

Living towards death: funeral reform from the perspective of folklore studies

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Abstract. Funeral customs constitute an essential component of social customs and culture—practices and norms established, shaped, and perpetuated by the living for the deceased, representing a core dimension of social ritual. Current academic research on funeral reform in China has been predominantly concentrated in the fields of history, policy, and law, while the core folkloristic themes inherent in funeral reform—such as cultural change and the transformation of customs and practices (*yifeng yisu*)—have received comparatively insufficient scholarly attention. Building on a systematic review of the history of funeral reform in China and a critical assessment of the existing state of scholarship, and drawing on theoretical frameworks in folklore studies, this paper situates funeral reform within the domain of folkloric culture and everyday life through three analytical dimensions: the formation patterns of "folklore," the right of folkloric subjects to make value judgments, and the de-subjectification of folkloric knowledge. Through these lenses, the paper seeks to uncover the deeper cultural significance of funeral reform and illuminate its connections with cultural consciousness and social governance. The analysis suggests that funeral reform cannot be reduced to a purely technical or administrative matter, but must be understood as a complex cultural transformation deeply embedded in the moral frameworks, emotional worlds, and community identities of local populations.

Keywords: funeral reform, folklore studies, subjectivity

1. Introduction

This paper addresses this lacuna by drawing on key folklore studies frameworks—including the formation of "folklore," the value-judgment right of folkloric subjects, and the de-subjectification of folkloric knowledge—to examine funeral reform as a complex cultural transformation embedded in local morality, emotions, and community identity. It is structured as follows: Section 1 overviews the history of China's funeral reform; Section 2 critically reviews existing literature; Section 3 conducts a folkloristic analysis along the three theoretical dimensions; and Section 4 presents conclusions and policy implications.

2. Historical evolution of funeral reform in China

"Funeral culture has manifested in markedly different forms across different stages of human history, broadly passing through five stages: abandonment of the body, grass burial, shallow interment, communal burial, and

hierarchical burial [1]." Since the Zhou Dynasty, when *li* (ritual propriety) was formally institutionalized as the normative framework for mortuary practices, Chinese funerary rites have oscillated between two competing orientations—frugal burial (*bozang*) and elaborate burial (*houzang*)—shaped by the governing philosophies of ruling regimes, prevailing ideological currents, and the influence of foreign cultures. In the modern era, funeral culture underwent profound transformation. Around the time of the 1911 Revolution (Xinhai Revolution), folk funeral customs were characterized by elaborate procedural complexity and pervasive beliefs in geomancy (*fengshui*) and superstition. It was Hu Shi who first advocated for mortuary reform, proposing such measures as the rejection of paper spirit money and ritual objects, the

elimination of Buddhist and Daoist clergy from funeral proceedings, and the simplification of funeral processions—thus opening a new era of thinking on the subject.

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, funeral reform proceeded through two phases: an advocacy phase (1949–1985) and a juridical/legislative phase (1985–present). The 1965 *Opinions on Funeral Reform Work* (《关于殡葬改革工作的意见》) explicitly set out the core objectives of vigorously promoting cremation, reforming earth burial, and overhauling traditional funeral customs. The promulgation of the *Regulations on Funeral Administration* (《殡葬管理条例》) in 1997 formally placed funeral reform on a legal and regulatory footing [2]. In 2018, the Ministry of Civil Affairs announced eighty pilot regions for comprehensive national funeral reform, gradually advancing systematic reform.

In summary, the transformation of funeral culture has been driven not only by changes in objective social conditions, but also by direct state intervention and the autonomous choices of ordinary people—three forces that together shape the evolutionary trajectory of funeral culture. At the same time, funeral reform is by no means a single technical change from earth burial to cremation, but a systemic cultural transformation encompassing both the reform of burial methods and the reform of associated customs—a comprehensive transition from ideational forms (why things are done), to behavioral forms (how things are done), to material forms (what is done).

3. Review of existing scholarship on funeral reform

The earliest traceable scholarly work on funeral reform appears to be Yu's 1986 article, "Strengthening Funeral Legislation to Promote Funeral Reform [3]." A keyword search for "funeral reform" yields over five thousand related publications; however, approximately 80% of these are concentrated in the fields of administrative studies, political science, law, and economics, while studies closely connected to folklore studies account for less than 0.9% of the total [4].

