

Where Did The Dead Souls Go? : A Cultural Critique of the “Disaster Death” of the Great Tangshan Earthquake

On July 28th, 1976, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake hit Tangshan of Hebei Province, a city to the east of Beijing. The earthquake caused a death toll of 240 thousand, and more than 160 thousand people were critically injured. Almost the whole city was razed to ground. However, in the 8 years' time after the earthquake, the whole country kept a suffocating silence. Reading over Tangshan local newspapers and journals in the 8 years, I found almost no reports or documents about the earthquake destruction. Only until 1984 when the Tangshan city government decided to build a Tangshan Earthquake monument and a Tangshan Earthquake museum did stories of the disaster come out. In recent years, the Great Tangshan Earthquake became a hot topic. Three Films or TV shows based on the Great Tangshan Earthquake came out respectively in 2006, 2010, and 2013, all of which were widely received. This shows that memories of the Great Tangshan Earthquake are constantly being recalled and reconstructed.

Among the many problems and questions that the Great Tangshan Earthquake raised in China, issues concerning how to worship the dead become the most prominent. These issues are caused by the emergency management plan for the disposal of victim bodies. Due to hygiene and safety concerns, victim bodies were collectively buried. Consequently, survivors could not know where their relatives were finally buried. Thus, they could not carry out mourning and worship activities accordingly.

In China, folks usually worship the dead by burning paper money in front of their tombs. Since the Republic of China, the state took over the control of death, burial, and worship rituals by regulating rules of cremation, the preservation of bone ashes, memorial practices, and others. This way, the state was able to manage death administratively. In the meantime, it allowed ordinary Chinese to keep part of the traditional practices including burning paper money. For a long time, such a complementary structure between the state and the folks satisfied the needs of both parts. Nevertheless, the mass losses of life during the Great Tangshan Earthquake invalidated this structure. Victim bodies were not burned but collectively buried, leaving no place for personal mourning. Although the establishments of public memorial facilities and rituals by the government relieved part of the mental trauma of some victims, this kind of memorization under a particular political schemata did not attend to, let alone replace, one essential character of life—the care for individuality. Therefore, for more than 20 years after the earthquake, survivors suffered tremendous mental torture by not having a proper way to express their feelings for the dead relatives.

In 2002, commercial capital stepped in the management of the dead. A private company constructed a “wailing wall” where survivors could pay to have the dead relatives' names carved on it. This kind of activity partially satisfied some people's need for worship. But in the meanwhile it divided the survivors.

Other victims protested the fact that private companies made huge profits out of the public death events. They not only criticized the company of violating Chinese traditional moral, but also indirectly condemned the government. They believed that the government was responsible for the public death events. It was the omission of the public power that led to the intervention of commercial capital. The public power's strike back was effective and powerful. In 2008, the city government built a free "wailing wall"; administratively sentenced the previous one to death. The government also demolished the previous "wailing wall" on the charge of violating building regulations.

For more than 30 years since 1976, the unsettled worship issue has brought unbearable and inexpressible mental trauma to survivors of the Great Tangshan Earthquake. This pain can be understood as "secondary victimization" caused by the earthquake. Analyzing the processes of this "secondary victimization", this paper discusses the complex relations among the public power, cultural tradition, and commercial capital in the hope to provide means to avoid future repetitions of such tragedies.