

Research Paper

Cremation in Hong Kong: *Catholic, Anglican, and Secular Perspectives*

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ABSTRACT: In 2019, cremations accounted for almost 95 percent of Hong Kong's funerals, even though the practice challenges long-held Chinese beliefs about ancestor veneration. Scarcity of available land is one reason Hongkongers opt for cremation. The government actively promotes "green burial," the scattering of ashes in remembrance gardens or at sea. The doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England differ on the acceptability of green burial. This essay explores the many factors Catholic and Anglican Hongkongers face when they make funerary preparations and consider cremation, including cultural traditions, costs, environmental impact, and religious guidelines.

KEYWORDS: Anglican, Catholic, Cremation, Green Burial, Hong Kong

Received 16 November, 2020; Accepted 02 December, 2020 © The author(s) 2020.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong is a Special Administration Region ("HKSAR") of the People's Republic of China. A national law of China called "The Basic Law" serves as the region's de facto constitution and governs the residents of Hong Kong. The Basic Law protects the religious freedom of Hongkongers [1]. Hong Kong has a population of approximately 7.5 million; 480,000 are Protestant Christians and 380,000 are Catholics. Around 30 percent of Hongkongers follow Buddhism (a dominant religion of mainland China) and/or Taoism (an indigenous religion of China).

Hong Kong's Protestant community is comprised of more than 70 denominations and approximately 1,500 congregations. Following the First Opium War (1839-1842), China's Qing dynasty rulers ceded Hong Kong Island to the United Kingdom. Soon thereafter, The Cathedral Church of St. John the Evangelist ("St. John's Cathedral") became the spiritual center of the new British colony and the colonial Church of England ("Anglicanism") (fig. 1). Over the following decades, the number of local Chinese converts grew to become a high percentage of Hong Kong's Anglican Church, which is now known as the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui ("HKSKH"). The HKSKH reflects Hong Kong's cultural diversity. Clergy conduct services at St. John's Cathedral in English, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Filipino (Tagalog). There are now thirty-eight Cantonese-speaking Anglican churches and five English-speaking Anglican churches in Hong Kong [2].



Figure 1.

The Cathedral Church of St. John the Evangelist.



Figure 2.

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

On July 1, 1997, following more than a century-and-a-half of British rule, the crown colony of Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereignty. “The turnover” has had a dramatic impact. Reverend John Chynchen is an ordained Anglican priest who has spent decades in Hong Kong, serving as a Bishop’s Chaplain and Honorary Chaplain of St. John’s Cathedral. Recently, Reverend Chynchen reflected on how the Anglican Church has adapted to Hong Kong’s return to Chinese rule. For example, the turnover “had a fairly obvious and expected effect upon the direction of Hong Kong in terms of language” [2; see also 3]. For much of the colonial era, English was Hong Kong’s sole official language, but now, under The Basic Law, both Chinese and English are official languages. According to Reverend Chynchen, after 1997 the world began to view St. John’s as an “overseas English cathedral, in its language and in its services,” even though, Chynchen quickly added, its services “are still bound to [The Revised Common Lectionary] of the Church of England.” The Revised Common Lectionary is a collection of English-language Biblical readings used in worship services throughout the liturgical year. It also provides a standard script used by HKSAR clergy presiding over funerals, entitled “Commemoration of the Faithful Departed” [4: 129]. Following the traditional lectionary might be viewed as conservative; however, Reverend Chynchen continued, “we have [also] had to introduce, against the rules you may say, Sunday service in Mandarin, in Putonghua, which some could see as a political decision ... and [for different reasons] we have services in Cantonese ... and regular services in Tagalog” [2]. As indigenous Chinese have assumed positions of leadership in recent years, Hong Kong’s Anglican Church has begun to share more Chinese elements, including aspects of Buddhism and certain Chinese folk religions, such as the funerary practice of cremation [3; see also 5].

The Roman Catholic presence in China predates the Anglican presence by centuries; missionary priests of the Roman Catholic Church first entered China in the thirteenth century. In 2011, The Pew Research Center estimated there were approximately nine million practicing Catholics in mainland China, but more than half were members of the government-affiliated Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association [6]. Although relations between the Vatican and the leaders of the People’s Republic of China have fluctuated, the mainland government permits Catholics to worship freely in the Diocese of Macau and the Diocese of Hong Kong.