The existing body of scholarship on funeral reform may be broadly categorized into three types. The first type consists of general descriptive surveys of the current state of funeral reform in various localities, accompanied by policy recommendations [5]. The second type interprets extreme cases—such as the grave-leveling campaign (*ping fen yundong*)—through the lenses of legal anthropology and sociology, revealing the tensions and negotiations between state power and folk belief [6]. The third type employs holistic qualitative research grounded in fieldwork, situating funeral reform within the context of everyday rural life [7]. This last approach most closely aligns with the methodology of folklore studies, presenting the reform process as a multi-layered and multi-stakeholder practice through a holistic lens. In recent years, the range of analytical perspectives applied to this subject has further expanded. Shao's cultural analysis of mortuary rituals in Du'chang County, Jiangxi Province, argues that the promotion of rural funeral reform must be grounded in a thorough understanding of local traditional funeral culture and the worldviews embedded within it—including views of the afterlife, filial piety, clan relations, and human ethics [8]. Gao et al., drawing on the case of

Singapore, reveal how state-led funeral reform creates tensions between land-use efficiency and the emotional and religious needs of citizens, compelling individuals to undergo complex processes of "emotional negotiation" in the face of state biopolitical management [9].

Overall, research on "funeral reform" that proceeds from the theoretical foundations of folklore studies as a discipline remains scarce. As an important instance of folkloric change and cultural practice, "funeral reform" deserves rigorous theoretical, innovative, and applied scholarly attention from folklorists using the analytical tools of their discipline.

4. Funeral reform from the perspective of folklore studies

4.1. Formation patterns of folklore and the stability of mortuary customs

In the twentieth century, Alan proposed the concepts of "social group" and "cultural tradition," expanding the scope of "folklore" from specific ethnic groups to any social group sharing a common cultural tradition. The American sociologist Sumner situated folklore within the sphere of social life, arguing that folkways are generated through the repeated enactment of uniform modes of behavior by a group, subsequently giving rise to ceremonies, *mores*, and institutions. He particularly noted that the transformation of folkways is constrained both by changes in the conditions of social life and by the superimposed "philosophical ideas and ethical standards"—the latter conferring stability upon folkloric forms and rendering their change gradual and slow [10]. Taking folk mortuary customs as an illustration: while these customs have undergone a degree of change over time—including updates to the paper spirit money, paper horses, and ritual offerings that people burn in commemoration—the Chinese population has long maintained the customs and traditions of *ru tu wei an* ("to rest in the earth in peace") and the preservation of bodily integrity after death (*si hou liu quan shi*). The traditional saying "the sacred dynasty governs the realm through filial piety" (*sheng chao yi xiao zhi tianxia*) attests to the centrality of filial piety to the burial traditions and customs of the Han ethnic group and beyond. It is precisely these *mores* that endow folkloric forms with their characteristic stability and constitute the most formidable "resistance" to the transformation of mortuary customs.

Sumner's analysis reveals a fundamental proposition in folklore studies: while new living conditions can precipitate change in folkways, rigid *mores* tend to preserve the stability of existing folkloric forms. This has strong explanatory power for understanding the resistance to funeral reform. When reform is pursued solely through the administrative coercion of folkloric forms, without engaging the underlying structure of *mores*, the result is superficial compliance rather than genuine transformation of customs and practices (*yifeng yisu*). This does not, however, mean that funeral reform itself is meaningless; rather, it demonstrates that an approach characterized by short-term thinking and a one-size-fits-all (*yi dao qie*) mentality is bound to yield limited results and may even intensify social tensions.

4.2. The right of folkloric subjects to value judgment

Sumner emphasized that the value of folklore should be determined by its bearers; the standard for evaluating folkloric value resides within folklore itself, not in any external criteria [10]. Folklore in different temporal and spatial contexts has its own internal logic and cannot be subjected to judgment by external standards, nor can abstract comparisons be made in isolation from specific contexts. In much of the policy discourse and academic research surrounding funeral reform, "earth burial" (*tuzang*) has been persistently stigmatized with labels such as "backward," "ignorant," and "superstitious," while "cremation" (*huozang*) has been adorned with symbols of "advanced," "civilized," "scientific," and "environmentally friendly." This logic of stigmatization, in essence, extracts mortuary customs from the cultural context that sustains them and subjects

them to a set of externally imposed, pre-determined value standards. Cui Jiatian has explicitly argued that the "drawbacks" of "earth burial" are not intrinsic to the practice itself, but are rather the product of discursive construction and a stigmatization strategy in service of the promotion of cremation [11].

