

# Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Bereavement in Eastern Countries

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## Introduction

This paper considers the similarities and differences in beliefs and practices to do with death, funeral rites and mourning customs in Asian cultures which share some common features, for example, hierarchical family structures defining respect for authority, specific gender roles and an extended family system [1]. However, despite the commonalities, there are also differences; stereotypes should be considered in order to understand the depth of the cultural differences and their impact on bereaved families.

## Four conceptual models of cultural differences

Laungani [2] introduced four conceptual models of cultural differences between West and East respectively: individualism versus communalism (collectivism), cognitivism versus emotionalism, free will versus determinism, and materialism versus spiritualism. He applied these to a

comparative study between India and England to demonstrate that death and bereavement are also different for people of different cultural backgrounds [3]. The differences are as follows.

### 1. Individualism and collectivism

Western society emphasizes individualism. This meaning includes clear boundaries for an individual's physical and psychological space, emphasis on self-reliance, an ability to use internal resources, the ability to cope with one's problems, an ability to assert one's own will on events change under stress. In contrast, collectivism, based on family and community-oriented societies, typifies the East, so individuals expect to submit to familial and communal norms and to sacrifice individual desires and aspirations for the common good. The extended family networks are very important here.

### 2. Cognitivism and Emotionalism

Cognitivism relates to a work-and-activity centered society in which people are more likely to be rational, logical and controlled, so the public expression of feeling and emotions is often discouraged. For example, at funerals, the English are guided by the need to control their emotions

to keep their dignity in public. In contrast, Eastern societies may be described as emotionalistic, but it may be difficult to generalize about non-Western societies [2]. Emotionalism belongs to a relationship-centered society where close intimacy is valued as is the sharing of emotions such as joy, happiness, sadness and grief. Emotional sharing is typically illustrated in Indian societies where feelings are often expressed without restraint.

### 3. Free will and determinism

Free will may be defined as the power of non-casual, voluntary action; at the common-sense level, it suggests responsibility for one's actions and control over time. Determinism, conversely, is associated with fatalism. For example, in the Indian's deterministic view of life, the law of Karma involves determinism and fatalism and has done so over centuries. The belief in the unending cycle of birth and rebirth means that death is not final, but leads to a new beginning.

### 4. Materialism and spiritualism

Materialism means a belief in the existence of the material world—a world composed of matter alone. A materialistic framework leads to a logical opposition to belief in the spirit. The spiritual is linked to a widespread belief in magical explanation in terms of sorcery, bewitchment and good and evil spirits.

The following section demonstrates how the four interrelated themes of determinism, collectivism, emotionalism and spiritualism are incorporated in the different cultural and religious beliefs

about death, funeral rites and mourning practices.

## Beliefs and views about death in the Eastern cultural characteristics

There are five main religions (Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity) in India. 1997 figures show Hinduism as 670 million; Islam 105 million, Christianity as 22 million Sikhism 18 million and Buddhism 6.6 million. Each religion has a different set of views on death, with different funeral rites and mourning practices, but (apart from Christianity) all teach reincarnation or rebirth after death. For Hindus, a good death is very important; and for a good death to occur, a good spiritual preparation is considered to be important. Muslims believe in the life hereafter and that everyone is judged by Allah at the Day of Judgment. It is very important for them when they feel death approaching to ask God to forgive their offences against others. If possible, the declaration of faith will be recited before death. Sikhism has its own attitude to life on earth; it holds that God did not make this world to punish people because of their sins. By reincarnation, individuals acquire merit from their behavior to others and their level of devotion to God, so, through death, each person is eventually released from the wheel of life and they start a new life in a particular place in heaven [4].

Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism affect the belief about death held by the Japanese; they believe in reincarnation and rebirth, but not in judgment after death. Shintoism and Buddhism are the predominant religions in Japan and

people may practice and believe in different religions simultaneously; for example, the Japanese go to a Shinto temple to receive a blessing when they marry, but they seek the help of Buddhist monks for a funeral. Within these religious paradigms, although death is irreversible, it does not necessarily separate one from one's earthly family immediately after death. There is a middle land between heaven and the underworld, so the dead remain close to the living [4].

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are the main religious influences on the Chinese. The Chinese believe in the immortality of the soul; the dead are judged and then punished. They believe that death is a kind of change into a new body, which is more than a normal physical body. The dead go on living in another world, so their spirits are with the living; this factor is related to ancestor worship. Death is associated with bad luck; they fear the corpse and its potential for bad luck, so the guests who have come to mourn take away candy with them to make the bad luck disappear before they reach home [5].