A Swiss priest and missionary named Father Theodore Joret (1804-1842) founded a Roman Catholic *apostolic prefecture* (a pre-diocesan missionary jurisdiction) in Hong Kong in 1841-1842. Father Joret established a mission house then began work on a permanent church. Joret lived to see the laying of the foundation stone of Hong Kong’s first cathedral, before he died of a fever at the age of thirty-eight. The present-day structure, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (fig. 2), was consecrated in 1938 and it serves as the centerpiece of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong. Of the HKSAR’s 380,000 Catholics, 160,000 are Filipino expatriates, many of whom serve as domestic helpers. Hong Kong’s Catholic community is relatively diverse compared to Hong Kong’s general populace and it has been actively involved in promoting ecumenism and Christian unity especially within East Asian contexts [see 7]. During the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church altered its traditional doctrine on cremation and religious leaders and scholars have begun questioning whether this may be an area for ecumenical progress and interdenominational cooperation [8].

II. CREMATION IN THE CATHOLIC AND ANGLICAN CHURCHES

Cremation, the process of burning a dead body until only ashes remain, has a long history. Cremation was a common occurrence in ancient India and, to a much lesser extent, in ancient China (Han 2012). The Greek poet Homer (alive ca. 800 B.C.) described the ritualistic burning of soldiers’ bodies in his epic poem entitled *The Iliad*, but cremation goes back much further into European history [9].

Early European Christians generally followed the traditional Jewish custom of burying their dead. They believed God would resurrect the *corporeal* (or physical) body after death, and thus it should not be destroyed. “Because of the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection and rejoining body and soul, the Church [considered] total destruction of the body [to be] a drastic action” [10: 19-20]. In fact, burning bodies was a powerful way the Catholic Church attempted to prevent heretics, witches, and others from resurrecting. The stigma attached to cremation slowly began to lessen during the early medieval period. Officials who were concerned about public hygiene and land conservation began establishing cremation societies around Europe [see, for example, 11]. This led to intense theological debates, with cremation’s advocates arguing the practice neither denied nor hindered corporeal resurrection. Still, for many centuries the Roman Catholic Church officially opposed cremation and punished those who defied the Church by withholding sacraments and funeral rites.

Finally, in 1963 the Catholic Church issued an *Instruction Office* entitled *Piametconstantem*, modifying its stance. On March 2, 2016, Pope Francis (born 1936) approved a new instruction, entitled *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*, reaffirming and commenting upon *Piametconstantem*. The documents clarified, “cremation of the deceased’s body does not affect his or her soul, nor does it prevent God, in his omnipotence, from raising up the deceased body to new life. Thus cremation, in and of itself, objectively negates neither the Christian doctrine of the soul’s immortality nor that of the resurrection of the body. *Ad resurgendum* reiterated the Church’s “preference of the burial of the remains of the faithful,” but stated, “cremation is not ‘opposed per se to the

Christian religion' and no longer should the sacraments and funeral rites be denied to those who have asked that they be cremated, under the condition that this choice has not been made through 'a denial of Christian dogmas, the animosity of a secret society, or hatred of the Catholic religion and the Church'" [12].

Ad resurgendum repeated the theological bases for favoring burial and disputed a few philosophical notions that some associate with cremation: "The resurrection of Jesus is the culminating truth of the Christian faith [and] the risen Christ is the principle and source of our future resurrection ... By death the soul is separated from the body, but in the resurrection, God will give incorruptible life to our body, transformed by reunion with our soul. ... Following the most ancient Christian tradition, the Church insistently recommends that the bodies of the deceased be buried in cemeteries or other sacred places. ... By burying the bodies of the faithful, the Church confirms her faith in the resurrection of the body, and intends to show the great dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person whose body forms part of their identity. She cannot, therefore, condone attitudes or permit rites that involve erroneous ideas about death, such as considering death as the definitive annihilation of the person, or the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or the universe, or as a stage in the cycle of regeneration, or as the definitive liberation from the 'prison' of the body"[12].

