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THE APPLICABILITY OF "INVISIBLE DEATH" TO POSTWAR HONG KONG REGION

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Abstract: The French historian Philippe Ariès posited that the twentieth century ushered in an era of "invisible death," where death became increasingly marginalized and secluded in the process of modernization, turning into a secretive taboo. While this theory offers a pivotal framework for understanding the transformation of death in Western society, its applicability to non-Western contexts remains untested. Post-war Hong Kong region provides a valuable case study for this examination.Therefore, the death in post-war Hong Kong region did not fade out of social vision, but was re-anchored through a series of institutional and ritual practices, becoming a continuously visible component of social structure. By analyzing this unique case, this study not only reveals the cross-cultural application limitations of the "invisible death" theory, but also attempts to clarify the cultural institutional arrangements that maintain and reconstruct the visibility of death in modern society.
Keywords: Invisible death; Post-war Hong Kong region; Visibility of death; Cultural system

1 INTRODUCTION

Philippe Ariès, the pioneering French historian, fundamentally reshaped our understanding of Western attitudes towards mortality through his seminal thesis of "inverted death." In his magnum opus, *The Hour of Our Death*, Ariès posits a profound historical shift wherein death, once a public and familiar event integrated into the fabric of community life, was progressively marginalized in the modern era. It retreated into the sterile, technical confines of the hospital, becoming a sequestered and sanitized taboo—a phenomenon he famously termed "invisible death." This powerful narrative of modernization-as-concealment has provided an indispensable framework for analyzing the socio-cultural trajectories of death in Western societies. However, its explanatory power becomes more complex and contested when applied to non-Western contexts undergoing their own distinct modernities.

It is at this critical juncture of theoretical dialogue that the case of post-war Hong Kong region presents a compelling site for examination. The socio-cultural landscape of Hong Kong region during the latter half of the twentieth century—a period marked by rapid urbanization, refugee influx, and colonial governance—would seem, at first glance, to exhibit conditions ripe for the emergence of Ariès's "invisible death." The simplification of domestic mourning rituals under the pressures of urban life, the traumatic yet ephemeral shock of the 1968-69 Hong Kong region flu pandemic, and the phenomenon of isolated deaths among a vulnerable elderly population all appear as potential vectors for death's social disappearance. Yet, to conclude that death became invisible in post-war Hong Kong region would be to overlook the robust and resilient structures that ensured its continued visibility. A meticulous death registration system, the enduring materiality of recorded identities in columbaria, the performance of indispensable public funeral rites, and the annual reaffirmation of communal memory through tomb-sweeping festivals collectively forged a distinctive reality. This paper, therefore, seeks to interrogate the applicability of Ariès's thesis by arguing that in post-war Hong Kong region, death was not so much rendered invisible as it was re-articulated through a complex interplay of bureaucratic, spatial, and ritualistic channels that maintained, and in certain ways even amplified, its presence within the public sphere.

In order to draw the above conclusions, this paper will start from the clarification of the concept of "invisible death," and on the basis of the literature review, we will examine in-depth the special historical arena of Hong Kong region in the post-war period, with a view to revealing how death has been redefined, recounted and remembered in the midst of social changes, so as to deepen our understanding of Hong Kong region's socio-cultural contexts.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In the field of Chinese social studies, funeral practices, as an important window for understanding cultural structures and social mentality, have traditionally received extensive attention from anthropologists and historians. Established studies have systematically explored Chinese funeral traditions from the perspectives of ritual practices, belief systems and social organisation. For instance, Ahern reveals the social connection and reciprocity behind ritual behaviour through a careful observation of ancestor worship in villages[1]. Henriot, on the other hand, traces the trajectory of the evolution of death concepts and practices from the late Qing to the Republican period through the lens of historical change[2]. Meng Xuehua, taking the Maonan as the object of study, points out that the funeral rites of the Maonan people center on the principle of "filial piety," guiding both the remembrance of the deceased and the sending-off of the

