

The Evolution of Chinese View of Death: Focusing on the Zhizha Art Exhibition at Musée Du Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac

Zhihao Sun^{1*}

¹ College of Art, Suzhou University of Science and Technology, Suzhou, China

Email Address

597043162@qq.com (Zhihao Sun)

*Correspondence: 597043162@qq.com

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Abstract:

An exhibition of Chinese Zhizha art with the theme Palace Paradis sparked much interest in the West. The curious portrayal of the afterlife by the Zhizha pieces brought much attention to the different views of death in China. As an essential part of Chinese funeral rituals, forms of Zhizha Art have constantly been changing. The internal causes of those changes are closely related to the folklore, education, culture, and economy of different times. Changes in the Zhizha art directly reflect the evolution of the Chinese view of death since traditional funeral rites and customs embodied the intrinsic cultural needs and the extrinsic regime consolidation functions. In addition, Zhizha also reflects the strong pantheism and realism in Chinese funeral rituals. As a gradually declining folklore entity, the prospects of this art form are worthy of consideration.

Keywords:

Zhizha, View of Death, Funeral Rituals

1. Introduction

On October 27, 2019, an exhibition of funeral ritual paper offerings from Taiwan, China, with the theme of Palace Paradis, was held in the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, which brought the West the Chinese view of the afterlife. The unique culture of death and the exquisite handicraft quickly attracted attention in the West. However, is Zhizha, the most common element in Chinese funeral rituals, really as beautiful and romantic as Westerners think? What culture and views of death are embedded in these pieces of colored paper? Moreover, what issues does Zhizha art face nowadays.

2. The Zhizha Art in Chinese Funeral Rites and Customs

Zhizha, or Taoist paper art, is a form of craft in Chinese folklore. Zhizha products are typical offerings in funeral rituals, which convey the worship of ancestors and the remembrance of relatives and friends. Through incinerating paper offerings in funeral rituals, the deceased are ensured material comfort in the fictional afterlife.

Contemporary derivations of this concept include paper wreaths and paper flower baskets. As a remnant of the feudal society, traditional Zhizha is scarce in mainland China but still prevalent in some remote areas, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and some minority regions [1]. The scarce presence of Zhizha art in today's funeral rituals is attributed to the folklore heritage of some regions and a common view of death.

Zhizha products are handcrafted using colored paper, bamboo, wood, and threads. Common Zhizha products in funerals are mostly the figure of deities, effigies, carts/horses, houses, gold/silver ingots, and daily utensils. The Zhizha art is closely related to the deceased's folk beliefs and regional customs and embodies folk beliefs and spiritual ballast [2]. Since the maturity of papermaking in the Northern Song Dynasty, Zhizha products quickly became important and indispensable funeral objects due to their strong plasticity, lightweight, diverse colors, and relatively low cost and has been used throughout the funeral activities of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties and even modern times [3].

Like the early social customs of most civilizations in the world, China also had the folk custom of burying items along with the dead, and the concept of elaborate burial and long term sacrifice was dominant in the early days of China, which became the characteristic of the traditional Chinese funeral culture [4]. Some dynasties even issued laws to enforce such ideas. Throughout history, offerings in Chinese burials mainly included human sacrifice in the early slave society, livestock sacrifice in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, pottery figurines in the Qin and Han periods, porcelains in the Wei and Jin periods, and Zhizha objects after the Tang and Song dynasties. The changes in burial offerings are closely related to the development of ethics, morality, and craft technology, i.e., the Zhizha art in funeral rituals developed under the influence of technology and ideology. To some extent, the gradual fading of elaborate burial customs also led to the replacement of funeral objects and pottery figurines by Zhizha art products. After the Song Dynasty, cremation was prevalent, which was not unrelated to the widespread of Buddhism [5]. Cremation was popular in the Liangzhe Circuit and Fujian Circuit, where Buddhism flourished [6]. The cremation custom took root despite the punishments in the early Song period [7]. Since the Zhizha art shared the form of cremation, it quickly reached prevalence alongside the cremation custom and became an indispensable part of funeral rites.