When viewed from the perspective of folkloric subjects, earth burial customs are not a simple symbol of "backwardness," but carry multiple cultural meanings: the people's understanding of life, reverence for ancestors, the maintenance of kinship bonds, and the pursuit of one's "roots." Research by Gao et al. further demonstrates that even in a modern state as powerful as Singapore, government-promoted space-efficient burial methods have generated profound anxieties among the Chinese-heritage population regarding cultural identity and emotional belonging; people need to undergo lengthy processes of "emotional negotiation" before finding a balance between institutional requirements and cultural tradition [12]. This demonstrates that the evaluation of mortuary practices is never a one-dimensional technical or administrative matter, but is deeply embedded in cultural structures and emotional networks. The substitution of state rationality for the value judgments of folkloric subjects not only ignores the critical functions that folk funeral rituals serve in social solidarity, emotional solace, and the

transmission of ethical values, but also obscures the complex systems of indigenous religious belief and meaning that underlie traditional customs

Consequently, the questions that funeral reform truly needs to answer are not simply how to replace "backward burial methods" with "advanced" ones, but rather: how can the indigenous beliefs and ethical values embedded in traditional mortuary customs maintain their vitality in modern society? And how can a productive balance between traditional culture and the objectives of modern governance be found? These questions depend upon ordinary people gaining adequate voice and participatory agency in the reform process.

4.3. De-subjectification of folkloric knowledge

With the advanced commercialization of the modern funeral service industry, people have progressively lost their traditional capacity for autonomy in managing death-related affairs, giving rise to what may be termed the "de-subjectification" of folkloric knowledge. In traditional society, the organization of funeral affairs (*baishi*) relied upon the collective wisdom of the family and neighborhood community, and the bereaved family retained full agency over the process. In modern cities, however, virtually every aspect—from the collection of the body and memorial ceremonies to the placement of cremated remains—is handled by funeral companies offering one-stop services (*yi tiao long fuwu*). As people become both unable and unwilling to organize these affairs independently, the chain of transmission for funeral knowledge and ritual logic is severed. Suzuki Hikaru, in *The Price of Death: The Funeral Industry in Contemporary Japan*, reveals this common tendency: the advanced professionalization and commercialization of the funeral industry has reduced the bereaved family from the director of ritual to a consumer, transforming a moment of shared ritual experience for family and community into an act of consuming a commodified service [13].

The consequences of this de-subjectification extend far beyond the individual level. In rural society, funeral customs have long served as a vital nexus for sustaining local social networks and reinforcing community identity. The values of filial piety and clan solidarity embedded in traditional funeral culture continue to be important vehicles for social cohesion and ethical education in local rural communities [9]. As village funeral customs are dismantled or coercively replaced, the social integrative functions they served tend to be lost, and the original equilibrium of rural social structures begins to dissolve.

It is therefore imperative that, alongside the promotion of funeral reform, agency be restored to ordinary people as subjects, enabling them to rebuild cultural subjectivity within new mortuary practices. This requires both genuine respect for local folkloric knowledge and the activation of grassroots self-governance

organizations—such as village ceremonial affairs councils (*cun ji hong-bai lishihui*)—as intermediary channels, allowing people to become active participants in funeral reform rather than passive recipients. The modes of mortuary practice that emerge through this process of autonomous popular exploration tend to possess greater vitality and resonance, and are better positioned to achieve the transformation in funeral reform from "being required to change" to "choosing to change."

5. Conclusion

Chinese traditional culture has always emphasized the principle of *shen zhong zhui yuan*—"be careful in mourning and mindful of those long gone." As an essential component of the everyday lives of ordinary people, the transformation of funeral culture encompasses dimensions of ethical belief, emotional identity, and social integration, and is by no means a purely technical or administrative matter. This paper through the three dimensions of the formation patterns of folklore, the right of folkloric subjects to value judgment, and the de-subjectification of folkloric knowledge, sought to present the complex dimensions of funeral reform as viewed from the perspective of folklore studies. The 2025 Central Document No. 1 (*Zhongyang Yi Hao Wenjian*) has once again emphasized the work of transforming customs and practices in rural areas, specifying that civilized, environmentally conscious, and frugal modes of burial should be encouraged on the basis of fully respecting the will of ordinary people—a formulation that, at the level of policy, resonates positively with the principle of subjectivity that folklore studies has long emphasized.

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