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soul, with their elaborate practices constituting a multicultural amalgam that integrates Bai-Yue, indigenous Guizhou, and Han Chinese customs[3].
In this line of scholarship, Hong Kong region's funerary history is characterised by a distinctive regional and staged approach, with Wilson noting that Hong Kong region functioned as a transit hub for human remains during the pre-war and early post-war periods, with organisations such as the Tung Wah Hospital playing a key role in the process[4]. With the development of the times, the social functions of funeral practices have also been given new interpretations: Zhuo Yue argues that Chinese funerals strengthen the individual's sense of belonging to the family and community through ritual activities[5]; Beaunoyer and Guitton further suggest that digital technologies are reshaping the ways in which the living and the dead interact, using the concept of "Cyberthanathology" to suggest that death does not really "pass away invisibly"[6]. Rather, it has moved into the digital realm and taken on new visible forms.
While these studies have laid an important foundation for understanding the continuity and transformation of Chinese funeral culture, there is a lack of systematic and in-depth discussion on the question of whether "invisible death" has survived the drastic social changes and modernisation process in the specific historical context of post-war Hong Kong region. In particular, it is worth asking how the social visibility of death was reconfigured when traditional funeral rituals encountered the multiple pressures of urban development, spatial compression and colonial modernity. Taking "invisible death" as a clue, this article attempts to re-examine the complex relationship between the governance of death, spatial order and cultural memory in post-war Hong Kong region, and thus responds to the explanatory power and limitations of Ariès's thesis of "death's recession" in non-Western contexts.

3 THE DEFINITION OF "INVISIBLE DEATH"

At the beginning of the 20th century, before the World War I, throughout the Western world of Latin culture, in both space and time, a person's passing still profoundly altered a social group or even an entire community[7]. When a person died, this family would put a funeral notice on the door and leave the front door open to allow entry for the person who was being mourned[7]. A service at the church then brought the entire community together, and after the congregation had expressed their condolences to the family, the casket was taken to the cemetery[7]. Social groups were struck by the death and reacted collectively, from immediate family members to wider circles of relatives and acquaintances[7]. In those days, every death could be called a public event.
With industrialization and urbanization, there was a quiet shift in attitudes towards death: the deaths of people other than politicians were not publicized; the old black and silver hearse became a plain grey sedan; and the disappearance of individuals no longer affected the continuity of society. The psychological mechanism that divorced death from society and removed its public ritualistic nature was accomplished. This made the death and mourning process more private and less visible in society, leading to the privatization of death. Another key point is the rejection and elimination of mourning, whereby the family of the deceased could not show distress in public. Around the middle of the 20th century, among the most individualistic middle classes in the West, there was a conviction that public expressions of mourning were inherently pathological[7]. This is society's way of denying participation in the emotions of the bereaved, a way of denying death in practice.In addition, death was fully medicalized after the World War II, and death was transferred from the home to the hospital.The isolation of the deceased from their families and communities by hospitals and the efforts of funeral directors to conceal their physical characteristics had also contributed to "invisible death[8]." Death had become a disguised admission of human failure as people find themselves unable to work against nature.
The above is Philip Ariès' theory of "invisible death." In short, this theory describes the phenomenon that death in modern society has gradually become hidden and difficult to be directly perceived and experienced by the public. In traditional societies, death is usually a public, collective event, accompanied by public activities such as ceremonies and funerals, reflecting the social nature of death. However, in the twentieth century, with the advancement of medical technology, the specialisation of hospitals and institutions, and the social avoidance and denial of death, death has become more private and invisible. Modern societies have progressively excluded death from public life, and the loss of the deceased no longer attracts collective attention or rituals, making death invisible or difficult to detect. This trend has led to an increased sense of strangeness and fear of death in society, and also reflects our denial of "evil" or the end of life, thus making death an "invisible existence" that is difficult for the public to understand or accept.

4 "INVISIBLE DEATH" AND POSTWAR HONG KONG REGION

It must be acknowledged that in the social landscape of post-war Hong Kong region, death does show some signs that are in line with Philippe Ariès' theory of "invisible death," especially in the modernisation of the hospital system and the phenomenon of the lonely death of the individual in the process of urbanisation.
In Hong Kong region in the second half of the twentieth century, hospitals, as the core of the modern healthcare system, continued to fulfil the social function of separating the living from the dead. Behind this phenomenon are multiple dynamics of cultural attitudes, urbanisation and the development of medical technology.
According to relevant studies, it was a common belief among Hong Kong region Chinese at the time that placing the body in the living space would bring about psychological discomfort and cultural ominous significance[9]. This belief was not simply a superstition, but a product of the interaction between the traditional funeral culture and the high-density urban living environment. Placing a body in a residential building, even if there are no real hygiene issues, is seen as incompatible with the norms of modern urban life[9]. This perception makes hospitals the ideal place to deal

with deaths. At the same time, traditional family ritual spaces are also facing challenges in the urban environment. A significant proportion of residents believe that the installation of family altars in high-rise dwellings may affect neighbourly relations, and in particular may be perceived by neighbours as damaging the Feng Shui of the living space. This community pressure reinforces each other with government regulation, prompting many families to relocate their ancestral tablets to specialised religious sites[10]. On the other hand, significant advances in medical technology have also reinforced the position of hospitals as the primary site for end-of-life care. Hong Kong region residents increasingly believe that hospitals are able to provide more effective treatment and life-sustaining care, and this perception has led to the common choice of sending sick family members to hospitals. Together, these factors have contributed to the central role of hospitals in the management of the dying process. By centralising end-of-life care and the disposal of human remains in specialised institutions, hospitals achieve a physical separation of the domains of life and death, thus constituting the distinctive spatial dimension of the "invisible death."

