

The Interweaving of Funerary Rituals: The First Encounter of Funerary Cultures between China and the West in the 17th Century—A Reading of *The Interweaving of Rituals* by Nicolas Standaert

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The focus of the study of cultural exchange between China and the West in the late Ming and early Qing period has, in recent years, been gradually shifted from its previous attention to the social and cultural elites and classic literature to the practical activities carried out by the missionaries and common local religious communities. The recent publication of *The Interweaving of Rituals: Funerals in the Cultural Exchange between China and Europe*¹ by Professor Nicolas Standaert, a sinologist from the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, serves as an embodiment of such a trend.

There are eight chapters in *The Interweaving of Rituals*. In its short and concise introduction, Prof. Nicolas Standaert has made a brief account of the change of research paradigm in the study of Christian religion in China in the past decades before delimiting the research theme, time and space of his book, that is, funerals related to the Catholic Church in China in a horizon of about one hundred years ranging from the late 16th century when the missionaries first entered China to the Rites Controversy in the late 17th century. It is the hope of the author that the unities and conflicts in the Sino-Western cultural exchange could be examined with a new paradigm that focuses on cultural interactions and that transcends the old Europe-centered or China-centered paradigms.

In the first chapter, the author has briefly presented the respective funerary features in China and European countries before China encountered the West in the late 16th century and then delineated in a concise manner the changes affecting the funeral rituals in China and Western countries from the 10th century to the 16th century. In the section on the Chinese funerary rituals, the author has focused his attention on the Confucian funerals as they are a core component of the Chinese culture, their challenges posed by the Buddhist and Manchu rituals in those centuries, the impact of the growth of commercial economy in the late Ming Dynasty on the funeral rites, and the important influence of Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals* as a regulative text since the start of the 16th century. The publication of such regulative texts as the *Rituale Romanum* (or *Roman Ritual*), the hierarchical funeral services, the importance of the mass, form the main trunk of the section on the European funerals. The differences between the Chinese and European funerals, it seems, lie in the fact that the Chinese stress “orthopraxy”, that is, they stress the importance of funeral procedures while the Europeans emphasize “orthodoxy”, which lays emphasis on the norms of faith and religious doctrines.

¹ The original book, *The Interweaving of Rituals* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2008), is in English; the Chinese version is translated by Zhang Jia, Shanghai, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, 2009.

The second chapter examines the Chinese funerals described in the European documents penned by the missionaries in the 17th century. The documentations in those proto-ethnographic texts, so called by the author, not only portray China as the “other”, but also make prominent the image of Europe as the “self”. After a detailed documentational analysis, the author, at the end of the chapter, has summarized that the main differences between the Chinese and Western funerals lie in the fact that the interval between a death and a funeral in China is long (sometimes as long as several months) whereas in Europe, it is short (one to two days); that the funeral ceremony in China is usually held at the home of the dead, where the survivors are at the center of the ceremony, the so-called family ritual, whereas in Europe, the service is done at the church, where the religious staff play a leading role, the so-called religious ritual; that the dead body is placed inside a coffin or casket in China whereas in Europe, it is only wrapped in linen cloth, with the funeral service held in the church; that the Chinese funeral is accompanied by a solemn funeral procession, and the body is then entombed on the outskirts of a town or city whereas in Europe, the body is buried in the graveyard nearby the church.²

The third chapter describes the gradual embedding of the Catholic funeral rituals into the local Chinese culture in a period of about one hundred years from the 16th century when the missionaries entered China to the time before their exile to Canton (1666). The missionaries first gave up their position of purism and exclusivism before adopting both the Chinese and Western rituals in funerals, then they tried to graft the Western religious rites onto the framework of Chinese funerary rituals until those rituals finally entered into the life of Catholic believers and became an important part in sustaining their faith. The author has noticed that funerals are not the same as sacraments. Their openness to relatives and friends renders the Catholic mission in China more vulnerable to outside influences, which make it change. For instance, Catholic missionaries refused, at first, to accept that part of the Chinese funeral rituals in which the relatives kowtow in front of the deceased person or the memorial tablet of the dead, believing that it is an erroneous religious rite. However, most of the missionaries, by and by, changed their view of the kowtow ritual, accepting it as a way for the younger ones to express their filial piety to their elders. From the theological point of view prevalent among the Western missionaries in China in the 16th century, the “civil features” in the Confucian funeral ritual and practice, regarded as a rite without evil intentions, are allowed to coexist with the Christian rituals; Chinese Catholic followers, however, are not permitted to practice Buddhist and Taoist rituals because they are seen as evil ones since they worship idols. From the anthropological point of view, the institution of Zhu Xi’s *Family Rituals* and the anti-Buddhist movement render the application of Catholic rituals less difficult in China.

