

DEATH AND DYING

THE **CHINESE** WAY

By

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## Introduction

The Chinese are a death-denying people. Like sex, death is taboo in the Chinese culture. I remember that when I was still a child, I was spanked by my parents in the Chinese new year simply because I had mentioned the word “death”. Phrases like “passed away”, “gone away”, or “back to the old place” are used in place of the word “death”. Though the Chinese are very pragmatic and they are fully aware of the fact that dying is an integral part of life as natural and predictable as being born, they still try hard to avoid the reality of death. Children are sheltered from death and dying; dying patients are isolated in the hospital or a special room. We have been warned by hospital staff and the patient’s family that we should never discuss the subject of death with a dying patient during our hospital visitation. There has been no systematic study on this subject in the Chinese history.

Such attitude towards death and dying has created many problems in our society. First of all, it creates an unnecessary fear of death. It is difficult to accept death in our society because it is so unfamiliar and unknown. The fear of death is the result of the fear of the unknown. Secondly, since death is a major life event that stresses our human existence, the failure to cope appropriately with death and to resolve the subsequent loss and grief process is likely to lead to emotional maladaptation. Finally, our treatment to the dying is very inhumane. When the doctor realizes that it is a terminal case, he just leaves the patient and his family in confusion. Our culture has made the process of dying a medical problem, yet no one takes responsibility. Moreover, many Chinese treat a dying patient as “unholy” and “untouchable”. It is a very pathetic and sad scene to see a man finishing his final course of life without any dignity.

Confucius said, “If we yet do not understand life, how can we understand death?” Yet I would say that if we do not know what death is, we can never really grasp the meaning of life. If we are to live a meaningful and productive life free from anxiety and fear of death, we must come to grips with the fact that we will die one day. We must also have the courage to face the fact of death and attempt to search out its true meaning. Paul Tillich rightly says, “And if one is not able to die, is he really able to live?”

It is the attempt of this paper to study the subject of death and dying within the Chinese cultural context. Instead of listing out the different views on death held by the different schools of philosophy (e.g. Buddhism, Taoism, etc.), I try to look deeper into this subject by analyzing the Chinese attitude towards death from a sociological perspective. It is also fascinating to compare this attitude with the Christian view. I hope that through this study, our death-denying attitude can be changed into a healthier attitude, and that both the dying and those close to them can be treated with care, consideration, and love.

### I. Death and Nature

## A. The “Earthly” Nature of Chinese Culture

The well known Chinese sociologist H.T. Fei (費孝通) rightly observes that Chinese culture is an “earthly” one. C.F. Fitzgerald also realizes that the Chinese civilization is based upon “the fundamental occupation” - agriculture. Over 90% of the Chinese population are peasants. To most of the Chinese, the earth is their “root”. Unlike the industrialized western society, where nature, or “earth”, is the object of exploitation, the agricultural Chinese emphasize much on harmony with Mother Nature, or earth. The famous Chinese poet C.Y. Liu said, “My ideal is to be united with Nature.” The Chinese farmer depends on the mercy of Nature. If there is no rain, or too much rain, his life and his family would be in danger. Therefore, all the Chinese religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Folk religions emphasize on harmony with Nature. Nature is the Great Mother to be worshipped and adored. “Earth” is holy and is inhabited by the spirits. Even in an industrialized city, when a bridge, a road, or a building is constructed, the “Earth God” must be worshipped first and a roast pig offered to “him” lest he be irritated and accidents become inevitable.

The “Earthly Nature” of the Chinese has great impact on the Chinese civilization as well as its sociological structure. Unlike Western society, Chinese society is not a very mobile. Chinese people would like to stay on their homeland forever and ever. The Chinese saying “Born in this place, die in this place” is a very good reflection of the Chinese mind. By staying on the same piece of land for generations and generations, a clan system is developed; this sociological structure has great impact on her culture as well as her attitude towards death. I’ll explore this area further in the next section.

## B. Death and Nature in the Chinese Culture

How does this “earthly nature” affect the Chinese view towards death? First of all, if Nature is to be adored and worshipped, and not conquered or exploited, nature must not be violated. Nature has a certain order - day and night, seasonal changes - and this order must be observed. That is why the Taoist emphasizes on “Back to Nature”. Similarly, human life, a product of the union between Heaven and Earth, has the same order as well. The process of birth, growth, growing old, and death is as natural as the seasonal changes. Therefore, natural death is considered a kind of blessing in the Chinese culture. On the other hand, premature death, homicide, suicide, or accidental death are unnatural and violations of Mother Nature. In our elder generation, it is not uncommon for a man to dig his own grave and prepare his own coffin at the age of sixty as a preparation for his natural death.