However, "invisible death" is not limited to the hospital setting, but also extends to the severance of social relationships and the disappearance of mourning rituals during outbreaks of infectious diseases: the influenza epidemic in Hong Kong region in July 1968, spread by droplet transmission, resulted in an estimated 400,000 to 600,000 people being infected[11]. To prevent the spread of the epidemic, patients were often asked to isolate themselves from their families, and most of the relatives and friends of the deceased were unable to attend the funerals due to the fear of mass infection. In this process, death is not only isolated within the high walls of hospitals, but also stripped of its original social ritual attributes due to the contagious nature of the disease, becoming a repressed and hidden event. Nonetheless, the living have not given up their emotional connection and expression of grief, turning to letters or the early Internet to convey their thoughts. Thus, even under the "invisible death" constructed by government control, disease threat and interpersonal isolation, human beings are still tenaciously seeking ways to express their remembrance and grief for the deceased.

With the emergence of the phenomenon of "invisible death" in the hospital space and in the control of diseases, another profound manifestation of this phenomenon at the social level is the increasingly frequent phenomenon of "death by loneliness." In order to analyse this phenomenon in depth, this article will take two cases of elderly people in the South China Morning Post (SCMP) in 1994 as examples: one of them is Mr. Wong, who was paralysed in his bed and had not been able to contact his son for many years; and the other one is Ms. Chan, who was ashamed to go back to her home because of her poverty and had no choice but to live in the Tung Wah Hospital[12]. These two elderly people had to face the end of their lives alone in the hospital without the care of their relatives. What they experienced was not only a lack of material support, but also a complete breakdown of social and emotional ties, and even neglect and forgetfulness in their last stage of life.

Such "invisible death" not only point to the physical aspect of passing away alone, but also profoundly reveal the changes in morality, ethics and family concepts in the process of urbanisation, and can be said to be an inevitable product of the trend towards Dink families and the era of indifference to the human condition.

In conclusion, in the modernisation process of post-war Hong Kong region, death has indeed shown many of the signs of what Ariès called "invisible death." The professionalisation of the hospital system has removed death from the domestic sphere, and the stigma of urban life and illness has prompted people to leave death and funeral matters to professional institutions, all of which have, to a certain extent, shifted death away from the public view of everyday life, making it appear invisible and isolated. However, under the surface of modernisation, death is still seen, discussed and even publicly emphasised in various ways. This is precisely the picture that the perspective of "visible death" is about to reveal to us.

5 "VISIBLE DEATH" AND POSTWAR HONG KONG REGION

Although the phenomenon of death in post-war Hong Kong region displays some of the characteristics of the "invisible death" of Ariès, if we look beyond this appearance, we will find that this "invisible" narrative is far from being the whole story. Hospitals and policies have moved death from the family to the public administration system; epidemics have made it an ongoing public crisis; and cases of "death by loneliness" have been exposed in the media and have become visible symbols of critique of social problems, forcing the public to face up to the costs of modernity. Death has not disappeared in post-war Hong Kong region, but has been systematically managed, embodied and continuously performed in the social community through a set of sophisticated institutional registries, highly centralised spatial settlements and cyclical cultural practices.

First of all, death registration has made deaths more visible. The earliest census of Hong Kong region was published in the Hong Kong region Government Gazette on May 15, 1841, and the official publication of the Hong Kong region government during the colonial period has been published ever since[13]. In 1872, the colonial government enacted "An ordinance for registering Births and Deaths in Hong Kong region," under which General Register Office was established to register all births and deaths in Hong Kong region[13]. The system has some limitations, such as the tendency not to report infant deaths, the sometimes arbitrary estimation of the number of deaths and the omission of deaths in order to avoid autopsies. But it was a marked improvement over previous death registration. Until 1961, government officials did not compile population projections and estimated life tables because they considered the data to be inaccurate and because the population of Hong Kong region was highly mobile before the outbreak of the Pacific War[13]. After a 30-year hiatus due to war and destabilizing events, Hong Kong region's first modern population census was conducted in February-March 1961, and since then censuses have been conducted every 10 years, so that

since 1961, Hong Kong region's registration of births and deaths has been considered to be very accurate[13]. By the 1970s, the number of deaths in Hong Kong region was affected by the influx of immigrants into the territory as a result of the unstable political situation in Mainland China. All deaths occurring in Hong Kong region are registered, including those of immigrants, irrespective of their country of residence or length of stay in Hong Kong region, resulting in a wide and complete coverage of deaths data[13]. Although there are some drawbacks, such as the fact that a death may be registered later than the year in which it occurred. But we still can see that death records from the late 20th century onwards are very clear, and even if you search for them now, you can find data on deaths at that time. The rigorous death registration system set up by the colonial government has transformed every death into a traceable file, enabling precise control of the deceased population.

