

An

# Ocean Farewell

by Vinky Wong Hiu-ying

One day at the end of October last year, Kong took her last boat ride with her mother to the east of Tung Lung Chau Island in the New Territories. There in the calm blue waters, she solemnly scattered a handful of her mother's ashes as the boat rocked gently on the waves. It was an experience she will never forget.

"That was my mother's wish. She wanted her remains to be scattered in the Hong Kong waters instead of keeping it in an urn niche," says 20-year-old Kong, a student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), who prefers not to give her full name.

"I mixed her ashes with flower petals. My family and I took turns scattering them. As the ashes mixed with the waters and disappeared, leaving only the petals floating, I realised I was taking her to her final journey."

While sea burial is a customary ritual in some societies, it is a relatively new practice in Hong Kong, where ancestor worship remains integral to maintaining traditional values.

In 2007, sea burial was legalised and the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) approved three designated areas for scattering human ashes: east of Tap Mun, in the northeast of Hong Kong;

south of West Lamma Channel and east of Tung Lung Chau.

According to an FEHD spokesperson, the number of applications for sea burial has increased markedly in the past three years - from 160 in 2007 to 279 as of the end of 2009. To further promote the practice, the FEHD has launched free ferry services to Tung Lung Chau every Saturday, starting in January this year.

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The increasing number of sea burials could be a sign of the growing public acceptance of the disposal of human ashes in an "environmentally friendly manner", rather than an indication of the disintegration of traditional values.



Fung Lin says people should visit her when she is alive and not worship her when she is dead.

"The traditional Chinese value is to pass on happiness and fortune to the descendants. As scattering of human ashes is environmentally friendly, occupying no land resource, such disposal will leave the descendants a good fortune - a green world," says the FEHD spokesperson.

For 90-year-old Fung Lin, sea burial is the only choice. Fung, who has no children, has drawn up a will stating she wants her remains to be scattered in the same waters as her husband who died eight years ago. She took back her husband's ashes from the Chinese Permanent Cemeteries in Tseung Kwan O and scattered them in the east of Tung Lung Chau in 2004, when sea burial was still illegal.

"Hong Kong people nowadays are old-fashioned," says Fung. But Fung has always been ahead of her time. Despite people's refusal to accept sea burials back then, she scattered her father's ashes into the ocean near Guangzhou in the 1940s because of the government's resumption of land. Ten years ago, she did the same to her mother's ashes.

**“Sea burial is convenient. If you respect and miss me, I would be there when you think of me. And when you think of me, this is already a way of worship.”**



JOEY MOK

Chan Fuk-chi says the ashes are not thrown into the sea as rubbish, but are placed back to nature.

The ocean serves as a great and peaceful resting place compared to the world she lives in now, according to Fung. Putting her ashes in an urn niche would be just like trapping her all over again. Besides, she says, occupying a space in a columbarium is no guarantee that anyone will burn paper offerings and joss sticks for her since she is alone in Hong Kong.

“Sea burial is convenient... if you respect and miss me, I will be there when you think of me. And when you think of me, this is already a way of worship... the most important thing is the intention,” she says.

“I would be glad if you visit me and bring me food while I am still alive and not when I am dead. You don’t have to worship me after I die. Who would know whether you’ve come or not? I wouldn’t!” she exclaims.

Sixty-year-old Tse Chi-kin is also determined to have his ashes scattered at sea. He believes there is no need for ashes to take up space, even if it is a small niche. “This is also much cheaper... besides, by sea burial, my spirit can travel around the world through the waters. I can try what I can’t when I am alive.”

While Tse, Fung and Kong’s family serve as a testament to the growing acceptance of sea burial, it may take a while for others to get used to this.

Wong, a 60-year-old volunteer at the St James’ Settlement Funeral Navigation Service, wants her remains to be mixed with her recently-deceased husband’s and then scattered in the Garden of Remembrance. “There is no place for people to visit and offer condolences if I choose sea burial,” she says.

The absence of tombstones in sea burials and the hope that people will offer sacrifices could explain why more people are still choosing the traditional burial method.

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Tao Kwok-cheung, the honorary secretary of the Society for Life and Death at CUHK, believes that sea burial does contradict traditional values of Chinese society.

“Families would have the feeling of drowning their loved ones when considering sea burial,” he says, adding that people still face internal struggles when choosing this method. Yet, because of rapid urbanisation and environmental limitations, people might have to undergo changes and adapt to this new practice.

“With farming society in the past, people had special feelings



TSE SIU-YU

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towards the soil so they tended to favour interment more. But because of recent urbanisation, burial is no longer feasible. Hong Kong society changed from a farming society to an industrial one and people were forced to accept cremation. If they accepted cremation, then they would also accept sea burial.”

Chan Fuk-chi, a social worker from the Hong Kong Sea Burial Service Centre, shares the same view, saying that it is only a matter of time before more people will be willing to choose sea burial. “There is a global trend towards sea burial replacing cremation in the future,” he says. “But it is a little bit hard and slow as we are still in a traditional Chinese society.” After all, it was only 30 years ago that cremation replaced interment in the ground.

According to Chan, most people have misconceptions about sea burial. “The ashes are not thrown into the sea as rubbish, but rather are being given back to nature where people come from originally.”

Chan’s clients are mostly elderly fishermen and sailors who would opt

for sea burial because they know no one will visit them in their graves. Some of them, however, choose sea burial because they distrust and are disappointed by the next generation. Chan says that about 30 per cent of the urn niches today are abandoned. Fearing that no one would come to visit or pay their respects, the elderly prefer to scatter their remains elsewhere.

Chan believes this attitude towards ancestors is influenced by today’s “throw-away culture”. The tech-savvy and fashion-following generation prefer to throw away or neglect everything they think is useless, including the ashes of the dead. In the process, they dispose of their love for their ancestors.

But loved ones can also leave the bereaved with clear instructions. The CUHK student Kong says that her mother drew up her will before she died in order to make things easier for Kong and her younger sister. “She didn’t want us to make special trips to worship her on festivals or birthdays,” she says. “She thought that it was fine as long as we still had her in our hearts.”



YUKY WONG HUI-YING

Kong scattered her mother’s ashes at sea in October last year.