Chapter four analyzes the impact of the Canton exile on the Catholic funerals in China. The Board of Rites, faced with the charge that the Catholic funerals treat the dead with indifference, pressed the missionaries to change their policy, adopt some of the Chinese rituals, and increase appropriately the amount of expenditures for the funerals so as to show their filial piety and adapt to the local realities. Such a policy

² See *The Interweaving of Rituals*, Chinese version, p. 83.

change is reflected in the variation of funeral processions. The public manifestation of the image of Madonna, cross, etc. in the funeral procession is conducive to the spread of faith by the missionaries to the general public. Another consequence of the cultural imperative is that the traditional role of the missionaries has turned from persuaders and leaders to that of participants. They must “obey the authority and value hidden in the framework of Chinese rites.”³

The fifth chapter concentrates on the treatment of “Funeral Rituals” drafted in 1685 by a missionary in Canton. By analyzing the funeral stages, participants, events, and functions prescribed in this manuscript, the author has seen a new type of funeral in which the Chinese family rituals serve as its trunk, grafted with the Catholic funerary elements. This new ritual is a “Chinese Catholic” funeral rather than an exclusive “Chinese” or “Catholic” one. In addition, religious community has taken the place of the priest who used to be at the center of a funeral and the importance of such a community in maintaining and spreading faith has gradually become prominent.

The theme of the sixth chapter is the tension created by the exchange of rituals. Local rites “without evil intentions”, or civil rituals, are tolerated while some evil rituals, suspected of being superstitious, lead to dispute among the missionaries. In his analysis of those evil rituals, the author has revealed not only the complex relationship between the ritual behaviors and their meanings, but also the inclusive and exclusive features of the Catholic rituals. It is the tensions between them that help turn the Chinese funerals into “Catholic” ones. In the end, the author has reached a ritual paradox: the Catholic mission, normally regarded as stressing orthodox thinking, has started to emphasize the correct religious practices while Emperor Kangxi has begun to pay attention to the purity of ideology to the point of neglecting the orthodoxy of practices.

Chapter seven, featuring the funerals of the missionaries who died in Beijing, analyzes the Chinese emperor’s sponsorship of the Jesuit funerals. The imperial sponsorship, meant to be a political commendation of the deceased missionary as a government official according to the Chinese ritual institutions, is misunderstood, however, by the missionaries as the emperor’s grace and tolerance of the Catholic Church. In those unusual funerals, on the one hand, the missionaries have no way but to accept many of the Chinese elements because the initiative is in the hands of the emperor, on the other hand, the imperial sponsorship makes the missionaries and believers more eager to learn about the funerals.

Chapter eight is the conclusion of the whole book. The metaphor of “textile weaving” echoes interweaving, the title of the book. The author has expounded in detail the meaning of this metaphor: the “religious community with common rituals” from the Mediterranean countries interacts and exchanges in a tense and consultative milieu with the social and religious entities such as Confucianism, Buddhism and ethnic Manchus in mainland China. The interweaving of funerals endows the participants with some new identity, although at the same time, some old identity gets lost.

³ See *The Interweaving of Rituals*, Chinese version, p. 152.