Now, if death is considered as natural as the setting of the sun, why do the Chinese fear death so much? Why are the Chinese a death-denying people? We have to take into consideration another very important aspect of death and its relation to Nature. While the Chinese believe that death is natural, they also believe that death is an ordeal as the burial of the dead signifies the intrusion of man into the holy and yet mysterious earth. As pointed out before, harmony with Nature is the Chinese ideal. To them, the world is one harmonious living whole. Through it all moves a majestic order. This order is

called Tao, a word which is central in all Chinese thought and belongs as much to the Confucianists and Buddhists as to the Taoists. This great principle of Tao is expressed in the celestial world, in the harmony and precision of the movement of the heavenly bodies. This is the Tao of Heaven or T'ien (天道) . Corresponding to this celestial system there is a territorial Tao, an Order upon earth; it is manifested in mountain and stream. The burial of the dead into the earth is a risk that this order may be violated. If the burial Keeps harmonious with this order, the soul of the dead will be in peace, but if it violates this order, the soul will be tortured. This combination of fear and hope towards death is clearly manifested in the common practice of Feng Shui, Wind and Water (風水). Feng Shui is a common practice which has to do primarily with the location of sites for dwellings and graves upon the surface of the earth in order that they may be in perfect adjustment to the unseen influences of the earth and air. Dr. Porter, in his article “Feng Shui, How the Chinese keep in Tune with Nature”, rightly observes:

“Careful attention was given to the study of these forces in order to choose the location upon which their beneficent influences converge and to avoid those at which discordant powers were in conflict or where evil influences were at work. By choosing such spots for dwellings, successful life would result. But of greater importance was the location of graves in auspicious and favorable surroundings. For the benign powers of life would not guard the spirit of the dead, but also through a mysterious spiritual heredity, pass on decedents a vital force, so that children and grandchildren would multiply, and wealth, honor, and high governmental position crown their successful life. Thus we see that Feng Shui means the way in which a Chinese tries to keep the dwellings in such accord with Nature, so in tune with Nature’s power, that prosperity may attend his family into the third and fourth generation if not further.

Therefore, death is an ordeal, an intrusion into the holy and yet mysterious Nature, a risk that would either bring blessing or curse not only to the dying one, but to his family as well That is why death is a subject to be ignored and denied.

### C. Death and Nature in the Bible

In the Bible, Nature is never deified. Nature is God’s creation, and in the creation mandate, nature is subjected under the administrative care of man. Man was asked to subdue the earth, rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Gen. 1:28). Worship of Nature is considered idolatry and a deliberate act of disobedience and rebellion against the triune God. In Old Testament time, Baal is the god of earth and Baal worship could not be tolerated by Yahweh. The Apostle Paul also says, “They became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (Rom. 1:23). Nature is God’s revelation, but not God Himself.

When man sinned, the relationship between man and Nature was broken. Man's life is characterized by his struggle with the soil (Nature), and the soil will finally conquer and claim him.

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:17-19).

We have to bear in mind that this is a curse. “For dust you are and to dust you will return” should not be taken as a mere declaration of the natural working of mortal man's destiny. It is in the form of a curse. Vos has the following comment:

“The simple explanation lies in this; that they declare not the natural lot of death, but explain particularly the form in which the curse of death had been expressed in the forgoin viz, the form of a return to dust. And this was due to the form in which the curse had been described: hard, fatal struggle with the soil. Now the closing words explain not that death must come, but why, when it comes, it will assume that specific form of a return to dust. In other words not death as such, but the manner of death is here brought into connection with the creation. Had man been created otherwise, and through sin death supervened, then death might have assumed a different form. Death is adjusted in its form to the natural constitution of man, but it does not spring as a necessity from this natural, material constitution.”

Therefore, the Scripture also indicates a very close relationship between death and nature, but this relationship is very different from the Chinese view. Because of the emergence of sin, man began his struggle with Nature. The Chinese way to overcome this struggle is to pacify it and harmonize with it. But such attempt is futile because nature, under the curse from God, can never be harmonized or pacified, and the soil will finally conquer him and claim him. Therefore, the fear of nature and the fear of death is so prevalent in the Chinese culture.

## II. Death and Identity

### A. The Clan System and Identity

As pointed out earlier in this paper, the earthly nature has great impact on the Chinese civilization and its sociological structure. Unlike the industrialized Western society, the agricultural Chinese are not a mobile people. Their native land is their root; only war or famine would motivate them to leave. Therefore, the clan system is a very distinct sociological structure in China. When I use the word “clan”, it is actually an expanded family with the same family name. Therefore, many villages are named after the family name (e.g. Kong's Village, So's Village). Within the tiny territory, this clan has

its own government (ruled by elders), school, farmland, etc. They perform all political, economical, and religious functions. Even when Chinese people migrate to the States, they group themselves together exclusively and carry on their life without being totally absorbed into the American society. Therefore, China-towns are everywhere in the metropolitan cities.

