

# CHINESE CREMATION: POLICY, SOCIETY, AND TABOOS

## Introduction:

- Death is not just a religious issue, it is a politically-and-socially-driven culture, involving various factors that often challenge one another.
- What were the driving forces behind the development in cremation practices and policies? How effective are political coercions on cultural shifts?

## Literature review:

- English secondary sources: cremation in imperial China, the religious influence on death
- The first comprehensive review on cremation in China: the Religious System of China, V3, by J.M.M. De Groot (1892).
- Primary sources: gazettes from post-war Republic of China (1912-1949), literature works by intellectuals, narratives from foreign missionaries

### Ancient times and Tang: religions of China

- Practiced in China as early as 3000 BC.
- Han Chinese regarded it as a barbaric custom.
- According to *feng shui* (Chinese geomancy, meaning 'wind-water'), the body is connected to the Earth, and the comfort of the dead leads to prosperity for the living.
- Though the definition of good feng shui varies, traditionally, burial was favoured over cremation.
- Tang: Buddhism, cremation prevailed.

### Sung: outside of religious factors

- Revival of the Confucian School. Authorities and intellectuals attempted to diminish cremation, a practice that goes against filial piety.
- But cremation continued to thrive.
- Cultural reason: influence from Northern ethnic tribes.
- Socio-economic reasons: war-torn era, burning bodies for convenience and to prevent further mutilation by enemies. An unconventional interpretation of filial piety.

### Ming and Qing: governance and society

- Banned cremation. Those who cremate the corpse of another person were punishable by 100 strokes of the heavy bamboo and exiled to 3000 *li*, except under special circumstances.
- How society affects the law: cremation was a tradition among the Manchus (the ruling class of Qing). Their ban on cremation was interpreted as an effort to strengthen their rule over the Han people by upholding the Confucian image of royalty.

### 1910-11 Manchuria plague

- Doctor Wu Lien-tuh obtained an imperial edict from the emperor to carry out mass cremations during the plague in Harbin.
- An example of the government's coercive role in controlling the use of cremation.
- Conspiracy theories against anti-epidemic measures. "No longer fear epidemics, but fear the measures the government takes to 'prevent' epidemics."