The Palace Paradis exhibition at the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac followed the basic forms and traditional concepts of Chinese funeral Zhizha art but incorporated more expressive visual art forms, making the exhibition more vivid and expressive. The exhibition cleverly avoided the pain in death in funerals and directed the contemplation of death to the continuation of the pleasure of life, which was fully in line with the Chinese concept of treating the deceased like the living.

3. The Conception of the After Life and the Implicated View of Death in Chinese Zhizha Art

“No one knows what the afterlife will look like, but we can imagine. These secular and tangible exhibits could express the yearning for the afterlife [8]”. The opinion on the Zhizha art expressed by Julien Rousseau, curator of the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, at the opening of the Palace Paradis exhibition clearly illustrated the Chinese view of the afterlife.

The existence of the soul was generally believed before the rise of modern science. Even today, numerous religious or folkloric portrayals of the afterlife are still deeply rooted. The Chinese had imagined a lot about the world after death, and the concept of heaven and nether world as the final destination emerged since the Shang and Zhou Dynasties [9]. At the core of funeral activities lies the understanding of the other world, which in traditional Chinese culture is called the ghostdom. All funeral rituals were centered around the other world. Funeral rituals are an important means of reflecting, consolidating, and promoting national culture and national self-awareness [10]. The Chinese conception of the underworld shows distinctive traces of foreign culture localization. For example, the idiom used to describe the death of a person is “to fly on a crane to the Western Paradise.” Flying on a crane signifies ascension to immortality in Taoism, and the Western Paradise is the land of ultimate bliss in Buddhism. In folk funerals, geomancers were employed to look for the grave’s location, while Buddhist monks were asked to expiate the sins of the dead. The former mostly practice Taoism, while the latter was derived from the combination of various religions. As a result, many foreign cultural elements exist in Chinese funeral products.

The concept of the underworld was formed due to the influences of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk myths and legends, but the influence of Buddhism was dominant. The early Chinese believed that the underworld should be like the world of the living, with a sovereign holding all the power. This sovereign is naturally the invisible conception of the living and is collectively called Yanluo Wang. The concept of Yanluo Wang was based on Yamarāja from early Buddhism and Hinduism. After Buddhism was introduced to China in the Tang Dynasty, the concept of Yanluo Wang was extended to the ten Yanluo Wangs of the ten halls due to the integration with traditional Chinese Taoism. The Yanluo Wang of the fifth hall is believed to be Bao Zheng, who retained his duties and power after death and ascended to deity in the other world. In some myths, Bao Zheng is described as the only lord of the underworld. Therefore, it is not difficult to see that the Chinese tend to believe in the connection between the two worlds. Since the two worlds are interconnected, physical death only serves as an intermediary process to enter the other world or the opportunity for the transit between the two worlds. Thus, one’s deeds in living become the measure of his/her status and position in the other world.

Although the underworld is rendered in various ways, it is still untouchable and unseen. Besides the abundant fantasies, the Chinese also fear the unknown of the underworld. Tang believed that Buddhism influenced the literati and officialdom from three levels: metaphysics, literature, and the fear of death [11]. Throughout the history of academic thought, most discussions of secular issues have focused on the question of life, while only religions have tended to bring the question to the other world, especially Buddhism [12]. The Chinese view of life and death is mostly influenced by Buddhism. Buddhism regards life as a collection of “suffering,” “emptiness,” and “illusion,” and everything in life is on the path of birth, dwelling, change, and extinction. Only by releasing all these things can one be liberated from worries. However, Buddhism has the concept of reincarnation, i.e., death is not the end. Unlike the initial belief system of Buddhism, the localized Buddhism theory in China was more focused on the teachings of ethics. Buddhism extended the views on life, time, and space in Taoism by regarding life as a necessary process to achieve the transcendence of the subject, thus introducing secular moral concepts that could help maintain the order and stability of secular society [13]. In contrast, Confucianism