Throughout the book, the author has examined in a chronological order the interweaving of the Chinese and Western funerals in the 17th century from the perspective of historical anthropology. On the one hand, when China and the West encountered each other for the first time, the form of funerals appeared to be quite thought provoking due to the different bases of the Chinese and Western ideologies; on the other hand, concrete historical events, such as the situation of the church in Europe, the political upheavals in China, etc. also exerted important impact on the interweaving of the Chinese and Western funerals. Therefore, any historical research like this should take into consideration both the perspectives of sociology, anthropology and intellectual history and give due emphasis on some aspects at the same time. As the author states, his main attention is focused on the funerals of missionaries and community of common believers. This anthropological vision has, of course, its merits. However, in such an anthropological study, as the Chinese participants are all common believers with vague faces, and as the ideas of cultural elites are not properly examined, the analysis might be somewhat partial. For instance, the perspective of “mind” (or *xin*), hidden in the pre-Qin dynasties, but increasingly emphasized by the Confucian scholars in the Song and Ming dynasties, might pose a challenge to the author’s view that the Chinese place undue emphasis on “orthopraxy”. As a matter of fact, the moral diary or spiritual diary that appeared in the late Ming Dynasty can be used as a piece of strong evidence to prove that the Chinese cared for “orthodoxy” as well.⁴

As far as research sources are concerned, the author has gathered many first-hand materials written in a variety of languages such as Chinese, Latin, French and English. The close and balanced combination of factual descriptions with theoretical analyses constitutes a unique feature of the book. However, since the book is made up of several speeches, it is not very concise as there are redundancies and repetitions in different chapters.

In addition, the Chinese translation, especially the rendering of some terms, such as “proto-ethnographic” mentioned earlier, needs improving. Prof. Nicolas Standaert explains in his English book that “proto” refers to the purpose, method and criteria of ethnological studies in the 17th century and does not conform to the disciplinary norms of ethnology developed in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁵ The Chinese translator of the book rendered “proto” into “原始”, which is misleading. I think it is more appropriate to translate it into “前驱”. Another case in point is that in the second chapter in the Chinese version of the book, there is a sentence “遗体是放在一个很大的棺槨里”, the original English word for “棺槨”, however, is “machine”, which means “hearse” rather than “coffin” or “casket”.⁶

Finally, the interaction and communication framework proposed by the author

⁴ Confer Wang Fansen, “Moral Diary and the Thinkers in the Late Ming and Early Qing Period”, the sixth lecture in his *Ten Lectures on the Ideology in the Late Ming and Early Qing Period*, Shanghai, Fudan University Press, 2004.

⁵ See *The Interweaving of Rituals*, English version, p. 39.

⁶ See *The Interweaving of Rituals*, Chinese version, p. 66; English version, p. 39.

has also drawn on the merits of several important frameworks adopted by foreign sinologists in their studies in the past century. Such a new framework not only pays attention to the role played by the transmitter, but also takes note of the initiative of the receiver; and by absorbing the theories established by Michel Foucault and Edward W. Said, the new framework also takes into consideration the subjective roles played by the text creators as well as text interpreters. It is true that the author has used this analytic approach throughout his book, for example, the same event is always analyzed from both the European and Chinese perspectives, and the influence of the Chinese “cultural imperatives” is stressed. At the same time, the author is also aware of the potential shortcomings of this analytic framework: it might become a preset and a regulative prescription, which can make people unaware of the conflicts and violent acts in the actual historical process. The weaving might go on smoothly, it might also be terminated; the weaved products might be perfect or flawless, but they might be destroyed too. The book gives the readers a feeling that the gradual localization of the Catholic funerals in China has resulted in the complete disappearance of the major conflicts between the Chinese and Western funerary cultures. But later history presented us with a different picture. Since the 17th century, the Catholic Church has given up their acculturative efforts. Chinese Catholic believers are now forbidden to burn incense in front of their ancestral tablets, which leads to great conflicts inside and outside the families. It can thus be said that the greatest conflict that ever occurred between the Catholics and Protestants on the one hand and the Chinese tradition on the other is manifested in their different views of funerals.

In short, in the realm of research into the cultural exchanges between China and the West, phenomenological history research without any presets, coupled with attention to the reactions and adaptations from both the Chinese and Western sides, is the methodological revelation given to us by the author.

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Translated from the Chinese original by Guo Yidun