Next, death also seems to be moving more towards visibility when it comes to how the remains are disposed of. Starting in the 1940s, cremation became progressively more popular in Hong Kong region, and by 1993, 68% of the deceased in Hong Kong region had been cremated, a significant increase from 35% in 1976[14]. As for the popularity of cremation, it is related to factors such as world trends, government policies and space constraints. In the late 19th century, cremation was introduced in Europe and the United States one after another, and the British Hong Kong region Government also encouraged the use of cremation[14]. In the late 1950s, the British Hong Kong region colonial government began efforts to modernize existing crematoria, build new crematoria and design attractive columbaria for storage of cremains, and the policy shifted towards the promotion of cremation as the preferred means of disposal of the deceased.Another key factor is the pressure on urban space, which is unique to Hong Kong region. Hong Kong region's limited land and high population density made traditional coffin burials less practical, and cremation was a more space-efficient way of disposing of the deceased[14]. The bodies "vanished" through cremation, which appears to be an "invisible death." But in its place were columbarium niches, affixed with the names and photographs of the deceased, and relatives who go to offer condolences can see their loved ones along with messages from other deceased persons, avoiding a complete separation of the living from the dead. Instead of making death invisible, the practice of cremation in post-war Hong Kong region constitutes a unique "visible death" through the concentration of space and the publicisation of rituals. Cremation concentrates the remains in the columbarium, a specialised territory for death, and when people go to pay their respects, they are entering a public space that is officially recognised and specialised by society. During traditional festivals such as Ching Ming, the crowds of people travelling to the columbarium form a periodic public spectacle, making mourning a highly visible social act. What is more, social controversies such as the shortage of columbarium niches completely problematise death, making it a visible social issue to be addressed by public policy, and making death continuously visible in the public sphere.

Then there are the funeral rites and grave-sweeping ceremonies that promoted "visible deaths." Needless to say the politicians because whenever a famous national leader passes away, the media in various countries will scramble to report on it and promote it to the public. In Hong Kong region, after the death of an ordinary person, the relatives of the deceased will also organize funeral ceremonies and invite others to come and offer condolences. What's more, during major festivals every year, people will make offerings of food and paper objects, including replicas of the deceased, to the deceased, because these gestures signify the spatial closeness of the departed souls and the continuity of the lineage in time[15]. Furthermore, the annual tomb-sweeping festivals of Ching Ming and Chung Yeung have been recognized by the State since 1961 and 1977 respectively, formalizing most of the informal practices of traditional tomb-sweeping[15]. These ceremonies not only served to lay the deceased to rest and gave psychological comfort to the family, but were also a way of capturing the attention of others and publicizing the deceased. The collective behaviour of the public in concentrating on sweeping graves during the Qingming and Chungyang seasons has created a cyclical public ritual. This phenomenon brings death into public view year after year in such a huge volume that it cannot be ignored. Thus, instead of making death disappear, the ritual transforms it into a public social fact that continuously confirms the visible presence of death in society.

To summarise, what post-war Hong Kong region presents is not the disappearance of death, but the modern transformation of its "visible" form. From a traditional cultural ritual, death has been transformed into a closely registered administrative fact, a centrally managed spatial event, and a social issue that is repeated through public rituals and media narratives. This multi-dimensional "visible death" reveals the profound changes in the social structure, family ethics and individual destiny of the colonial city in the process of modernisation.

6 CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study examines the historical evolution of death conceptions in late twentieth-century Hong Kong region, revealing a dialectical interplay between "invisible death" and "visible death." Moving beyond the dominant Western-derived narrative of death as "retreat," it demonstrates that postwar Hong Kong region's death paradigm exhibits a unique dual dynamic: while death has undergone a degree of concealment through modernization, it has simultaneously been systematically and publicly managed via state institutions, ritual practices, and spatial configurations, thereby acquiring a new form of visibility. This localized theoretical framework offers a significant conceptual tool for understanding modernity in non-Western societies.

That said, this study focuses primarily on macro-structural and cultural mechanisms, leaving room for further exploration of individual emotions and everyday practices at the micro level. Future research that delves into the fabric of daily life, capturing how people encounter death through concrete practices and emotional experiences, could engage in productive dialogue with this study and contribute to a richer, more comprehensive social history of death.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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