avoided the topic of death but also advocated righteous death. Avoiding the topic of death was mainly reflected in not covering the subjects such as ghosts, gods, fate, and life, which manifested the preference of ease over hard, realism, and perceptual thinking. In contrast, advocating righteous death signifies the placement of moral and social values above life [14]. The character of the Chinese is heavily influenced by Confucianism. Death or the underworld are seldomly talked about due to the avoidance of such topics in Confucianism, and Buddhism supplemented Confucianism with descriptions of the other world and recognized the sufferings in death. Even though Confucius lived in a time with strong folk superstition, his replies to Zhong You about ghosts, gods, life, and death were focused on the rites of life. “If you can’t serve people, how can you serve ghosts?” “How can we know death if we don’t know life?” By avoiding the topic of death, Confucius attached importance to fame, wealth, and officialdom in life, the latter two of which had obvious utilitarian overtones. In answering the summoning of the king, Confucius made the journey without waiting for his carriage to get ready [15]. The teachings of Confucianism have greatly inhibited the spread of religious superstition, making the Chinese more inclined to focus on the deeds in living rather than the unknown of the other world. This attitude is not hard to find in Chinese folk culture. The Chinese do not really have the same cultic beliefs as in Western religions but conceptualized the other world according to the habits of the living. Since all concepts of the other world outlined by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism brought unease to the Chinese, they focused on the pleasures of the living instead of thinking and talking about the pain after death.



Figure 1. Guanyin bodhisattva and king of ghosts in Zhizha form in the Palace Paradis exhibition.



Figure 2. Food in Zhizha form in the Palace Paradis exhibition.



Figure 3. Houses in Zhizha form in the Palace Paradis exhibition.



Figure 4. Horses in Zhizha form in the Palace Paradis exhibition.

The Chinese perception of the underworld was well illustrated in the Palace Paradis exhibition curated by Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac. Those Zhizha products presented a distinctly realistic color, with Guanyin Bodhisattva, dramatic characters, divine dragons, phoenixes, hot pot, sushi, sports cars, airplanes, cell phones, tennis rackets, mahjong, watches, backpacks, and a host of other things in daily life, all reproduced through Zhizha. Whether it is the gods (Figure 1), food (Figure 2), housing (Figure 3), transportation (Figure 4), or daily necessities, all of these things

that may be necessary after death are common things in living. Those Zhizha products covered a wide range of items from Buddhist gods and goddesses and Taoist gods of longevity to folk mythological species. There were traditional Beijing copper pots and Japanese sukiyaki. There was also cheongsam, western-style black suits, and even modern technology products. All these items reflected the powerful assimilation of Chinese culture, i.e., anything that brings pleasure in living is considered good.

The view that “how can we know death if we don’t know life” laid the foundation for the Confucian way of looking at life and death, and the attitude that “the gentleman does not talk about what he does not know [16]” expelled the thinking about death from the realm of life. As Confucianism influenced the character of the Chinese people, a reluctance to talk about death gradually emerged. Often, Chinese people either keep the topic of death to themselves and treat it with indifference or take psychological comfort in the form of beautiful fantasies [17]. This is why the Chinese conception of the underworld is nothing more than a conglomeration of the many beautiful things that existed during life.

4. Insights into the Will of Feudal Rule from Zhizha

The Chinese funeral Zhizha art on display at the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac reflected some folklore culture, which is a far cry from the Chinese funeral customs today. Exhibitions of exotic cultures are often based on curiosity. For the Chinese, the Zhizha art exhibition at the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac is more of a paper sculpture art than funeral folklore. The reasons for this are: Firstly, the objects on the Palace Paradis exhibition are distinctly different from traditional funeral objects due to cultural changes and technological innovations. Secondly, the images of ghosts and gods in the exhibition showed a confusion of factions since the long and widespread materialistic concept of history education gradually weakened the feudal superstitious ideology. Thirdly, as an exhibition of exotic folk art, Palace Paradis had a certain degree of cultural communication power, and the curators emphasized its artistic rendering power and the curiosity of fast-food culture. This obviously does not accurately present the full picture of Chinese funeral Zhizha folklore.

