Introduction

Death management policies of Hong Kong's nascent colonial government were a series of spatialized practices, informed by a hierarchical preference for regulating bodies based on race, religion and class divisions. In the early days of the colonial era, the Hong Kong government did very little to meet the burial needs of the local Chinese population. Chinese graves scattered on hillsides were considered to be unhygienic and an environmental nuisance, and in the wake of urban development in the 1930s, many Chinese were exhumed and cremated. Around this same time, the government began to promote cremation as a means of reducing the amount of space taken up by burials.

This chapter examines the development of Hong Kong's death management policy, as characterized by: (1) stricter regulation of the death space by clearing hillside graves and temporary Chinese cemeteries and; (2) institutionalization of cremation as the primary means of handling dead bodies. It will link discussions about the earliest burial sites to current debates on the shortage of columbaria in order to produce intriguing and multilayered dialogues around death space politics in Hong Kong.
Chinese Death Studies and Management

Chinese societies have long been fertile grounds for the study of death rituals, but the majority of studies have focused on traditional practices in rural settings. Research on modern Chinese urban funerals remains scarce. This chapter will contribute to our understanding of modern urban funerals in a Chinese society that contrast with ‘traditional’ funerals in rural Chinese settings. Sinologist J.J.M. de Groot’s (1892–1910) voluminous ethnography of Chinese funerals details traditional southern Chinese mortuary rites, and later anthropologists such as Maurice Freedman (1957; 1966), Emily Ahern (1973), Arthur Wolf (1970) and James Watson (1982; 1988) all deepened understanding of traditional Chinese rituals and their relationship to the proper functioning of family and community life. In Chinese villages a ‘proper’ funeral and burial often serves the purpose of ensuring an auspicious future for the dead in the afterlife, which in turn is believed to be closely related to the well-being of the living. For a normal death, a proper burial with elaborate pre-burial rites attended by a large crowd is most important (Freedman, 1957: 190). As elaborated by Yu Ying-shih (1987: 380), Chinese death traditions have stressed the importance of a ‘peaceful burial’ (安葬) by interring the dead in an auspicious site based on good geomancy. To Chinese families, death is not an end to life, as the living continue to interact with the dead through a variety of rituals. As I have noted previously (Chan, 2000), for the newly dead, the living have a responsibility to provide proper services to facilitate the ‘rite of passage’ in which the deceased (sin yan先人) transforms from a new, unruly ghost to a more settled ghost.

Funerary rites also help to contain and manage death pollution (caused by death itself). As detailed by Watson (1982; 1988), most Chinese villagers have “a morbid fear of anything associated with death” (1988: 112). This fear is related to the notion of death pollution, described as ‘killing air,’ which is said to be released at the moment of death, and which casts adverse spells on those who are affected by the air. In order to ensure a smooth funeral, family members are to take up their respective roles and to perform and dress in proper mourning attire during the proceedings, based on their individual kinship positions. In view of the varying beliefs about the afterlife and the

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2 Chinese terms in this chapter are written in the form of the pronunciation of the local Cantonese language used in Hong Kong.

3 Watson conducted his study mainly among Cantonese speaking Hong Kong villagers.