Determinism relates to beliefs in fatalism and a sense of finality concerning the after-life, consisting of heaven and hell. In India, Hindu belief in the *Law of Karma* involves determinism and fatalism. It is a belief in the unending cycle of birth and rebirth, a belief that one's life does not end at death, but leads to a new beginning. This helps to reduce the terror of death [6]. In connection with determinism, three countries commonly believe in reincarnation and rebirth after death; this may show the strong influence

of Buddhist ideas. But though Indian and Chinese people believe in judgment after death, Japanese people do not. Also, these three countries treat death as a spiritual matter; the dead spirits need to be purified to enter the world of the dead, so each country has developed its own rituals of funeral and mourning to help the dead spirits.

### Funeral rituals

According to each one's view of death, each country has developed its own form of funeral rites. In India, the body is cremated less than 24 hours after death; there are three reasons for this. The first is hygienic; the second is concerned with pollution and purification and the third is spiritual [6]. However, Islam requires the body to be buried as soon as possible and forbids cremation. Graves are dug in such a way that the face of the deceased is turned towards Mecca. The body may be returned to the place of birth, where the next of kin make the funeral arrangements. Islamic law requires friends and relations to feed the bereaved family members for three days after the death. The friends and relatives who live nearby offer extra accommodation to visitors who have come for the funeral and the bereaved family appreciates this [7]. When a Buddhist family thinks that death is impending, Buddhist monks are invited immediately beforehand, because the moment of dying is very important if the dying Buddhist is to be free of desire and hatred. Following a death, monks will chant passages from the *Abhidhamma* [7].

About 90 per cent of Japanese conduct their funerals according to Buddhist rites. A priest from the Buddhist parish temple chants passages from the sutras at the bedside and gives a Buddhist name to the deceased. The front door or gate of the house bears a piece of white paper with a black frame on which is written the sign of death throughout the mourning period. An all-night or half-night wake is held and, during this time, refreshments are served and visiting mourners bring money to help the bereaved family with the funeral expenses. After cremation pieces of the bones of the deceased are gathered, placed in a small jar and brought home for later burial. Japanese normally cry very quietly and privately and avoid crying collectively in public during the funeral, because they believe that if the bereaved cry too much, the deceased cannot go to heaven, so it may impede their journey.

Chinese people spend lavishly on these rites and do not bury the dead person immediately. Apart from the family mourners, the funeral procession will include professional mourners who are hired to lament instead of the family to express the family's grief. Chinese bereaved people burn paper money, paper houses or other goods, because they want the soul of the deceased to live richly in the other world [8]. Families need to consider *feng-shui* when they bury the deceased. In accordance with their beliefs, the site of the grave is carefully chosen because it relates to the family's fortunes, so if a family fortunes decline, the body will be reburied [4].

The funeral ceremony of each country relates

to its traditions of emotionalism and collectivism. Indian society is relationship-centered, so people easily share their emotion with other people and close physical intimacy is valued. Society generally accepts the expression of feelings and emotions without restraint. Unlike India, crying in China is only permitted as part of the ritual and the Chinese have always hired others with louder voices to wail during funeral ceremonies on behalf of the bereaved family and demonstrate how they loved the deceased. After these, however, the family members repress their individual grief, so controlling their emotions is, for the Chinese, essential in bereavement. The Japanese, for their part, do not normally cry in public at all during funerals, so they too need to repress their grief. Funerals in all three countries actively involve family, friends and community; for example, visiting mourners stay awake all night before the funeral ceremony and at the funeral itself take part, as well as bringing money to help the bereaved family. This illustrates that Eastern cultures place a greater emphasis on spirituality and determinism than in the West. The rituals determine the type of journey the deceased will have to another destination and the rituals themselves encourage collectivism since they have to be performed collectively by the gathering of friends, family and community which implicitly, at least, encourage a collective and periodic expression of grief.

### Mourning practices

These three countries commonly have complica-

ted formal mourning process schedules, and regularly perform mourning and ancestor ceremonies at home or at the temple. Mourning Hindu families usually fast on the first day and do not clean anything for ten days after bereavement, according to the schedules for special mourning ceremonies on each mourning day for 12 days. They believe that it is important to perform these properly to prevent the individual spirit from wandering in space. Food (rice and milk) is offered and may involve a dialogue with the deceased spirit during the ceremony; this is usually repeated each year. The relatives for the funeral will stay with the bereaved family for between 12 and 15 days [3]. In addition, Hindu families have an annual ceremony of making offerings to all their ancestors in order to maintain a continuous link between the living and the dead [9]. Relatives may wish to visit the grave regularly on Fridays for up to 40 days after the death. Mourning ends with a meal and Qur'anic reading. Public rites are for men only. According to religious laws a Muslim wife is expected to stay in her home for up to 4 1/2 months after the death of her husband [10]. Sikh mourning ceremonies follow some similar patterns to those of Hindus. During 10 to 13 days of mourning, foods are provided by friends for the family and guests and there is a complete public reading of the Sikh Holy Scriptures. Sikhs have a structured mourning period. Further mourning periods are one, three and six months. Widows and sons used to take at least a year to get back to normal life, but now it has been reduced to three months [11].