The Palace Paradis exhibition at the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac has received mostly positive social feedback in the West. The visual artistry of the exhibition and the witty content of the artifacts brought about by the exquisite handcraftsmanship dilute the sadness in the topic of death. As the viewer’s attention was easily drawn to the Zhizha art of modern-day products and figurines of exotic gods and goddesses, one of the key themes of the Palace Paradis exhibition was overlooked, namely, the figurines of servants. Mostly appearing as young women or children, the figurines of servants reflected the inequality in feudal society due to social status. Although Zhizha figurines of servants are no longer acceptable due to the human rights consciousness today, they were very common in traditional funeral Zhizha products and one of the most important elements of funeral rituals during the feudal period. In feudal society, Zhizha figurines of servants were often presented in the funerals of the upper class.

Cixi, the late ruler of the Qing dynasty, burned many Zhizha ships during her lifetime in the hope of leading the spirits of the departed to the other side so that her residence in the underworld would be free from intrusion. A great deal of money was also spent to build luxurious Zhizha ships (Figure 5) and a large number of Zhizha

figurines (Figure 6) for the purpose of other-worldly pleasures. Cixi's Zhizha ship was 70 meters in length and 7 meters in width. [18]" On the Zhizha ship were Zhizha products such as treasure houses, guards, singers, attendants, pavilions, and a series of other things that were enjoyed in living. In addition, deities of different religions, such as Bodhisattvas, cranes, and ghost guides, were also made in Zhizha form to ensure the successful attainment of immortality. A few months after the funeral ceremony, mandarins spent another fortune on the Zhizha ship for Cixi during the ghost festival, fearing that the Empress Dowager could not get across to the other world since the rivers froze over during the winter [19]. As a major event in the late Qing Dynasty, Cixi's funeral reached an extreme scale. As an epitome of the declining Qing dynasty, it reflected the strict hierarchy of the feudal dynasty on the one hand and the process of following and perfecting Chinese funeral rituals on the other [20]. More importantly, the enormous expenditure on large-scale funeral rituals reflected the fashion of unrealistic comparison. Instead of mourning the departed, the funeral ritual revealed the feudal rulers' obsession or desire for the benefits of living.



Figure 5. *The Zhizha ship on the funeral ceremony of Empress Dowager Cixi.*



Figure 6. *The servant figurines on the funeral ceremony of Empress Dowager Cixi.*

In the *Random Jottings from Bean Garden*, Lu Rong made the following remarks on the funeral rituals of his time: "At today's funerals, people cut white silk into strips and hand them to visitors offering condolences, calling it handing out the token of mourning. [21]" Handing out the token of mourning meant "handing out the silk strip for mourning," and crying at funerals is a rite the guest must perform. In Nanjing during the Ming Dynasty, handing out the token of mourning was for the monetary gifts from the guests so that it would seem all friends and relatives contributed to the funeral. In southern China, handing out the token of mourning was for attracting a larger funeral procession, which could reflect the influence of the bereaved clan. Even strangers were acquiesced to come and mourn the departed just for the token of mourning. Handing out the token of mourning was more common in the feudal funeral rituals of the wealthy and literati class as a way to further their influence.

The core concept in folklore is the reciprocity between *li* and customs, which is based on the ideological heritage and related resources of traditional Chinese society. The traditional social relations in China were based on vernacular culture and folk customs. The *li* in the reciprocity of *li* and customs refers to the institutionalized *li* formulated at the national level, which can be restrained by laws. The customs are the folk ethos that naturally arose among the common people. The merging of *li* and customs formed the social state and cultural characteristics of the intersecting *li* and customs and regulating customs with *li* in traditional Chinese society. The *li* in Chinese history not only derived and condensed from the customs but also continuously interacted with them [22].