Cremated remains are often scattered on public ground or in bodies of water, even though the Catholic doctrine expressed in *Ad resurgendum* disapproves of such customs: "[B]urial in a cemetery or another sacred place adequately corresponds to the piety and respect owed to the bodies of the faithful departed who through Baptism have become temples of the Holy Spirit and in which 'as instruments and vessels the Spirit has carried out so many good works'. ... [T]he burial of the faithful departed in cemeteries or other sacred places encourages family members and the whole Christian community to pray for and remember the dead, while at the same time fostering the veneration of martyrs and saints. ... When, for legitimate [sanitary, economic or social] motives, cremation of the body has been chosen, the ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a sacred place, that is, in a cemetery or, in certain cases, in a church or an area, which has been set aside for this purpose. ... [Tombs of] the faithful departed become the objects of the Christian community's prayers and remembrance. ... places of prayer, remembrance and reflection. ... The reservation of the ashes of the departed in a sacred place ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community. ... Also it prevents any unfitting or superstitious practices. For the reasons given above, the conservation of the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence is not permitted [except in 'grave and exceptional cases dependent on cultural conditions of a localized nature']. ... In order that every appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism be avoided, it is not permitted to scatter the ashes of the faithful departed in the air, on [unconsecrated] land, at sea or in some other way, nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry or other objects. These courses of action cannot be legitimized by an appeal to the sanitary, social, or economic motives that may have occasioned the choice of cremation"[12].

To summarize, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes the validity of cremation for sanitary, economic, or social reasons, while clearly expressing a preference for burial. It however, does not approve of attitudes or rites involving "erroneous ideas about death," including that death annihilates the person, or represents a stage in regeneration (reincarnation), or a freeing of the spirit from the body's prison, or that cremation constitutes a fusion with Mother Nature. Finally, *Ad resurgendum* unambiguously states, the ashes of a member of the Catholic Church should be placed in cemeteries or other sacred places, and should not be scattered in the air, or on unconsecrated land, or at sea, nor should they be kept in homes or "domestic residences," except under very rare circumstances.

The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong has also offered advice on "What to do when a Catholic dies?" [13]. According to the Diocese, only the "Catholic faithful" (i.e., those who have received the Catholic Rite of Becoming Catechumens) can apply for burial in Hong Kong's Catholic cemeteries. In order to bury a body or spread ashes in a Catholic cemetery, applicants must also obtain a government permit, issued by Hong Kong's Food and Environmental Hygiene Department. Typically, Catholic clergy perform funeral rites at a cemetery chapel, at the graveside, in a funeral parlor, or in a crematorium chapel.

Until the last century, the Church of England's doctrine concerning cremation diverged significantly from that of the Roman Catholic Church. Formally, the history of the Church of England goes back to the late sixth century A.D., when Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540-604) sent a Benedictine monk named Augustine (ca. 550-ca. 604) to Britain to Christianize King Aethelberht (ca. 550-616) and his Kingdom of Kent. The historical designation "Church of England," though, usually indicates the Church that separated from Roman Catholicism in 1534 and embraced Europe's Protestant Reformation. For centuries, the Church of England shared the Catholic Church's prohibition of cremation. As late as 1874, the Anglican Bishop of London, John Jackson (1811-1885) warned that the practice of cremation would "undermine the faith of mankind in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, and so bring about a most disastrous social revolution" [14].

During the later-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such attitudes began to change, as Britain emerged among European countries as a leading proponent of cremation. In 1902, the Parliament of the United Kingdom approved The Cremation Act, which officially recognized the right of burial authorities to establish crematoria in England, Scotland, and Wales. It took a while before the Church of England signaled its support. Around

1910, the Dean and Chapter of Westminster formalized the policy of cremating the bodies of persons interred in London's Westminster Abbey, site of the coronations of British monarchs, the *supreme governors* of the Church of England. A decade later, the bodies of Anglican Bishop John Mitchinson (1833-1918) and Bishop Edward Hicks (1843-1919) were cremated, setting a precedent for other Anglican Christians. The Cremation Society of Great Britain engaged with Anglican clergy to normalize cremation in the U.K. and its overseas colonies and territories [8] and soon the cremation movement spread to various parts of the British Empire, to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong [15].

Since 1969, The Canons of the Church of England have recognized the legitimacy of cremation. Specifically the Canons state: "Cremation of a dead body is lawful in connection with Christian burial. When a body is to be cremated, the burial service may precede, accompany, or follow the cremation; and may be held either in the church or at the crematorium. The ashes of a cremated body should be reverently disposed of by a minister in a churchyard or other burial ground in accordance [the provisions of the Church of England] or on an area of land designated by the bishop for the purpose of this sub-paragraph or at sea. When a body is to be buried according to the rites of the Church of England in any unconsecrated ground, the officiating minister, on coming to the grave, shall first bless the same"[16: 59-60].

Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England does not express a preference for burial over cremation. Furthermore, the Church of England's Canons do not specifically disparage "erroneous ideas about death" that are associated with cremation, such as annihilation of the person, fusion with Mother Nature, or reincarnation. An Anglican's remains may be interred at sea, so long as a proper officiating minister first blesses such "unconsecrated ground." Simply stated, members of the Church of England enjoy much greater (but not complete) freedom to practice cremation than do members of the Roman Catholic Church [see also 17].

HKSKH, Hong Kong's Anglican Church, offers its membership a specific theology and instructions on cremation entitled "Funerals and the Burial of the Dead" [18]. It reads, in part, "Funeral may be seen as the full stop of the life of the dead. It also offers an occasion for the relatives and friends of the dead to express their sorrow and to thank God for guarding the dead to complete his/her journey on earth. Since ancient times, different rites have been used by human beings to say good-bye to the departed loved one. ... Fewer and fewer burial plots at Christian cemeteries in Hong Kong are now available while there are still some burial plots at the public Wo Hop Shek Cemetery. The undertaker will offer suggestions. Cremation is very common nowadays. Funeral service will be held in a funeral parlor before cremation is taken place at a crematorium. Ashes collected after the cremation may be placed in a niche of a columbarium with inscription and photo."

Although cremation is firmly entrenched within Anglican (and now Roman Catholic) funerary methods, many members of Hong Kong's other Christian and non-Christian traditions continue to reject cremation, including Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Orthodox Jews, Parsees, and followers of various Chinese religions [15].

III. BURIAL IN HONG KONG: THE COLONIAL CEMETERIES

The oldest burial grounds on Hong Kong Island are Hong Kong Cemetery (originally "The Protestant Cemetery"), which opened in 1842, and St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery, which opened in 1848 (figs. 3, 4). Originally, British Colonial Governors had authority to determine costs for burial in The Protestant Cemetery. Governor Sir John Davis (1795-1890), who served from 1844-1848, set the following fee schedule: the sexton was to be paid five shillings and sixpence (or three rupees) for digging a grave at least five feet deep. In addition, the government imposed a fifteen-shilling "ground fee" against the estate of all who died with sufficient remaining assets. If the deceased's estate was too small, their remains were placed in a "pauper's nook," with exceptions being made for those who had served in the British military. Flat stone slabs marked most sites. If a monument was necessary, the government collected an additional fifty shillings [16: 11]. Simple, upright headstones were not taxed [*Friend of China and Hongkong Gazette* 16.8 (1851)]. In 1851, the colonial government collected 91 pounds, 13 shillings in burial costs. In the same year, the colonial government spent approximately the same amount (103 pounds, 6 shillings, and 8 pence) on public education [*Hong Kong Government Gazette, Blue Book*(1851)]. The Protestant Cemetery was, in reality, a predominantly Anglican burial ground; approximately 80 percent of the 7000 interments were for English residents, almost all professing Anglicans who were afforded the funerary rites of the Church of England [20: 17]. The Anglican Bishop consecrated The Protestant Cemetery and it was under the supervision of the Anglican Colonial Chaplain. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church acquired the land used for St. Michael's Cemetery and, originally, the Church did impose any burial fees or an indiscriminate "ground fee," unless the family wanted a monument and in that case "fees were paid according to the size of the plot desired" [19: 11].

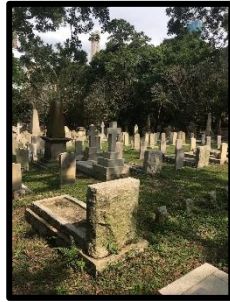


Figure 3.
The Hong Kong Cemetery, aka The Protestant
or Colonial Cemetery.



Figure 4.
Buildings encroach on St. Michael's
Catholic Cemetery.

