembered. That fairytale became the dream of many people. Additionally, the symbol of Tibet is a white lion who occupies the peak of the highest mountain in the

world; the Tibetans consider eagles, which live in mountains, to be the most divine animal. This type of folklore lays a foundation for the method here called the celestial burial.

T Tibetans today and in the past have widely accept this burial method. The only people who are not qualified for such burial are criminals; their bodies are usually thrown into a river instead. American scholar R. A. Stein conducted some research on the origin of the Tibetan celestial burial. He thinks that the Iranians once practiced celestial burial, so did Zoroastrians in the Alexander the Great period. However, he was uncertain whether they had any influence on Tibet.

According to records from the Tang Dynasty (618-907), there were three burial methods in India at that time: fire, celestial, and water. Therefore, because of Tibet's geographic closeness to India, its celestial burial culture could have been influential. Tibetan Buddhism adapted some indigenous religious rites which include the worship of heaven, earth, wood, water, snow, and all natural objects, especially all the deities and souls that are around mountains and rivers. The Tibetan indigenous religion believed that heaven is the utmost limit, rising from the ground and the underground. These three realms can only be reached and occupied by deities and souls. The sun, moon, and stars are deities of light, who can raise souls to heaven. For this reason, indigenous religion believers have paid more special attention to worshipping heaven, and all their relevant rites and ceremonies are designed to unite heaven, earth, and human beings.

Tibetan indigenous religion originally had diverse burial forms and these included using earthen or jar burials, ground burials, and celestial burials. The belief was, and remains, that the deceased's soul can rise to heaven once the body gets completely devoured by eagles or other animals. This local religion has heavily influenced Tibetan customs. In a sense, Tibet's celestial burial and its death perspective are based on both Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and the indigenous religion.

T Tibetans generally believe that souls have to be completely separated from their tangible bodies before they can rise to heaven. How can this separation occur? One of the most important procedures is to dismember the body, break the parts into pieces, and let them disappear thoroughly.

T Tibet's celestial burial is different from burial in the wild as practiced during the ancient Han period in China or by others such as those from Inner Mongolia. In a sense, open burial is a crude and shoddy copy of the celestial burial, while the celestial burial is a more sophisticated and delicate format of open burial. Burial in the open involves placing the whole body on the open ground and let animals and birds consume it. The whole process can be long and some remains may be left there for a long time.

T Tibet's celestial burial overcomes these flaws and combines the mysterious with a quick and efficient procedure. Compared to burial by fire, cremation, it is more beneficial to the environment. Fire burial is more hygienic, more economic, and saves more land resources

than earth burial, but it could cause air pollution during the burning process. The placement of ash is another problem. Based on some studies, scattering ashes in rivers and lakes may contaminate water resources and aquatics.

In Han areas of China, the deceased's ashes need to be buried in a grave, so the burial method actually becomes a combination of fire and earth. Two mediums are needed to exterminate the tangible body and raise the soul to heaven thoroughly: celestial burial specialists and eagles. Celestial burial specialists are trained professionals and are familiar with the structures of the human skeleton systems. They can dismember all pieces of a body with a knife professionally, mix them with Tibetan butter and glutinous rice cake, and place them on a celestial burial platform to feed eagles. Eagles, who are worshipped by the Tibetans as a symbol of divinity, are long accustomed to this "feeding" method. Homeless dogs will clean up all the remains after the process.