Such sociological structure has two unique characteristics. The first is solidarity, and the second is self-centeredness. Sociologist H.T. Fei uses a very vivid metaphor to describe these two features. He compares the Western society and the Chinese society by using two different metaphors. The Western society is like a bunch of hay tied tightly together by a rope. The rope represents law and constitution. All are equal under the same law. But the Chinese society is like a stone thrown into water creating ripples. If the stone is a big one, there are more ripples. The stone is the head of the family or the clan. The ripples are his dependents. The emperor is the biggest stone. Confucius said, “The whole country is the Emperor’s land, and the whole country is the Emperor’s people.” A Chinese philosopher S.M. Leung remarked that China is more like a family (a very big family) than a country. Therefore, individuality is very foreign in the Chinese culture. When the missionaries went to China and told the Chinese that Christ came to save their individual souls, the Chinese did not understand their motives and concluded that this was just a pretext for imperialism and aggression. The Chinese find their identity only in their clan and their soil. They don’t have the concept of individual self. In Chinese traditional philosophy, nobody raises Socrates’ question, “Who am I?” They only identify themselves with their clan and their soil. Now, if a person is cut off from his clan and his native soil, he’ll experience an identity crisis. An alien is an outcast and he virtually has no rights and no identity in that community. Death is another threat to his identity. Death means separation from his family as well as the loss of his identity. I’ll explore this relationship further in the next section.

It is true that solidarity of the clan of the family is very strong in the Chinese culture, yet paradoxically, the Chinese are also a very self-centered people. The common saying “Everybody only clears the snow in front of his door, and never bothers the frost on his neighbor’s roof” is a very true reflection of this Chinese mentality. If you visit a Chinese village, you’ll find that the public places are the dirtiest and most messy places. If we are reminded again by Professor Fei’s analogy, we’ll understand that it is not law and justice that binds the whole community together, but the head of the clan that binds the whole community together. C.P. Fitzgerald has a very insightful interpretation of the Chinese revolutions when he says that it was not the political ideals of communism that bound the Chinese people together, but the charismatic Communist leaders who bound the people together. Perhaps this explains why Chairman Mao was almost deified and worshipped by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in China. Now, if it is the head of the family, not the abstract law and justice, that binds the community together, the emotional attachment to him is very strong. They are very loyal to him; and the head of the family or the clan is the top priority, Confucius says, “A virtuous man gives attention to himself (i.e. his family) first, but a non-virtuous man gives attention to others (other family) first.” (君子求諸己、小人求諸人)

Therefore, we can conclude that the Chinese find their identity in their clan and their native soil. While they do not have any concept of individuality or individual rights, they are very self-centered. To use Professor Fei's words, the Chinese do not have the concept of individualism, but they are very selfish and non-social-minded.

### B. Identity and Death in the Chinese Culture

If the Chinese person finds his identity in his relationship with his family members and his native soil, death is definitely a threat to his identity. Death means separation, alienation from his clan and the community; the Chinese describe death as "eternal separation" (永别). I have done more than thirty interviews with the dying concerning the subject of the fear of death. Over 90% of them confessed that the greatest fear is the fear of separation from the family and the loss of identity.

The Chinese person has his own way of coping with this identity crisis. First of all, he strongly believes that his identity can be maintained through the continuation of his family. Death is not an absolute end; life can be continued through the birth of the offsprings. Therefore, Confucius says, "There are three things that would be considered as disobedient to your parents, and the greatest one is to have no children." To be barren is a curse in the Chinese society, and to have no male offsprings is equally evil. Therefore, in order to make sure that they will have male offsprings, polygamy is not uncommon in the Chinese society.

Martyrdom is a very honorable deed in the Chinese culture. Throughout Chinese history, martyrs are treated as heroes, and sometimes even worshipped. In fact, martyrdom is by no means uncommon in China. This sounds strange and paradoxical. While on the one hand, death is a threat and to be feared, yet the death of the martyrs is beautified and glorified. If we look deeper into the motives of the martyrs, we immediately realize that none of these martyrs died for their religion, their faith, for righteousness and justice, or even for their "country". They sacrificed themselves for their family, for the Emperor, for the head of their clan, etc. The fear of death is overcome by the sacrificial deed of saving their clan or the head of their clan (the Emperor is the head of the biggest clan) so that life can be continued eternally. In other words, the threat of discontinuing the clan is greater than the threat of an individual death. Thus, the Chinese saying "Sacrifice your small-self for the sake of the big-self" (牺牲小我、成全大我) remains the ideal for many Chinese.