The forms and contents of traditional Chinese funeral rituals are mostly rooted in Confucian filial piety, which in turn contribute to the stability of feudal rule. The

Confucian school always promoted filial piety and regarded li in the living and li in the departure from the living as equally important. The behavior of a person in a funeral is regarded as the continuation of filial piety, and the filial piety to the deceased and past ancestors can be presented through funeral customs. The reason why the Confucian school values the moral attribute of filial piety is because Confucianism believes that filial piety is the basis of loyalty. If the living cannot perform filial piety to the deceased ancestors, they cannot be loyal to the country in the same way. Loyalty is regarded as an extension and alienation of filial piety. When most people perform loyalty and filial piety, social relations and families will be stabilized. Confucius evaded speculation about ghosts and gods, and his view of “respecting ghosts and gods and staying far away” proved this point. Instead of guessing and discussing the unknown world after death, Confucianism would rather demonstrate the educational function by offering sacrifices to the deceased and advocate the image of both loyalty and filial piety. In “The Analects,” there is a passage that reads, “by treating the funeral of parents with care and paying respectful tribute to the ancestors of distant generations, we can make the people’s hearts return to simplicity. [23]” The feudal rulers would maintain the ties of patriarchal blood through filial piety so as to achieve the political goal of “ruling the country with filial piety” and consolidate the hereditary monarchs [24].

Thus, there was not just the memory of the living for the dead in feudal funeral customs. For the upper feudal ruling class, literati class, and the wealthy, funeral customs obviously carry more information, all of which embody the wishful thinking of the living in the real world. The influence of these ideas did not stop at the upper class but affected every member of the feudal society from top to bottom. In the Chinese Zhizha art exhibited at the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, the curator displayed Zhizha figurines of children servants in an outdoor public square as the core symbol of the exhibition. On the one hand, this shows the wrong angle taken by Western curators to study Chinese funeral customs. Merely curating a Zhizha art exhibition as a form of handmade art cannot reflect its full picture. On the other hand, it also objectively reveals the strict feudal social hierarchy reflected in the traditional Zhizha art. Even if the deceased is gone, the living still hopes to bring material or spiritual services to them through the Zhizha servant figurines. Undoubtedly, this continuation of decadent feudal thought should be defined as dross in today’s society based on equality and the legal system.

5. The Changes of Collective Consciousness Reflected in the Declining Zhizha Art

Today, Zhizha has lost its original functions and gradually faded out of public view, largely due to China’s advocacy in changing customs and getting rid of old rules and bad habits. Before every Qingming Festival, the local governments would enforce their regulation on the funeral industry and expressly prohibit the production of Zhizha products for funeral incineration. On the one hand, this is objectively beneficial to the implementation of China’s environmental protection policies. On the other hand, it helps to break down feudal superstition and discard the dross in folk customs. The foundation of transforming outmoded habits and customs lies in the modern scientific civilization, and the relevant restrictive policies could guide the healthy development of folk traditions. Before every Qingming Festival and ghost festival, Zhizha is banned in most cities. The thousand-year-old folk culture and history of Zhizha have encountered difficulties and officially gone into decline. Even

with the many dissents among the people, Zhizha still inevitably fades out of people's view.

The progress and development of human civilization cover not only the advancement of living status but also the development of death culture. As life and death are two opposites of the same process, the question of living cannot be answered without answering the problem of death. Even though the departed cannot object or comment on their funeral customs, the rationality of handling their remains inevitably affects the living environment of the living. In this sense, funeral customs are undoubtedly a show for the living, one that shows them the hope of life and the respect they deserve after death [25]. Therefore, funeral customs should have a place in traditional Chinese culture. However, this does not warrant the idea of elaborate funerals. As mentioned above, funerals are performed for the living and have little meaning for the deceased. As far as the elderly are concerned, good support in life is far more meaningful than an elaborate funeral. At present, Chinese society is in a transitional period. Urban Capital is more concerned about the human labor force, i.e., the young and the prime of life, which is different from the traditional farming society where the experience of the elderly was more valued. As the labor force is being drawn to the cities, the elderly are left behind in the rural areas. Since the elderly no longer have a say in anything, no longer respected or cared about, their suicide rate is rising to many times of the general population, especially in rural areas. Roughly 80% of suicides in China occur in rural areas, and the suicide rate of people over 65 in rural areas is 5 to 7 times the average suicide rate in rural areas. This shows the lack of care for the elderly. Compared to giving them elaborate funerals to gain a reputation after their death, increasing support for the elderly is more conducive to the healthy operation of society. At present, the "folk tradition" identity of Zhizha is facing various impacts: From a cultural perspective, the folk-custom Zhizha products are distinctively the manifestation of superstition and difficult to gain a foothold in today's scientific and humanistic environment. From the perspective of environmental protection, the funeral Zhizha products have certain impacts on the natural environment. From the perspective of safety, the funeral Zhizha products are highly flammable. From an economic perspective, the exquisitely made Zhizha products bring certain meaningless burdens. It is because of the many factors mentioned above that the funeral Zhizha products have gradually transformed from folk-custom handmade products to the object of intangible cultural heritage. Nowadays, the Zhizha art has been listed as intangible cultural heritage in Fenghuang, Hunan Province, Yangquan, Shanxi Province, Taizhou, Jiangsu Province, and Putian, Fujian Province. The Zhizha products show different styles due to the influence of local culture. However, all forms of Zhizha art are in decline. Without its original functions, and because of the Chinese mentality of pursuing good fortune and avoiding disaster, the Zhizha art has gradually turned into a cultural phenomenon of the past that is about to disappear.

