**death/死亡(Sǐ Wáng)**

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| Chinese Perspective | WU Fei | 31 May 2022 |

As the end of life, death is a universal and natural phenomenon; but as it annihilates enjoyments and meanings attached to life, death is rendered quite some cultural meanings and hence is understood very different in different cultures. The understanding of death plays as an important key of a philosophical tradition.

In Western tradition, *The* *Phaedo* by Plato is the first important philosophical text on death, in which death is defined as the separation of soul and body.[[1]](#footnote-1) As soul is understood as a spiritual substance more noble than body, such a separation is also seen as a kind of release, and that is why Socrates regards soul as immortal and death as good to soul. When the idea in *The Phaedo* is adopted by Christianity, the immortality of soul is confirmed as a religious doctrine, and death is literally seen as the release of soul. In his *City of God*, Augustine finds death quite difficult to understand, since we could only grasp the time before death (that is, living) and that after death (that is, dead), but there is no dying (in death).[[2]](#footnote-2) This dilemma is quite similar to that of present as discussed in *The Confessions*: the future is measurable, the past is measurable too, but the present is not. When we are saying “the present,” the present is already turned into the past. Only the present, however, is, while the future is not yet, and the past is no more. The authentic being is without length and hence could not be grasped.[[3]](#footnote-3) Death is ungraspable because it is lengthless either. But is not death more similar to nonbeing rather than being? Is not being more similar to living rather than death? This apparent paradox is quite important in Western philosophy. The present is, just as God is. God is forever present, without future or past. Human beings, however, are living within the flow of time, their real being is also present, but they could not grasp the present, and hence could not grasp the real being, although he could not live without being. Created from nothing by God, their true being inclines to nothingness. Death signifies their existential situation as always inclining to nonexistence. Death is significant to human beings, also because death could make them face the nihilistic truth of their life and hence quest for the true meaning of being outside this mortal life.

This level of understanding is adopted by Martin Heidegger. Life toward death is Heidegger’s famous proposition. When one realizes that death is the unavoidable end of his life, that might free him from the routine everyday life and quest for the meaning of being.[[4]](#footnote-4) Death is close to being and important to human beings, not because death is good, but because death reveals the nihilistic existence of human beings. In Ingmar Bergman’s classic movie *The Seventh Seal*, Death is seen as representing God Himself. He always kills people mercilessly, he is the negation of everything in life, yet he knows nothing about God. All these, however, do not turn him to Devil, but render him represent God. Similar to Death, although usually seen as loving and merciful, God is always beyond everything in this mortal life. In order to become immortal spiritually, one has to confront death face-to-face and renounce the mortal life.

Plato, Augustine, and Heidegger are three milestones in Western intellectual history about death. All three see death as an unavoidable end of the mortal life, but none sees it as a bad thing in the absolute sense. Plato regards death as the release of soul from the mortal and corporal life, because he regards soul as a spiritual substance. Augustine discloses the nihilistic meaning of death, but also (perhaps unintentionally) shows the similarity between the present and death. As a modern philosopher, however, Heidegger would not believe in the spiritual or immortal being of soul. What he asks one to pursue via death, is no more immortality in the traditional sense, but being in a quite philosophical sense. Except for some quite religious people, the modern do not believe in immortality in the literal sense any more. But the dualism between mind and body as established by Descartes is still a philosophical proposition accepted by most Western philosophers. In this intellectual context, the Kantian idea of immortality is quite significant: when we focus on spiritual life without much attention on the corporal life, the death of the latter has nothing to do with our thought, hence our thinking would seem to be eternal and our spiritual life would be immortal.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is a typical idea of immortality for the modern. They might sacrifice their life for some noble idea, and hence attain immortality in a spiritual sense.

In Chinese intellectual history, however, death is understood in a quite different sense. Life is understood as a kind of cycle between yin and yang. Yang is the positive and dynamic force of life, while yin is the negative and cohesive force of life. Yin and yang do not represent good and bad, or mind and body, but life comes from the alternation and combination of them. When there is too much yang, one’s life is flourishing but in fever; when there is too much yin, life is in rest and close to death. Yin and yang are well used in both medical and philosophical theories. The annual cycle of four seasons, as up-and-down of yin and yang, is the basic Chinese theory of time. Spring, as the beginning of yang, is seen as the first period of life-cycle: birth and youth（生）; summer, as the flourishing of yang, is seen as the second period of life-cycle: growth and maturity（长）; autumn, as the beginning of yin, is seen as the third period of life-cycle: fruiting and harvest（收）; winter, as the fullness of yin, is seen as the fourth period of life-cycle: rest and death（藏）. The four seasons could be condensed into two general periods, that of yang (spring and summer) and that of yin（autumn and winter）, as well as divided into twelve months (three for each season), to twenty four solar terms (six each season, or two each month), and so on, corresponding to detailed combinations of yin and yang in *The Book of Change*.