However, having dozens of children will not be able to take away that fear of death and the loss of identity. This is clearly illustrated by the presence of the Temple shrines in the Chinese communities. The Shen-chu-pei (神主牌) of the dead are put into the clan's temple shrine. Shen-chu-pei is a piece of wooden plate with the name of the dead grafted on it. When the dead is buried, this wooden plate (a representative of his identity) will be put into the temple shrine along with other deceased clan members to ensure that he is not alone. The dead is buried alongside with his forefathers so that he can still enjoy that community life in the next world.

### C. Death and Identity in the Bible

What is “identity”? Hans Frei defines this term as “the specific uniqueness of a person, what really counts about him, quite apart from both comparison and contrast to others.” He says, “A person’s identity is the total of all his physical and personality characteristics referred neither to other persons for comparison nor to a common ideal type called human, but to himself.” Such definition sounds very “Western” and “existential”. However, “identity” is more than a person’s uniqueness, it is obviously a “relational” term. When a person introduces himself, often he says, “I am so and so, a Chinese.” All these are relations. “Chinese” refers to his relationship with his countrymen, “student” refers to his relationship with other fellow-students in the campus, “pastor” refers to his relation with church-members, and “so and so” refers to his relation with his family. The term “identity crisis” indicates that this person lacks a sense of identification with something else - a meaningful community or some other significant point of reference for his life, It indicates an alienation with others, either his peers or his family.

We can also say that there are several kinds of relationships from which man finds his own identity. First of all is his relationship with others - family, peer, or any other meaningful community; Chinese put a lot of emphasis on such a relationship. As pointed out before, a Chinese finds his own identity in his relation with his clan or family. Second is his relation with Nature. Taoism put much emphasis on such a relation, and most of the Chinese too find their identity in their relation with their native soil. Third is his relation with himself. Soren Kierkegaard writes, “Man is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates itself to its self.” Thus, “identity crisis” refers not only to his alienation with any meaningful community, but also an alienation with his past self or future self.

However, we must realize that all these relations are transient and temporary. One day all these relationships will be broken down, and that day is the day of our death. Death mercilessly cuts off all our relations with others, with our family and also with ourselves. After death, there is no such thing as present self, past self or future self. Death is the end of all relationships. Karl Barth is right when he says that death is the loss of identity, total isolation and alienation. The Hebrew word for Sheol means isolation, alienation. If our sense of identity is grounded only on such transient and temporary relationships, death surely means the absolute loss of our identity.

The Scriptures define man in terms of his relationship with his creator. The word  $\omega' \text{ אִשָּׁה}$  is also a relational term, it indicates not only his relationship with his significant others (woman), but also with his creator. A man is called, from a creation point of view, the image of God. But the Scriptures often use the word “covenant” to indicate man’s relationship with God. It is a soteriological term. The Lord is called the Lord of the covenant, and man is his covenantal people. The word covenant  $\text{בְּרִית}$  is derived from the Akkadian root baru meaning to “bind”. Covenant is a bondage, a bondage between



life and death. When the Lord said to Israel, "I am your God, you are my people." He and his people entered into this life-and-death bondage. However, when man sinned and broke the covenant, death was the result. Thus the Apostle Paul says, "The sting of death is sin" (I Corinthians 15:56). The people of Israel were no longer called "my people", but call "no people". They were a people without identity because they had broken the covenant. Through the death and the resurrection of Christ, man can be reconciled to God through faith. Christ has established a new covenant through the shedding of His blood. A new Israel is gathered, and an eternal relationship is established. The Apostle Paul triumphantly declares,

"Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?" (I Corinth. 15:55)  
"If God is for us, who can be against us?  
He who did not spare his own son, but gave him  
up for us all - how will he not also along with  
him, graciously give us all things? ----- Christ  
Jesus who died - more than that, who was raised  
to life -- is at the right hand of God and is  
also interceding for us. Who shall separate us  
from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or  
hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness  
or danger or sword? ----- For I am convinced that  
neither death nor life, neither angels nor  
demons, nor anything else in creation, will be  
able to separate us from the love of God that is  
in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:31-35)

Thus, the answer to the threat of death can only be found in man's reconciliation with God, in his willingness and commitment to enter into a new covenantal relationship with the living God. It is only then that his identity will be secure and eternal.

