

INVISIBLE NICHE: (RE)CONSIDERING CULTURAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS IN DESIGN

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1. Introduction

According to the traditions of the Chinese in the Canton region, as well as those of most other Chinese provinces, after one has passed away, it is believed that one's body should be laid underground to rest, and that one's spirit would live forever in another world. Since the 1960s, due to the insufficient supply of graveyards in Hong Kong (a special administrative region located in the southern part of China, the majority of whose population is Cantonese), the Hong Kong government has encouraged people to use an alternative method -- cremation -- and to place the cremated ashes into the niches of columbaria. This method (a government policy) has gradually become more and more acceptable to the Hong Kong people. However, some people still reject it since it contradicts Chinese traditional and cultural beliefs and needs. In addition, although columbaria save space, the demand for niches is large and increases every year. It is expected that this solution will also prove unsustainable. It is thus important for us to turn our attention to designing a new concept and system, as well as the physical objects of a new burial method, the aim being to fulfil both traditional cultural beliefs and needs and the new social (urban) needs.

2. The spatial and temporal dimensions of burial culture

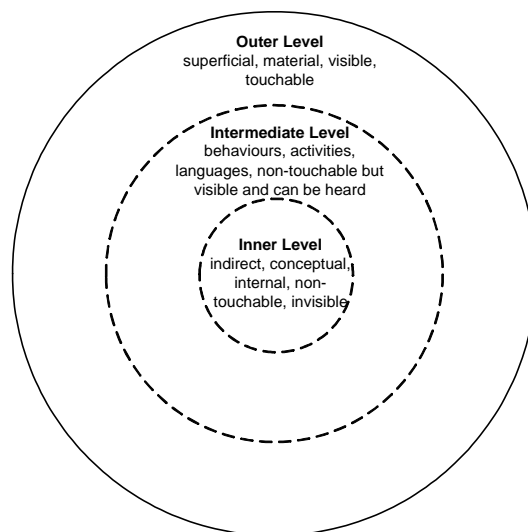


Figure 1. The spatial dimension of culture

To propose a new burial design, we have to understand the cultural considerations of the Chinese (specifically the Cantonese -- those in Hong Kong) towards death. In fact, it is difficult and complicated to understand the culture(s) of a country or a group of people, as culture is related not only to physical objects but also abstract personal beliefs, needs and wants [Ng & Ingram 1983, Siu 1998]. Talking about Chinese cultures, Ho [1992] points out that culture has both a "spatial dimension" and a "temporal dimension". Each spatial layer of a culture represents the specific structure and characteristics of the culture at a specific period of time. The spatial dimension can be understood as three levels of structure: an outer level, an intermediate level, and an inner level (Figure 1). Compared with the two former levels, the inner level is intangible and invisible. Although this level is difficult to understand, it can be reflected through the intermediate and outer levels of the spatial dimension. Culture also has temporal characteristics. If the spatial dimension is the cross-section of culture, then the temporal dimension is the longitudinal-section of it. Different temporal layers illustrate different structures and characteristics of a culture in terms of time.

2.1 Traditional ways of thinking

The inner level of the spatial dimension of culture affects not only how people make decisions and "act" (the intermediate level), but also the design of physical objects (the outer level). The traditional Chinese beliefs and ways of thinking about death affect how most Hong Kong people select burial methods (including burial activities and physical objects). The Chinese ancients believed that human beings were a combination of the spirit and the body [Ho 1992, Wang 1995]. When one passed away, his/her spirit remained alive. Under this concept, people thought that there should be "homes" for the spirits. This marked the origin of graves, known as "tombs" in Chinese. Most Chinese also believed that the spirit would return to the sky, while the body would return to the ground. As the deceased person's body was buried in the ground, he/she could get rid of the misfortune and vexation of the living world. By having a good rest under the ground, his/her spirit would be purified and returned to the sky and bless the descendant. Thus, the Chinese (even nowadays) have a traditional way of thinking about and referring to death: "going back to the earth, and being settled".