The colonial-era cemeteries sit side-by-side, but they are a study in contrasts. The overall design of The Protestant Cemetery belongs to a transitional period when British urban planners reconceived the traditional church *graveyard*. During Europe's Industrial Revolution, masses of people moved into cities, and lived near church buildings and adjacent consecrated burial grounds, or graveyards. Such proximity to decaying corpses led to continued outbreaks of infectious disease. Acts of Parliament of 1832 and 1852 mandated the construction of large, municipal cemeteries away from heavily populated areas [see, for example, 21, 22]. Hong Kong's early colonial cemeteries are in Happy Valley, a neighborhood that historically was remote from the city's primary business and residential districts. A stroll through The Protestant Cemetery still feels somewhat like visiting a calm and dignified English garden. With ample spaces surrounding and separating most plots, it is a model of the nineteenth-century *landscape style* of cemetery design [20: 18]. The bodily remains of the British colony's upper-class political, military, and religious leaders were laid in the earliest gravesites. In contrast, "the Catholic Cemetery is so crowded that it is impossible to reach the end of a row without stepping on graves [and] the Portuguese, Chinese and British Catholics lie huddled without distinction" [19: 3]. According to Hong Kong cultural scholar Patricia Lim, "This ordering of the society of early Hong Kong [evident in the early cemeteries] extended [well] into the realms of the Anglican Church where there existed a system of pew allocation in the newly built St. John's Cathedral according to which seats were carefully allotted from front to back depending on status and wealth until well into the twentieth century. The church depended for its income on the subscriptions that were paid by worshippers for their seats, which were allocated by a church seating committee ... The Chinese members of the Church of England took their place at the back or more likely attended native churches. The Church of England contrasted sharply in this matter with the more democratic and cosmopolitan approach of the Roman Catholic Church where a lower-ranking congregation joined together in no particular order" [19: 85-86; see also 5].

Today, after "the turnover," such social ordering seems like a relic from the past. Similarly, the chances of being buried in Hong Kong's Protestant Cemetery or St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery seem to have been lost to time. Both burial grounds are nearly completely full and modern residential buildings now blanket the surrounding area, preventing expansion. New burials at The Protestant Cemetery are mostly additions to family plots, the most recent being a decade ago. St. Michael's Catholic Cemetery, next door, has seen a few burials that are more recent, still Hong Kong's Catholic Diocese no longer lists the cemetery as available for general burial requests. The Diocese recommends other cemeteries in less congested areas. In the late nineteen seventies and eighties, a two-tube underground tollway known as the Aberdeen Tunnel was built that linked Aberdeen and Hong Kong Island's south side with Happy Valley and the island's north side. The project necessitated appropriating more than three thousand of The Protestant Cemetery's graves and relocating the remains. A new *ossuary* (a room for bones) was built to house older remains and *acolumbarium* (a structure with niches for cremation urns) was also constructed. A few of the columbarium's niches are still available, though they come at a high cost and with many regulations [see 23, 2].

IV. HONG KONG'S "GREEN BURIAL"

Anglican Reverend John Chynchen often presides over funeral services in Hong Kong. According to Reverend Chynchen, the scarcity of available burial plots has led to skyrocketing prices for the few that remain and this has directly contributed to changes in Anglican burial procedures. "Due to the shortage of land, [costs in Hong Kong have become] quite prohibitive for average people. The average gravesite would run into several million dollars. So very few [Anglicans] are buried now in Hong Kong" [2]. The HKSAR is notorious for the high cost of its real estate, but in recent years, the real estate market has actually become "more expensive for the dead than for the living" [24]. Kwok Hoi Pong is chairperson of the Hong Kong Funeral Business Association. Kwok says, "A niche for an urn in a private columbarium in the best position can cost up to

HK\$1,800,000 and a ground burial plot can run up to HK\$5,000,000 (appx. US\$650,000). As a result, cremation has become an attractive option. In 2018, approximately 45,000 died in Hong Kong and 92 percent of the bodies were cremated. In 2019, approximately 49,000 deaths occurred and nearly 94 percent of the bodies were cremated [24; 25]. Crematoria are located throughout the HKSAR: in Cape Collinson, Cheung Chau, Diamond Hill, Fu Shan, Kwai Chung, and Wo Hop Shek. In comparison, in 2019 there were over six thousand crematoria in mainland China and more than five million cremations. That, however, represented only slightly more than half of all mainland deaths [26]. Mainland China's abundance of available land, relative to Hong Kong, is one reason for the disparity.