A quite similar analogy between life and seasonal change is also found in ancient Greek mythology, but it is never fully developed while Christian idea of time and history became the mainstream. Chinese philosophy, however, theorizes it as a grand theoretical system of cosmology. While some types of creatures might really be born in spring and die in winter, most lives, especially human beings, would live through quite some years. Hence the annual circle does not really signify human beings’ life-span, but symbolizes the movement of yin and yang in their lives. There is a balance between yin and yang in both spring and autumn, while yang is growing in spring, but decreasing in autumn. In mid-summer, yang dominates while yin coms into being. In mid-winter, yin dominates while yang also begins. Although winter is regarded the season of yin and rest, it also signifies the most vibrant birth of yang, since it would begin from nothing. If yin dominates but yang would not begin, that means death, which would happen to everyone sooner or later.

Death is nothing but a natural end of life, both corporal and spiritual. We have no reason to claim immortality in a literal sense, and hence no way to complain our mortality. Although an important belief of Taoism is that human beings could become immortal by proper cultivation, Confucianism does not buy this idea. According to the Confucian thought, the most important thing is to live a valuable life. Si-Ma Qian, the greatest historian in China, says, “Death is either weightier than Mount Tai or lighter than a goose feather.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Since death is a part of life, what makes death different is the value of life.

People also pursue immortality, but not in the same sense as in the West. There is a very famous discussion of immortality in *Tso-Chuan*. A popular idea of immortality is the continuity of the family, but according to intellectuals, there are three kinds of noble immortality: by virtue, by work, or by word. The most noble type of immortality is by virtue, as done by ancient sage kings; the next is by work, as achieved by many distinguished figures; the last is by word, as done by authors of great books. None of these types of immortality is endless life in the literal sense. All four understandings of immortality (including the popular one, which is accepted by many people) rely largely on history, which is the very reason why history occupies such an important role in Chinese intellectual system. For ordinary people who could not pursue immortality in history, it is still important to harmonize and continue the family, which is immortality in a popular sense.

There is a saying among Chinse people: “The value of a person is concluded when his coffin is closed.”（盖棺论定）The moment of death is also the moment of judgement, because as far as one lives, he is subject to changes. Hence funeral is very important for Chinese people. After the death of important people, such as emperors, high officials, or important intellectuals, they should be given posthumous names （谥号） as judgments of their lives. Even powerful people like emperors could be given very bad posthumous names, such as Zhou Liwang（周厉王）, Zhou Youwang（周幽王），Han Lingdi（汉灵帝）, and Sui Yangdi（隋炀帝）. For ordinary people, funeral of an aged and happy person is the moment both to mourn and to celebrate, and such a funeral is called comedy funeral （喜丧）. It is the moment to mourn, because the relatives have lost a beloved one; to celebrate, because the deceased have lived a good life. On the contrary, if someone dies very young or suffers a violent death, he would be afforded a very ignoble or at least simple funeral.

Above is a brief comparison of Western and Chinese ideas about death. Besides the idea of soul, a major difference comes from the understanding of life. For Western culture profoundly influenced by Christianity, the mortal life is seen negatively, and hence the noblest cultural pursuit is for a better being than mortal life. Death is seen both as the result of sin and a chance to be released from mortality. In Chinese culture, however, life is seen as a natural process, and its end is also natural, though unwelcomed. Life is valuable in itself, and there is no need for something else to pursue. The best person is someone who has lived the most valuable life. This does not mean, however, that nothing is more important than individual life. One could sacrifice his life for something more noble and attain immortality, but nobody could be immortal by himself. Immortality means continuity of lives in history. One is allowed to sacrifice his life only for other people’s life or lives. This is a humanistic attitude toward life and death.

1. Plato, Phaedo, 67d4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei,* 13.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Augustine, *Confessiones,* X.15(18)-16(21). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 52-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B806-807. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Si-Ma Qian, *A letter to Ren An.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)