Basically, Indian mourning customs are founded on a collective outlook, which Laungani (1996) refers to as communalism. Indian customs involve the family and the community when bereavement occurs; all the dead person's friends and relatives are expected to support and help the bereaved family at the funeral [4]. They have common suppositions about the nature of family life and the role of the community [9, 11].

In Japan's mourning ceremonies, mourning rites are held around the altar every 7<sup>th</sup> day until the 49<sup>th</sup> day. The family members of the deceased send acknowledgment notes and gifts to the mourners who visited them, to express their gratitude. On certain days in the spring and autumn and during the Bon Festival; the family and relatives visit the grave with offerings and make a welcome fire and offer food on the household altar; then, two days later, they make a fire to send off the spirits of their ancestors. In particular, the Bon festival has considerable social and domestic importance.

According to this view of death, the Japanese believe their ancestors look down on their descendants and encourage the living to make contact with the dead through the family shrine. The family makes conversation at the family altar and shares their good or sad feelings with the ancestor [4]. Yamamoto, Okonoji, Iwasaki, and Yoshimura (1969) compare the course of grief amongst a small sample of Japanese widows with those of some British counterparts. Adjustment among the Japanese widows was comparatively good. The authors attributed this to the belief in both the Shinto and Buddhist

religions.

In Chinese culture, family members have developed over almost 3,000 years many rituals to manage their bereavement, based on Confucian principles, which are the virtues of filial piety and righteousness. However, Confucianism almost disappeared during the twentieth century. The Chinese government gives permission for it to be practised in the family home rather but not within the larger kinship group or clan [4].

These three countries commonly bring spiritualism and collectivism into their mourning practices. They include ancestor worship based on the belief that the dead person's spirit still exists and members of the community, as well as every member of the extended family play an active part in the mourning ceremonies. Mourning practices in Eastern cultures emphasise the transitory nature of life and death and serve to increase family and community cohesion through marking ancestral connections which establish continuity between the living and the dead.

## Conclusion

Many scholars assert that surveys of cultural differences should consider bereavement studies. Three Eastern countries, India, China and Japan, all with a similar culture to Korea's, were chosen to illustrate the cultural diversity of bereavement. The mourning culture of these countries was considered on the basis of similarities and differences, concentrating on the features of determinism, collectivism, emotionalism and spiritualism.

Commonly, as regards determinism, the three

countries believe in reincarnation and rebirth, based on Buddhist ideas, except that the Japanese do not believe in judgment after death. Collective mourning practices are heavily involved in various ways; many community members take part in various ways in the funeral ceremonies and mourning practices, as well as friends, relatives and the extended family. People bring food and money for the expenses of the funeral, attend the wake on the funeral eve and act as emotional supports. Japanese ancestor worship focuses on their continued communication between the living and the dead. A Japanese family altar is like a "hot line" to the spiritual kingdom [12]. The Chinese believe that the spirits of the dead live eternally in another world, so they need to be treated very well, otherwise, their hungry ghosts will return to plague the surviving family members. It is an important obligation for the living to make offerings to them at the family altar.

In addition, these three countries serve their ancestors in both similar and different ways. They share the activity of offering and as a way of helping the transition from life to death, as well as maintaining continuity and indeed prolonged attachment with the deceased in the few lengthy ceremonial events and ancestor worship through lengthy ceremonial ancestor worship [9]. They are also highly spiritual and as illustrated, sometimes believe in evil spirits.

Indians accept that people will cry openly, whereas Chinese people only permit grief to be expressed according to mourning rituals and beyond this they tend to prohibit crying in

public. Conversely again, Japanese people restrain their grief most, compared with the two other countries. Crying seems to be prohibited in public throughout the whole mourning process.

Hence it can be argued that in Eastern cultures attitudes towards death are more deterministic than in the West. They seek to establish greater connection between life and death as well as between the living and the deceased. In so doing greater prominence is placed upon collectivity, continuity, spirituality and they tend to be more expressive though in some cases the latter aspect may be limited.

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