In Hong Kong, space is so limited even storage of cremation urns has become prohibitively costly. To increase availability for future generations, Hong Kong's government encourages "recycling" or reusing niches used to hold cremation urns. A government study found, "Under current practice, niches are seldom recycled. The cumulative effects over time would be a severe drain on our scarce land resources, to an extent even worse than residential units for the living, which are recycled through generations of inhabitants. Therefore, in the long run, reliance on the provision of new niches for disposal of cremated ashes is not sustainable" [27]. The government regulates the public cremation industry and monitors the costs of cremation services. Currently, an adult cremation in Hong Kong costs HK\$1,220; "temporary storage of ashes" costs HK\$80 per month; and a "standard niche and permit to place a memorial plaque" costs HK\$2,400 for the "initial 20-year interment period" [28].

From the government's perspective, neither public storage of ashes nor public interment of bodies is a permanent arrangement. Work crews routinely exhume and cremate bodily remains to make room for new interments in Hong Kong's cemeteries, especially those in more remote areas. For example, the government has designated the Cheung Chau, Tai O, and Lai Chi Yuen cemeteries for the use of "indigenous villagers of the Islands District, residents living there for a long period of time, or their minor children." However, the government position is that "coffin burial spaces in [these] public cemeteries are not intended for permanent use. All human remains that have been buried for more than six years are required to be exhumed [and] the exhumed remains can be interred in the urn graves in the respective cemeteries" [29]. Exhumation and reburial costs can be quite high. Demolishing, digging, clearing, and repaving an "exhumable" burial plot in Hong Kong's Catholic cemeteries runs HK\$7,500, and, of course, reburial or cremation costs considerably more.

Kwok Hoi Pong predicts soon Hongkongers "will no longer have a choice ... the only option will be storing ashes at home or *green burial*." Unfortunately, for Hong Kong's Roman Catholics either option may go against Church doctrine.



Figure 5.

Entrance to a Hong Kong Garden of Remembrance.

Green burial refers to cremating bodies and, rather than storing the ashes in urns, scattering them in a *garden of remembrance* (or memorial garden) set aside for commemorating the departed (fig. 5). There are fourteen land-based remembrance gardens in Hong Kong. Ashes are also frequently scattered into bodies of water. In recent advertising campaigns and public service announcements, Hong Kong's government has begun aggressively marketing green burial, "as a more environmentally-friendly and sustainable means of handling human ashes" [27]. In 2017, the government began circulating a booklet entitled "Returning to Nature what Nature Creates." The pamphlet reads, in part, "Returning to nature after death nourishes and blesses the living. The bereaved can also find solace knowing that their loved ones live on in another form. ...[T]he service of scattering cremains at gardens of remembrance or at sea, and the Internet Memorial Service provided by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department can help bring out the infinite values of life. These services enable the deceased to return to nature, reduce waste, and allow us to pay tribute to our loved ones in a more environmentally-friendly way. Our densely populated Hong Kong can be turned into a truly green and more pleasant home for us" [29].

Hong Kong's architecture and design firms have devised creative plans to increase public enthusiasm for green burial and have submitted their proposals for government approval. The Hong King and London-based

architectural firm Bread Studio, for example, has proposed an offshore structure called “Floating Eternity” (fig. 6). Floating Eternity would be both a maritime columbarium for storing urns and a site for scattering ashes into the sea. Bread Studio architect, Benny Lee suggests the evolution of cemetery design must mimic the evolution of housing design, which in Hong Kong is driven by a limited supply of land [30].



Figure 6.
Architectural rendering of Floating Eternity.

Due to the scarcity of land, Hongkongers are learning to accept cremation, but scattering ashes on the ground or at sea has not been a common historical Chinese practice. Cecilia Chan is a professor of social work at the University of Hong Kong. Professor Chan explains that even though green burial appears to be a pragmatic decision in a crowded, expensive city like Hong Kong, “in line with traditional Chinese customs, we prefer to store our ancestors’ ashes in a niche at a columbarium, a physical place where we can pay respects, give offerings and receive blessings. Many Chinese people are still very conservative” and chose to adhere to long-held Chinese beliefs about venerating the dead [24].