The importance of this way of thinking for Chinese people is reflected by how seriously they take the process of selecting places to construct tombs. The Chinese believe the location of tombs and the direction they face affect the fate of their descendants. For example, in the past, the Chinese believed that the construction of the emperor's tomb was a matter relating to the movement of the universe. Until now, the selection of a graveyard is still an important part of *feng-shui*, that is, the direction of the tombs, the pattern in which they are arranged, the situations and positions of mountains, the flow of rivers and the growth direction of trees.

With reference to the concept of culture stated by Ho [1992], the three levels of the spatial dimension of traditional burial culture can be understood as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1. Three levels of the spatial dimension of the traditional burial culture

Inner level	Beliefs and preferences: Human beings were a combination of the spirit and the body. When one passed away, his/her spirit remained alive. When one passed away, his/her body should be laid underground to rest, and his/her spirit would live forever in another world As the deceased person's body was buried in the ground, he/she could be rid of the misfortunes and vexations of the world: "going back to the earth, and being settled". Proper burial showed respect to the deceased. By having a good rest under the ground, the deceased's spirit would be purified, return to the sky (heaven) and bless the descendants. The location and direction of tombs affected the fate of their descendants.
Intermediate level	Behaviours and activities: The deceased was buried in the ground. Serious consideration was taken in selecting places for constructing

	tombs, taking account of, for example, the direction in which the tombs faced, the arrangement and pattern of the tombs, the positions of mountains, the flow of rivers and the growth direction of trees.
Outer level	Physical design and objects: Graveyards (tombs). Constructions of the tombs. Physical objects assisting the funeral rites, and routine offerings (e.g. in special festivals)

2.2 Changes in social needs and culture

As mentioned above, culture has a temporal dimension. This means the three levels of the spatial dimension of culture change according to time. In Hong Kong, as in many modern cities in the Chinese mainland, underground burial has become very expensive, and cannot match the needs of urban development -- there is a limitation of space in dense urban areas. In order to save space for building graveyards and to decrease construction and maintenance fees, the government has encouraged people to adopt an alternative method: cremation followed by placing the cremated ashes into the niches of columbaria. Although this government policy received a fairly negative response at first, this method has in fact become increasingly acceptable to Hong Kong people. Moreover, under the influence of modern culture, many people (especially the younger generation) want to simplify the traditionally very complicated burial process (funeral rites) in order to minimise the inconvenience. According to interviews, one of the key preferences/concerns of respondents in handling burial activities is "convenience". Thus, cremation, niches and columbaria have become common and seem to be well-accepted method and designs.