### Republic of China: science and New Culture

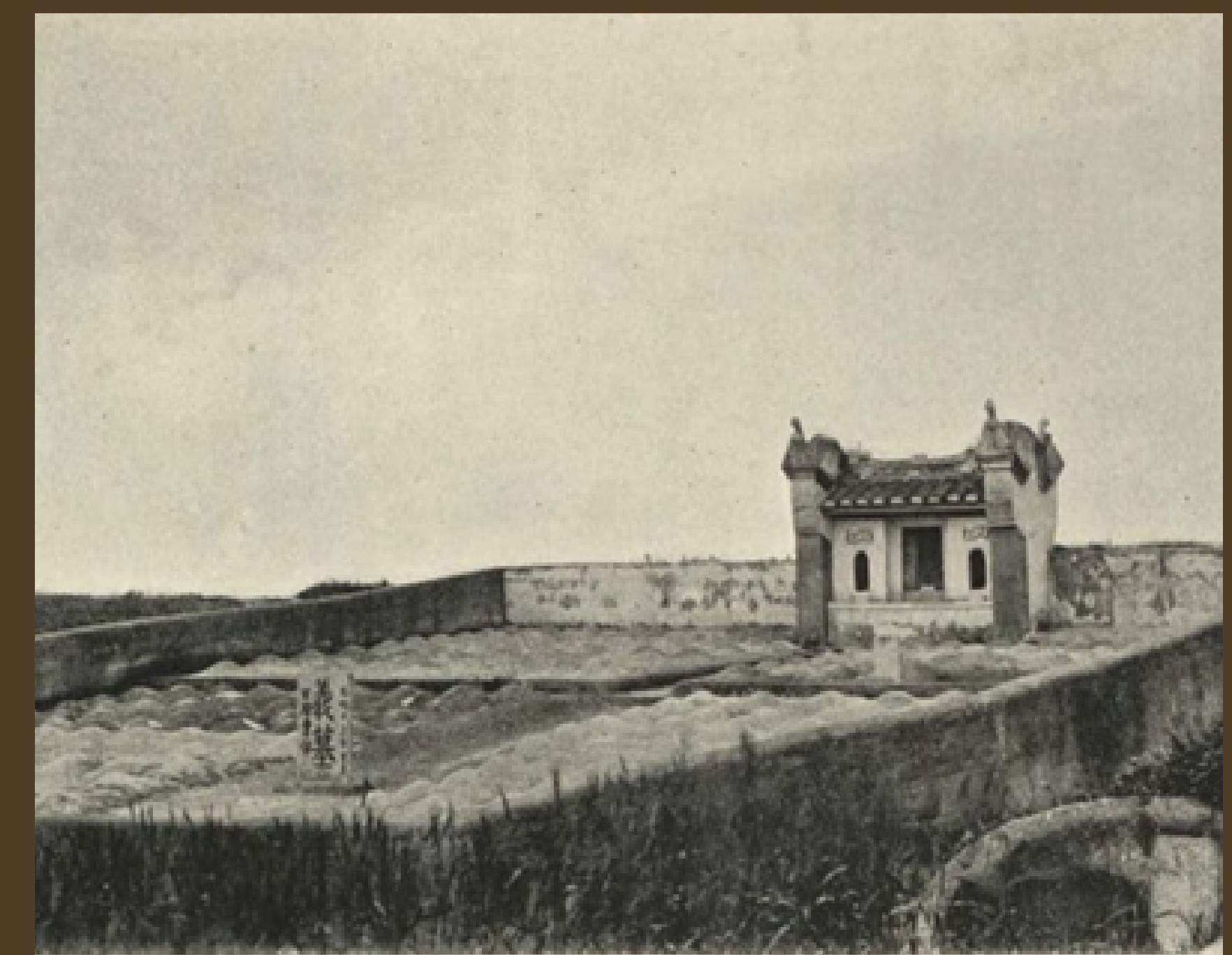
- New Culture Movement (1910s-1920s)
- Scholars criticized traditional Chinese customs, including rigid funerary practices. They advocated for cremation as a more economical and clean alternative to burial.
- Outreach of the movement? The illiteracy rate in 1920s China was as high as 80%. Many rural villages continued their traditions even today.

### Republic of China: development in the cities

- Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the chairman of Kuomintang, officially approved the building of a crematorium in 1924.
- The crematorium in Hankou opened in 1929. 1412 bodies were cremated in a year. Its management became the model for crematorium projects around the country.
- Many projects were disrupted by the Second Sino-Japanese Wars and the Chinese Civil War.

*"Dr. Wu (Wu Ting-Fang, Chinese diplomat and politician, not to be confused with Dr. Wu Lien-tuh), in an effort to remedy these drawbacks, had strongly advocated for sky burial, commonly known as cremation. Cremation was popular in China during the Song and Yuan dynasties, and is now a common trend worldwide. It truly benefits the people and is quite feasible. At the time, those who understood the situation and valued public health supported it."*

**-Lin Sen, in a petition to Sun Yat-sen, 1924**



*A burial charity. The problem of exposed coffins and bodies was serious in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many charities or guilds offered burial services. This particular grave was operated by a Guild of Benevolence. Due to a lack of land the overwhelming number of corpses resulting from conflicts, the government often resorted to implementg cremations.*

**-photo taken by Isabella L. Bird**

## Now: CCP's approach

- More aggressive than ROC, creating laws to impose mandatory cremation.
- Chinese folk religion persisted, even after the Cultural Revolution.
- Ways to avoid compulsory cremation: not moving into cities, bribery, suicide, etc.

## Conclusion

- The development of cremation is a complex issue involving **politics, society, culture, religion**, etc. These factors can either challenge or support one another.
- **Political coercion is often challenged** by strong socio-economic factors. Government and society are interrelated.
- China's current goal of a 100% cremation rate may be proved **difficult**, unless another strong social shift appears in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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