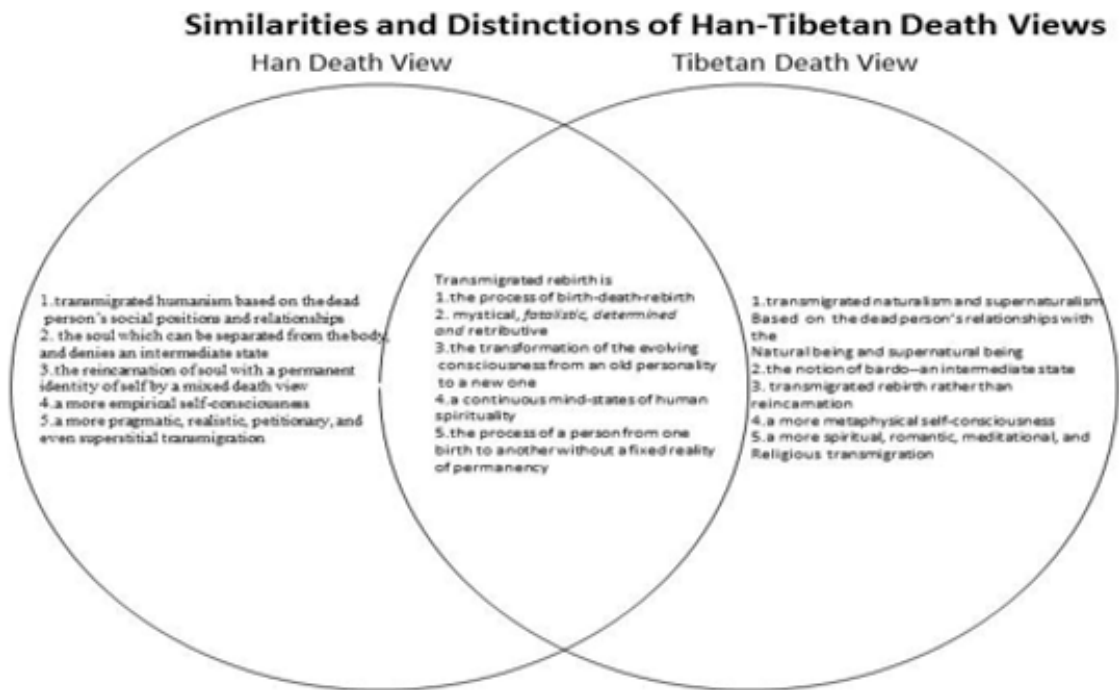
The objective outcomes of the celestial burial methods found in Tibet are that death (1) becomes a certain transformation of two existing objects: a broken body and eagles' organic excreta; (2) offers the most beneficial burial format for environmental protection; and (3) becomes a most inexpensive burial format.

There are different kinds of prejudices or biases manifested against the celestial burial: one may be described fairly as discrimination – that the celestial burial is considered to be uncivilized, brutal, benighted, and backwards; another is that the burial ceremonies have been seen as a monstrous and unusual phenomenon or tourist attraction; a third is that the ceremonies are tolerated and protected by local government mainly to comply with policies involving minority rights. The simple subjective desire of the celestial burial culture is to rise to heaven, while its objective result is to return to nature in a most thorough, most unconventional, and most natural fashion. In a democratic nation, burial method is every individual's free choice under certain rules. Of course, celestial burial requires some natural preconditions such as a vast and open plateau similar to Tibet. In a sense, if we leave aside cultural prejudices, psychological barriers, geographic limits, and some technical specifics, celestial burial might be considered as the most reasonable and most beneficial to human development of all burial methods.

Original Buddhism rejects the doctrine of reincarnation and the transmigration process or movement of birth-death-rebirth from one life to another. Two key critiques of Hinduism by Śākyamuni are the ideas of *anatta* which means no atman, "no self" or "no soul," and *anicca* which means "impermanence" or "constant changeability." For this reason, since "there are no souls," it is impossible to produce the "reincarnation of souls" from this life to the next life. Normally, reincarnation means the transmigration of the soul from one body to another after death. Interesting enough, later, both Han Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism emphasize transmigration without the "irreducible soul."

Conclusion

Although both Han and Tibetan belong to the same state and share a long-standing historical relationship with a certain overlap between the two geographic areas, they obviously have very different cultural traditions. These two traditions show absolutely opposite characteristics in terms of their burial cultures. We may use the following diagram to compare Han and Tibetan death views.



Traditionally, both “death views” and “funeral cultures” of the Han and Tibetan people are based on the doctrine of mystical transmigration. They emphasize:

- 1) Transmigrated rebirth from this life to the next involves the process of birth-death-rebirth;
- 2) Transmigrated rebirth is mystical, fatalistic, determined and retributive;
- 3) Transmigrated rebirth is the transformation of the evolving consciousness from an old personality to a new one with certain mystical connections;
- 4) Transmigrated rebirth is a continuous mind-state of human spirituality; and
- 5) Transmigrated rebirth is the process of a person from one birth to another without a fixed reality of permanency.

However, there are certain important distinctions between the Han and Tibetan people that can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The former advocates “transmigrated humanism and super-humanism,” which focuses on the dead person’s social positions, social functions, and social relationships in this life and the next, while the latter believes in “transmigrated naturalism and supernaturalism,” which pays more attention to the relationship between the dead person with the natural being and supernatural being;
- 2) The former advocates the notion that the soul or spirit can be separated and detached from the body, and denies an intermediate state, but asserts that incarnation is immediate. By contradistinction, the latter believes in the notion of bardo -- an intermediate state;
- 3) The former advocates the reincarnation of the soul with a permanent identity of self, using a mixed view drawn from a combination of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism; but the latter believes in “transmigrated rebirth” rather than “reincarnation”;
- 4) The former advocates a more empirical self-consciousness; the latter believes in a more metaphysical self-consciousness; and
- 5) The former advocates a more pragmatic, realistic, petitionary, and superstitious transmigration; but the latter believes in a more spiritual, romantic, meditational, and religious transmigration.

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