### III. Death and Immortality

#### A. Death and Immortality in the Chinese Culture

Do the Chinese believe in the immortality of life? Before the coming of Buddhism from India, the concept of immortality was not very obvious. Confucius refused to speculate on this subject. He said, "If we yet do not understand life, how can we understand death". However, in Confucianism, immortality is often conceived not so much as the continuation of an individual life, but the continuation of the race for ever. Life can be perpetuated through the birth of the offsprings. Therefore, to be barren is a curse, and to have no male heir is equally evil.

However, in Taoism, the concept of immortality of life seems to be much more popular. Lao Tze said that a man's eternal life can be attained through his union with the eternal Nature. In the latter developments of Taoism, the concept of immortality was much more obvious and developed. The famous Chinese scholar Hsu Ti-shan (許地山) said in his book Taoistic Thought and Taoistic Religion:

“The Taoist idea of immortality is not a greedy clinging to life, nor a seeking to escape from death, it wants to Know life as it is and death as it is. Religion then can reach its complete effectualness only insofar as it can match life and death. Moral philosophy (ethics) suffices for life, but when we have a philosophy of death on top of philosophy of life, then and only then, have we attained to religion. The peasants as we know him, does not have very clear or extensive conceptions of salvation except in terms of the pictures furnished him by the hell temples where future punishments are vividly depicted in relief — salvation for him is summed in words -- through hell and the cycle of rebirth to heaven,”

The coming in of Buddhism in the first century helped to spread this idea far and wide. For most Chinese, immortality of the soul is taken for granted. The future life is a continuation of this life and a preparation for re-entrance into the physical world. The doctrine of life immortality can be summarized in the following:

1. After a man's death, the soul becomes three, one stays with body in the grave, one goes wandering through the spirit world; and one goes through its transmigration in re-incarnation after judgment in the underworld. At last, if its stock of merit becomes sufficient, it may hope to enter heaven and be at rest.
2. In the next world, “business is transacted as usual”, money-making and law-suits, success and failures, are as much a part of the life of the spirit world as of mundane life. Therefore, when a Chinese dies, his relatives burn paper money, paper car, etc., in order to give the deceased some money to spend in the other world.
3. Every soul will undergo a judgment and the judgment of the soul is according to the doctrine of Yin-kuo (陰功) and the cycle of rebirth (輪迴). There are six possible stages of rebirth.
  - a. the order of devas, or T'ien Tao. This is the thirty-three heavens, mostly reserved to very good and moral saints.
  - b. the order of humans, or Jen Tao. This is a stage for good people.
  - c. the demonic order of “Asuras” ( ). This is the order reserved for

half-good and half-bad people who are in constant strife with the principle of eternal goodness personified as “Ti Shin” (帝釋), the Lord of Central Heaven.

- d. the stage of sufferers in Ti-yu (地獄) Known as the Earth Prisons or the Eighteen Boundless Hells. They are kept in these hells for a long time, but not for eternity. When sin is expiated on earth by a person’s relatives, he may have hope for a better life.
  - e. the order for criminals condemned to insatiable hunger and thirst after release from hell. This is known as the order of Yen-Lo-Wang or Pretas (閻王) .
  - f. the order of animals. Bestly men and criminals will be “converted” into animals in their next life.
4. As we have pointed out, when a man dies, his soul becomes three Known as the Hun (魂), Shen (神), and P’o (魄) . P’o remains in the dead body until decomposition sets in. However, if it still remains there after decomposition, it becomes a vampire, a devouring ghost. The Hun or Shen is also a powerful and restless spirit. They will depart from the dead body on the 49th day after death. It is powerful because it can either bless or curse the bereaved, it is restless because it is resentful in the disembodied state and longing for reincarnation. Whether it can re-incarnate or not depends very much on the living who can give it needed supplies of the necessary existence in the spirit world as well as the reincarnation of the life.

Therefore, ancestor worship is very common in the Chinese society. In order to redeem the soul of the deceased, they burn paper money, invite professional mourners to mourn, and priests to do all Kinds of rituals. Families have spent \$5,000 (US\$) to fulfill all these obligations. This often creates many family conflicts in our generation today because the youngsters are more exposed to the Western way of thinking.

## B. Death and Immortality in the Bible

### 1. Was Man Created immortal?

Was man created immortal according to the Scripture? Is immortality of life described in the Bible different from the Chinese concept of immortality? If Adam had not sinned, would he be subject to death? There are many different theological interpretations on this subject. Pelagians and Socinians taught that man was created mortal. Man is under the law of death by virtue of his creation. In the course of time, he is bound to die. This was so even before Adam sinned. This view is supported by present day science which stresses that death is the law of organized matter, All physical organisms, including human, carry within them the seed of decay and dissolution. Death reigned in the vegetable and animal world before the

entrance of sin. Likewise, before Adam fell, he was subject to death.