The Palace Paradis Zhizha art exhibition curated by the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac made this declining traditional Chinese folk culture reappeared in the form of visual art. As a result, this traditional Chinese folklore once again comes to life and arouses praise in the West. The spiritual core of that art exhibition is undoubtedly rooted in China's profound cultural charm. At the same time, that successful exhibition also posed a question: what is the future of Zhizha products? For the Zhizha art, the effects of the intangible cultural heritage protection policies are extremely limited, and the social transformation casts shadows over its continued

existence. Obviously, the one-size-fits-all management approach has led to the decline of the Zhizha art. Folklore is rooted in the needs of the people, and guiding customs with li and restoring folklore to a means for meeting the needs of the people in a healthy way is a topic to explore in the process of traditional cultural revival. During the inheritance and revival of traditional culture, folk culture is often gradually stripped of its original fertile soil by the local governments, cultural elites, and grassroots civil servants and turn into independent cultural heritage for so-called protection. However, the reason why a product of folklore can become a collective phenomenon is that it once carried a certain essential function of people's life and gained a sense of collective identity in its long-term implementation. Therefore, by separating it from its origin and turning its protection into the duty and mission of a specific group, the existence of this cultural resource will inevitably lose the original ecology and authentic language of traditional culture. At this point, it is barely worthy of being called folklore but pseudo folklore lacking a spiritual core [26], which naturally cannot resonate with the public's emotions.

The Zhizha rituals and customs are rooted in the vernacular culture, and the vernacular customs and traditions should not become abandoned backward memories in the process of urbanization. With its positive factors that contribute to the promotion of spiritual civilization in the process of urbanization, Zhizha could help generate featured cities and social relations with regional characteristics. The concepts and customs of contemporary vernacular culture have been given the function of cultural tracing in the cities. In this process, the rural and urban cultures continue to contradict, merge, and evolve. Thus, vernacular culture should be integrated into the development of cities in an innovative manner [27].

6. Conclusions

The Zhizha art exhibition themed Palace Paradis at the Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac brought to the museumgoers the Chinese culture on death. The Zhizha art derived from Chinese vernacular culture is considered a bridge between the living and the dead, and burning Zhizha offerings is an expression of folklore belief. Even though it is backward and superstitious by today's standards, it still reflects the Chinese view on death as a unique cultural and artistic expression in China. The collective personality embodied by the Zhizha art, including treating the deceased like the living, Confucian filial piety, and the pursuit of good fortune and avoiding evil, remained unchanged despite its continuous changes in form. The Zhizha art is not to be discarded entirely, even though part of it is not acceptable in this age of science and civilization. As an art form rich in vernacular culture, its development with time is worth consideration. The organic combination of making li in accordance with customs and transforming li into customs constitutes the core of the reciprocity between li and customs in Chinese folk culture. The living customs of the feudal society thousands of years ago are no longer comparable to those in modern civilization, but could a folk custom that has lasted for thousands of years no longer exists today? According to the feedback from the public today, the Zhizha folk custom still has spiritual functions.

How to guide the development of folklore through reasonable policies instead of roughly generalizing it to feudal superstition requires the attention of policymakers, folklore culture researchers, and folklore art inheritors.

Conflicts of Interest

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