While cremation has been practiced in China on a limited scale dating back to the Neolithic period, through much of China’s history the process “was stigmatized and its use was largely localized to a limited number of ethnic minorities and religious groups” [31: 1]. During the early dynasties, many Chinese people associated cremation with the burning of an enemy, or the retaliatory burning of a body to curse that person and his/her family, or suicidal burnings [31: 10-12]. One form of positive body burning is found in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, a type of self-immolation within a religious context that historian James A. Benn described as “auto-cremation” [32: 35]. Still, many contemporary Chinese hold negative views of cremation. Codified Chinese beliefs about death and burial can be traced back to the ancient writings of the politician and philosopher Confucius (551-479 B.C.). Chinese festivals involving funerary traditions include Qingming Jie (or “Tomb Sweeping Day”) and the Chung Yeung Festival (a day to visit the graves of ancestors). Hong Kong’s secular green burial program complicates the traditional visitation of ancestors’ graves, particularly when ashes are scattered at sea.

In spite of long-standing cultural objections, many Chinese residents of Hong Kong recognize that cremation has played an important historical role in fighting disease and improving the sanitary conditions of large cities. Pioneering Chinese Malaysian physician and epidemiologist, Wu Lien-teh (1879–1960) studied medicine at the University of Cambridge. In the frigid winter of 1910, Dr. Wu traveled to Harbin, China, to investigate the source of an unknown, deadly disease that ultimately claimed more than 60,000 lives [33]. Dr. Wu helped identify the cause as pneumonic plague and, after discerning the disease spread through breathing, he developed an effective surgical mask to filter out deadly air. Harbin’s ground was frozen solid and it was impossible to bury many corpses, so Dr. Wu obtained permission from the imperial authorities to cremate these bodies, which, as stated, went against tradition. This proved to be the turning point in the epidemic. After the mass cremations, new infections dwindled dramatically, and within months, the crisis ended [see 34; 35: 300-301].

In contemporary Hong Kong, though, the government is not advocating cremation in order to fight disease; rather, Hong Kong’s government is promoting the ecological benefits of “green burial.” Bodies of deceased Hongkongers are to be burned, rather than buried, because the latter option uses up too much valuable land. The adjective “green” has many meanings within the current conservation movement. In general, if something is green it harms the environment as little as possible (Collins Dictionary). Recent scientific research, however, indicates the cumulative effect of cremating dead bodies is significant environmental damage. Cremation burns copious amounts of fuel and “results in millions of tons of carbon dioxide emissions per year” [36]. According to Nora Menkin, Executive Director of the U.S.-based People’s Memorial Association, the average cremation uses the same amount of energy and produces the same emissions as burning two full tanks of gasoline in the average automobile. Even the most efficient crematoriums, featuring advanced scrubbing or filtering systems, cannot neutralize all of the carbon dioxide generated when a body is cremated, an estimated 534.6 pounds of carbon dioxide per cremation. In the U.S., for example, cremations account for about 360,000

metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions every year [36]. Because of such concerns, there is a movement toward alkaline hydrolysis - also known as *water cremation* or *aquamation* – a process that leaves a much smaller carbon footprint. As with conventional cremation, water-cremation is not universally accepted. Some Catholics, for instance, have claimed it “fails to provide [people] with the reverence and respect they should receive at the end of their lives” [37; see also 38]. While individual dioceses and clergy have come out against alkaline hydrolysis, as of 2020 the doctrinal leaders at the Vatican have not issued an official position, though many Catholics expect one in the very near future.

V. CONCLUSION

Funerary practices in Hong Kong have changed dramatically over time. When Hong Kong became a British colony, indigenous residents generally followed the Chinese tradition of burial with attendant funerary rites of ancestor veneration, such as tomb sweeping. The colonizing Europeans also buried their dead, in accordance with longstanding Christian traditions. Anglicans were at the forefront of Christian groups who embraced the use of cremation. Roman Catholics followed much later, and with significant limitations. Contemporary Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated places in the world [1], and real estate is at a premium. As a result, the local government is aggressively promoting green burial, and the scattering of ashes on consecrated and unconsecrated land and at sea. Hong Kong’s Roman Catholics and Anglicans, and all other Hongkongers, therefore, have many factors to reflect on when making funerary preparations, including cultural customs, costs, environmental impact, and their religious convictions.

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JAMES W. ELLIS, Ph.D., J.D. "Cremation in Hong Kong: Catholic, Anglican, and Secular Perspectives." *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 08(11), 2020, pp. 29-37.