Reformed theologians oppose the above view. They think that man was created immortal. It was of the fall of Adam that brought man mortality. The Scriptural support is:

- a. Man was created in the image of God and was pronounced good on his completion (Genesis 1:26,37,31). In view of the perfect condition in which the image of God existed originally, it is quite impossible than man carries within him the seed of decay, dissolution and mortality.
- b. According to the Bible, death is introduced into the world of humanity by sin, and as a punishment for sin (Gen. 2:17, Rom. 6:23).
- c. In the Scriptures, death is not something that is natural to the life of man, but something that is foreign and hostile to human life. It is a judgment (Rom. 1:32), a condemnation (Rom. 5:16), a curse (Gal. 3:13), and an expression of divine anger. It is something unnatural.

All these do not mean that there may not have been death in the vegetable and animal world apart from sin, but even there, the entrance of sin evidently brought a bondage of corruption (Rom. 8:20-22).

These arguments sound very convincing, yet a study of I Corinthians 15:42-49 throws further light on this question.

## 2. I Corinthians 15:42-49

I Corinthians 15 is Paul's answer to the Corinthians question. The Corinthian theology is much influenced by Gnosticism and Greek anthropology. They believed that they were already baptized with Christ, and their "soul" had been saved. Death to them is not an enemy, but a friend. Death only means the release of the redeemed soul from the bodily prison. The carnal body is perishable and evil. Therefore, they cannot accept the notion of bodily resurrection. Paul refutes such erroneous theology. Death is the last enemy to be conquered. If there is no general resurrection, the resurrection of Christ is also not true (v.12). If Christ was not raised from the dead, we are still in sin and our life is totally hopeless.

In verses 42-44, Paul contrasts the two different kinds of body, namely, the body of the believer prior to his death and his resurrection body. The body of the believer prior to his death is described as perishable, dishonorable, and weak, while the resurrection body, imperishable, glorious, and powerful. Paul summarizes the above in verse 44a where he

states that the two bodies being contrasted are the natural body (**ΨΥΧΙΚΟΣ**) and the spiritual body (**Πνευματικός**).

In verse 44b Paul takes an important turn. He argues that if there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. In other words, he argues directly from the psychical body to the pneumatic body, the former being the condition for the latter; the latter is postulated on the bases of the former.

Verse 45 is closely connected to verse 44b, Here, Paul appeals to Scripture to support his argument in verse 44b. He cites Genesis 2:7 which mentions only the creation of the first Adam, but Paul finds in it also a reference to the becoming of the last Adam. Since verse 45 is an attempt to elaborate verse 44b, it seems that Paul is saying that Adam is the primary representative of ο **ΨΥΧΙΚΟΣ**, and the last Adam, that of ο **Πνευματικός**.

The important thing to note at this point is that Adam is in view prior to the Fall for in Genesis 2:7 Adam has not yet sinned. Therefore, we can conclude that our body is a psychical body which is characterized by mortality and corruption. Man was created mortal. His psychical body will pass away. However, the psychical body is followed by the pneumatic body which is a higher form of somatic existence. In other words, God has planned from the beginning that there will be provision for a higher Kind of body, or higher state of existence. This argument is further supported by the presence of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9, 3:22). This tree was obviously associated with higher, unchangeable and eternal life to be secured through probation. This is supported by Revelation 2:7 which says that the fruit of the Tree of Life is reserved for those “who overcome”. if man were created immortal, the presence of the Tree of Life would be meaningless. Only when man was created mortal would the Tree of Life become meaningful, for then, the victor would be transformed into this higher unchangeable and eternal form of life confirmed by the reward of the fruit of the Tree of Life. Now, man has sinned, he has failed the probation. The Tree of Life is only reserved for those “who overcome<sup>1\*</sup>, or those who are in Christ. Thus, only the followers of the Second Adam would experience this transformation from the psychical body to the pneumatic body, also Known as the resurrection body. In other words, the day of our resurrection is the day when our psychical body transformed into the incorruptible pneumatic body.

### C. Immortality of the Soul vs. Resurrection

We have so far discussed that man’s body was not created immortal. But what about his soul? Does the Bible, like the Greeks or the Chinese, believe that our soul is immortal? Is the belief of the soul and the belief of resurrection mutually exclusive?