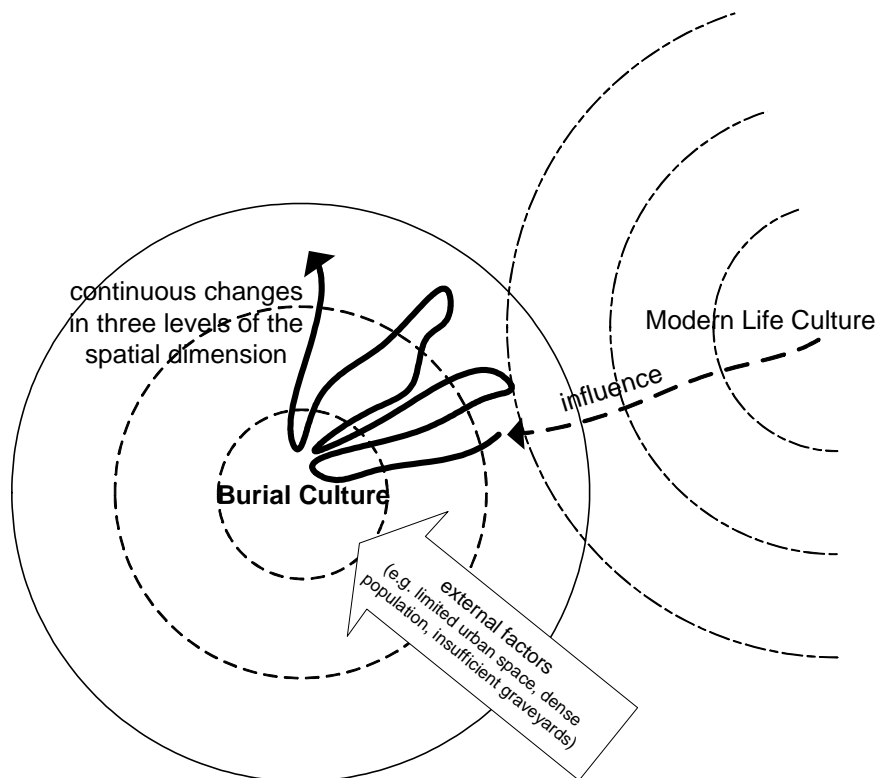


Figure 2. Changes in three levels of the spatial dimension of burial culture

Figure 2 illustrates the influences and changes in the burial culture of Hong Kong. The modern way of life and other external factors affect the traditional burial culture (that is, all three levels of the spatial dimension). The influences and their changes are continuous transformations: the outer level influences the intermediate and inner levels continuously, and vice versa. For example, social changes

(modern urban life) make people change their preferences to the "simple" and "convenient" (the inner level). In terms of time, this preference has acquired more and more strength and, in turn, burial activities have become simpler and thus raised the acceptance rate of the methods of cremation and placing the cremated ashes into the niches of columbaria. In addition, the increasing influence of new foreign and/or local cultures (e.g. lifestyles, religions, new knowledge) and external factors (constraints and changes of economy and lifestyles) continuously accelerate these changes and reinforce the results. The details are shown in the following table (see Table 2):

Table 2. Changes of the three levels of the spatial dimension of burial culture

Inner level	New beliefs and preferences: Urban lifestyles and needs: busy, simple, efficient, convenient, e.g. accessible location of graveyard or columbarium. Individualism or isolation: human relations. Economic concerns. Relatively low status of senior relatives.
Intermediate level	Key changes of the behaviours and activities according to the changes of the inner level: Cremation. Simple funeral rites. Relatively less consideration of traditional customs and routines.
Outer level	Key changes of physical design and objects according to the changes of the inner level: Niches. Columbaria. Objects assisting the simple funeral rites.

2.3 Areas not satisfied

In Table 2, the intermediate and outer levels of the spatial dimension of burial culture are modified according to the changes at the inner level. It is clear that these changes have been widespread across Hong Kong in the past four decades. Some people, especially the young generation, do not like the traditional burial method of laying a relative's body underground. They prefer to follow the current government policy. However, these changes at the intermediate and outer levels of the spatial dimension of burial culture do not represent satisfaction/settlement at the inner level. Some people point out that the current choice is just "the choice is one 'between a rock and a hard place'".

In fact, land is the most expensive product in Hong Kong. It is too expensive for an ordinary people to buy private land as a graveyard nowadays. Most of the time, people expect the government to provide graveyards. (The charge is also very high compared with that for a niche in a columbarium. Sometimes people need to wait a long time, and many of the graveyards are located far away from the urban areas.) However, since the 1960s, the provision of land for graveyards by the government has decreased rapidly. Even those prepared to endure the delay and the long distances involved in using the traditional underground burial method are required, according to the new government policy concerning public graveyards, to remove the remains (that is, dig out the bones and put them in urns) from the ground after seven years from the burial. This policy makes people feel that it is complicated, inconvenient and troublesome to select the traditional method. Moreover, some people believe that digging out the deceased from the ground after burial is impolite and disrespectful to the deceased. Further, if there are any customary or *feng-shui* mistakes during the digging out process, this may cause some misfortune. Thus, many people prefer to select the cremation method -- not because they *prefer* to do it, but more because they have no other reasonable choice. Therefore, the changes mentioned above do not mean that the inner level of the spatial dimension of burial culture has been totally replaced or erased. In fact, the beliefs and preferences (e.g. "going back to the earth, and being settled") listed in Table 1 have not been satisfied.