First of all, we have to notice that the Biblical doctrine of body and soul is very different from the Chinese or the Greek. While both Chinese and Greek believe that man is an immortal soul living for a while in a mortal body, and images like prison and release, cocoon and butterfly are used to describe the departure of the soul from body in death, the Bible does not say that the body houses a soul. Rather it is the soul that contain the body. To use Wheeler Robinson's phrase, a "man is an animated body, not an incarnated soul." The German philosopher, Max Scheler also argues that just as during life the personality cannot be contained by the .physical body, so in death the spiritual body will not come to an end when the physical body has deteriorated". In fact, in I Corinthians 15, the contrast is not so much between the mortal body and the immortal soul, but the corruptible psychical body and the immortal spiritual body. Culmann has the following comment,

"Only he who apprehends with the first Christians the horror of death, who takes death seriously as death, can comprehend the Easter exultation of the primitive Christian community and understand that the whole thinking of the New Testament is governed by the belief in the Resurrection. Belief in the immortality of the soul is not belief in a revolutionary event. Immortality, in fact, is only a negative assertion: the soul does not die, but simply lives on. Resurrection is a positive assertion. The whole man, who has really died, is recalled to life by a new act of creation by God. Something has happened - a miracle of creation. For something has also happened previously, something fearful life formed by God has been destroyed."

Therefore, we can conclude that death is never regarded as natural. It is considered the last enemy to be conquered. However, the Bible also emphasizes the atonement, reconciliation and victory over death through the vicarious incorporation into him who is the second Adam. By the first Adam came death into the world, by the second Adam came resurrection and life (I Corinthians 15:22). In other words, eternal life is a free gift of God and not the continuation of the existing life.

#### D. The Intermediate State

Now, if our psychical body will be transformed into the spiritual body in the time of general resurrection, what about the condition of the dead before the Second Coming of Christ (i.e. General Resurrection)<sup>1</sup>? Theologians call this period the intermediate state.

In the Old Testament, the dead were thought to have gone to the which was a place of darkness cut off from the life on this earth. Yahweh did not have much interest in this place. However, the dead (or we can use the word soul although the Hebrew understanding of the soul is very different from the Greek notion of soul) there were not without life. They existed as the weakest form of life; for example, King Saul's, turning to the woman at Endor and summoning the soul of Samuel to inquire of his fate (I Sam. 28). In the New Testament, the Bible seems to have little hint on human condition in the intermediate state. Paul in Philippians 1:20ff says that, "to die is to gain --- I desire to

depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” Paul seems to suggest that death is a pathway unto a closer union with Christ and is thus far better. When he dies he will be with Christ visibly and gloriously, and this is the gain. However, the Whole context also suggests that to live or to die makes no fundamental differences for him. Living and dying are not placed over against each other, but the latter rather a result of the former. He can call death “gain” because life in the body presents all Kinds of troubles, trials, and limitations with regard to what Christ means for him. That is why Paul says in verse 23 that he desires to depart (to die) and to be with Christ; for that is far much better.

Therefore, we can conclude that dying is to be with Christ. The Bible sheds no light on the mode of existence, but the intermediate state is a conscious existence, for believers can feel Christ’s presence which is far better. In the Second Coming of Christ, he will be raised up and transformed immortal and incorruptible. This is the only hope for mankind.

#### IV. The Chinese Way of Dying

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross suggests that a dying patient progresses a sequence of normal, healthy emotional stages, from the onset of the illness to death itself. They are denial, isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and then acceptance. They are not in rigid sequence. Each stage may vary in duration, recur, or overlap as ambivalence, depending on whether that emotion has been thoroughly worked through. So far, nobody has done any research work among the Chinese patients. But I have interviewed more than 30 terminally sick patients, and I was surprised that Kubler-Ross finding corresponds to my findings exactly. This seems to indicate that these stages of development is not a cultural product, but a universal phenomenon.

##### Stage One: Denial

Denial is a radical but almost universal response to a grave medical shock. It is more usually needed at the beginning of a serious illness than towards the end of life. But some patients may remain in this stage until the very moment of his death.

Dr. Lam was a very successful young medical doctor. At the prime of his life, age 34, he discovered a very malignant tumor in his liver. His medical knowledge tells him that this is a terminal case. When I visited him in the hospital, I was surprised to see that he virtually denied that this was a serious sickness. He told me and his wife a lot about his plans after the surgery (survival of such kind of surgery is less than 5%), and he seemed to be fully convinced that he would be alright after this surgery.

Mr. Wong was 40 years old. When the doctor told him that he had lung cancer, he flatly denied the diagnosis. He went to see doctor after doctor in order that he might find one telling him that the diagnosis was wrong.