3. A new concept of cemetery

After (re)considering carefully the Chinese cultural needs and the social changes in Hong Kong, we have proposed a new concept of burial method, the *Invisible Niche*, to the Hong Kong government and the people and organisations interested in providing funeral services. The key idea of the concept/design is that, instead of placing the cremated ash into the niches of columbaria, the ash of the deceased will be put into newly designed degradable urns (that is, the *Invisible Niches* in this article), and buried underground. In this way, the ash will ultimately enrich the environment. After the ash is totally degraded, the land will be ready to absorb more ash. In other words, the space for cremated ash is unlimited.

Moreover, we have proposed that individual epitaphs be set up inside the cemetery for every deceased person. The relatives of the deceased can carry out funeral rites and mourning. Ten years after the burial, the individual epitaphs will be replaced by carving the name of the deceased onto the monument in the cemetery, which is a sign of honour and eternity. This replacement can minimise the accumulation of epitaphs, and result in the cemetery being sustainable. The rite means paying the highest respect to the deceased ancestors. We thereby hope to lessen the sorrow of the surviving relatives and lead them to a more positive way of taking leave of their family members and friends.

After discussions with government officers, people providing funeral services, and some Hong Kong Chinese, we discovered that the success of this new burial design concept depends not only on the well-organised system and the design of the physical environment and objects (e.g. degradable urns) for the cemetery, which aims to save space and result in a high degree of sustainability (that is, to meet the new social/urban needs). In fact, it also significantly relies on whether the design can fulfil people's traditional cultural needs and wants. In Chinese, the main concern is: "going back to the earth, and being settled".

4. (Re)considering the cultural and social factors in design

We are now living in a rational and function-oriented society. A city like Hong Kong, for example, places constant emphasis on development. Of course the nature of the term "development" is neutral. However, in the current development-oriented society, we seldom give serious consideration to some simple but fundamental questions: Have our initial cultural beliefs and preferences been totally changed? If not, have they been satisfied? If not, why do we still accept or force other people to accept such kinds of superficial designs?

Today we quantify everything. However, we seldom consider what is quality of life. Harvey [1989] and Raban [1974] criticise the modernist and rationalist idea nowadays that we only focus on large-scale, metropolitan-wide, technologically rational and efficient urban plans, but seldom consider traditions, local histories, particular wants, needs, and fancies. In short, we are seeing an unbalanced trend whereby current designs aim at a high degree of (superficial) usability, but seldom consider social, cultural and ideological satisfactions [Jordan & Green 1999, Siu 2000]. In fact, the most unfortunate thing is that we are forced by the supposedly better/improved designs to accept something which goes against our original and fundamental (traditional and cultural) beliefs and preferences. For example, the policy discussed above, regarding "cremation and placing the cremated ashes into the niches of columbaria" was accepted because people had no other choice.

Clearly, simple maintenance of "old" things without considering new societal needs is too idealistic and impractical. Thus we would totally fail if we proposed underground burial sites without considering the limitations of land availability in Hong Kong. Further, the success of the *Invisible Niche* is not because of any high-tech invention. Its design concept is based simply on the use of some degradable materials to make the urns, and the redesign of the burial system to achieve a sustainable solution to meet urban needs. It still has room for improvement, such as the initial investment of finding a place (large in size and convenient in location) to put the urns and set up the epitaphs and monument. In fact, the critical point for the success of the *Invisible Niche* is (a) its serious reconsideration of the Chinese way of thinking of death: "laid underground to rest" and "going back to the earth, and being settled", and (b) how its design satisfies this kind of thinking. The project

experience also tells us that considering traditional cultural needs and new social needs may not necessarily involve a contradictory outcome. If we seriously try, we can achieve a win-win outcome that satisfies both kinds of need.

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