Usually, denial may be manifest in remarks such as: It's just one of those things; When I go home next week . . . ; I'm going on vacation next year; I'm getting better; I'm feeling fine; It's not too bad; I hope to be back at work by . . . ; The pneumonia is worse than the cancer; This emphysema is the cause of my trouble.

### Stage Two: Isolation

Isolation usually goes together with denial. Having received and blocked the shock of impending death, the patient seems to need to retreat into himself for a period in order to mobilize his resources to start coping with the situation.

When Mrs. Lau was told that she had liver cancer, she immediately retreated to the Victoria Peak alone and continuously asked herself this question, "Why me?" Apart from this question she repeatedly asked herself, she had great envy of those who were healthy.

Often, isolation may be verbalized as follows: You don't know how it feels; You can't, know how it feels . . . ; They don't understand; I don't like to complain, but they can't help me; I had a vision - I saw myself climbing a mountain on my own, and then I was all alone on the top, on a grassy plane; I think I have cancer, but I haven't told anyone; They don't tell you anything; I have to manage alone; I try to work out what's going on; I don't like to bother them; They are too busy; I try to hide what I am feeling, so that I don't upset my family; I don't like to be alone; Pastor, I don't want to bother you because I know you will be upset when you hear this bad news.

### Stage Three: Anger

I was visiting a patient who suffers from stomach cancer. After introducing myself, he began to burst into anger and cried loudly in the ward, "You people having been pressing me all the time! You want me to die right now . . . ." Anger is in fact a fairly common feeling experienced by those who face impending death. Once the patient has acknowledged that the threat of death is real, a natural temporary reaction seems to be that of protest and rebellion. Feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment predominate. Again, he would ask the question, "Why me? Why not him?" The target of this anger may be the doctor, nurse, relatives, pastors or even God.

During the interviews, I found that most of these patients felt annoyed with the hospital environment, hospital staff, and demanded to be transferred to another hospital or be sent back home. Many often, his relatives didn't understand his emotional need and this became the bone of contention among the family members.

Angry feelings may be expressed as: Why am I being punished?; They don't care; No one takes any



notice; The intern should be fully responsible for my sickness; The treatment is doing me no good; The doctor is not responsible and the nurses are inconsiderate; My relatives are inconsiderate; How can there be a God of love?; What have I done to deserve this?

#### Stage Four: Bargaining

This is very common among the Chinese when they appear to accept the fact of dying. They say, “Yes, it is me, but I am not yet ready. Give me a little longer until I have seen my son coming back from the States, then you can take me any time.” The patient may bargain with his life in exchange for more time, a day without pain, an opportunity to put something right, complete a task, repent, or to achieve one last wish.

#### Stage Five: Depression

Once the patient can no longer deny his illness his disbelief, rage and bargaining are replaced by a sense of loss with which depression is usually associated. But Chinese tend to repress this depressive feelings even at the point of death. When visitors came they would put up a smiling face and act as if there is no problem, I had several occasions to talk with these patients, and the following conversation is a typical example:

Pastor: Hi, how do you feel today?

Patient: OK. It seems to be better. Pastor, I know (with smile) you're busy, you shouldn't have come. If I recover I'll go and visit you.

(Note: This is not a denial, but Just wanted to show the Pastor that he is OK even though he has accepted the fact that he is not OK, he is not denying the fact of imminent death, but denying his feelings towards this tragedy.)

Pastor: You said, “If I recover,” you seem to be quite bothered by whether or not you will recover.

Patient: Everyone would be worried if he is sick, isn't it true, Pastor?

Pastor: So, you are worried.

Patient: Yes.

Pastor: You are worried about your life, about your family.

Patient: Yes, I am scared. I am very depressed. I am worried about my wife and my children.

(At this point, the patient no longer represses his feelings. With a touch from the pastor, he begins to cry, and releases his repressed feelings freely.)

#### Stage Six: Acceptance

The final stage is acceptance. If a patient has had enough time and has been given some help in

working through the previously described stages, he will come to the stage of acceptance. It is as if the pain is gone, the struggle is over, and there comes a time for “the final rest before the long journey” as one patient phrased it.

In the Old Testament, we find similar emotional reactions of the dying. The illness of Hezekiah in II King 20 is a classical example. There was denial, anger, isolation, bargaining, and depression when Hezekiah learned about his death. These psychological developments are natural and universal. I am sure that an understanding of a patient’s state of mind will equip us in a much better way to care for these patients.

## Conclusion

Death and dying in the Chinese Community is still a relatively new area that needs further research work and study; this paper only provides a framework for such research. I am looking forward to seeing more thorough research and more attention from the public so that our society will no longer be a death-denying society.