

# **Till the Rainbow Bridge: Human-animal Relationship in Post-death for Stray Animals in Hong Kong**

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## **Abstract**

Stray animals, an outcast group of animals that could potentially be taken in as pets but have been abandoned physically on streets, are neither pets nor wild animals. In this paper, a small group of volunteers in Hong Kong opted to dedicate their work towards this outcasted group of animals, further, they treasure not only the animals' lives but also their deaths. Through unveiling the post-death care practice among stray animals, this research attempts to reveal human-animal relationships with this group of stray animal volunteers. By being a participant observer in the post-death care practices and meetings of the volunteer group, as well as conducting in-depth interviews with the volunteers and carrying out observation online, I tried to figure out the reasons and beliefs beneath the act of volunteering for lifeless animals, record and examine the funerary practice, in addition, how are they performed as a ritual for the sake of both animals and volunteers, also, what is the vision of the voluntary work for dead stray animals. This project endeavors to contribute to a fuller picture of human-animal relationships by divulging the work spent by a volunteer group to the dead stray animals.

## Introduction

On a random day on my way back home, dusk fell, and the light was dim. A small crowd of people stopped and squatted on a narrow pedestrian next to a busy traffic road where big trucks were rushing away. Curious, I walked closer to check on what was happening. Right on the step that I was close enough to become part of the group, my curiosity was struck, and I suddenly felt muffled by the scene. A ginger tabby cat lay down, covered with a pink fluffy towel on its body, its eyes were closed like sleeping, and a young lady who was closest to the cat squatted down and gently petted the cat's body, caressing the soft hair on its head. Instinctively, I knew the cat was not asleep. The vibe of the group was depressing; I felt hushed despite hearing people speak and cars closely passing by. "The cat has gone already (貓貓已經走咗喇)" said the lady who was still petting the body. Everyone stayed and remained silent at the moment, the petting was still going on until a shop owner nearby came to the circle. "Last time it was nearly crushed by the car already, Aiii but this time still..." the shop owner sighed, "let me call its owner." "You could ask its owner to see whether he would send it to which hospice service company", "Is there a place to place it better first?", the crowd recommended. The cat was decided to place in the shop owner's store first where air-conditioned indoors could keep it from heat and dirt on the road. The cat was wrapped in the soft towel, tenderly picked up in the lady's cuddle, and walked to the store. I stood for a few seconds and watched the shop owner and the lady walk away, the group scattered in different

directions that were originally their way.

This was my first time meeting the death of a completely unknown animal. The entire process was extremely ordinary, there was no blood or mess left on the road, the cat looked like sleeping from the start to the end, and nothing was unsettled nor sanguinary, the whole process went so slow and calm that I thought everything seemed fine and alright. Even though I knew the cat was dead and I felt sad about it, I could still observe the people and took a photo for record at first. That was until, after the cat's body was taken away, I continued my way back home, and suddenly the scene came back to me, and I abruptly burst into tears. I was sad about its death whereas I had never met it before, I found myself drowned in an emotion that I cannot explain or maybe mixed with some guilt, I felt sorry for not being able to help the cat while at that time I was planning to research on something that should target on animals' lives. In the accident, the cat was a stranger to everyone who stopped on the road but people cared about it and seemed to have defaulted it would receive a hospice service like what human usually does. However, stray animal bodies are usually managed and sent to landfills as municipal solid waste under the "Public Cleansing and Prevention of Nuisances Regulation" by the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department of the Hong Kong government. This experience has become the spark of my research on the deaths of animals, especially stray animals that people are not intimately linked to and no relationships were built between.

Weeks later, I found groups of volunteers whose aim was to provide post-death care

funerary services for stray animals in Hong Kong. The group that this study focuses on is the only volunteer group that is completely organized by volunteers and does not accept any monetary donations from the public. This group of volunteers is eye-opening for me how they sustain the operation, how they are devoted to the work, and how they decided to specifically help the dead one instead of the living one.

My first fieldwork overwhelmed me with enormous experiences that I did not expect and imagine. For collecting bodies of stray animals, volunteers mostly rely on public reports to their three hotlines to locate where dead bodies are found, they would drive to the location and pick the body back to the storeroom or directly to the ceremonial company. Before my visit on another random sunny day, there was a case received and another volunteer had gone to the reported location already. Hence, I missed the chance to observe their collection step and was driven directly to the association's storehouse which was rented by the founders together with the money from volunteers. The storehouse is the chief location where their work supplies and animals' bodies are stored. We arrived and got off, the volunteer who collected the body also got off his truck, holding a heavy plastic bag in his arms. The bag was transparent and I could see a tabby patterned fur wrapped inside. I knew my biggest concern of facing animals' death had finally come for me. The handling process in the storeroom first started with a bathing time, the tabby was first placed on a rack, volunteers and I put on gloves, and I was invited to participate in the whole process. Rubbing the soap gently on the body, the skin and fur were

soft, but I could feel the flesh beneath was hardened. After rinsing, the cleaning step was over and the cat was placed on a new underpad to dry for the next process of massaging. Bodies that died for a period would become stiff; the massaging time is to let it rest, relax and eyes closed. Using the palm and root of the thumb to massage the joint and muscle, the stiffed muscles gradually become flexible. The cat was then posed with a softer posture like it was sleeping, warped with a towel with its head showing up, just like a baby burrito. For the last step, the stray cat is named, packed, and passed through everyone's arms to give him a farewell hug before placing it into a huge fridge temporarily, waiting for more cases to be handed over to the cremation company as a lot to save time and work. This is a brief procedure of their work. After the visit, I was overwhelmed with information and emotions, instead of being collapsed, my feelings towards the cat were complicated, sad about its death but also questioning the work I had done. The experience furnished me with immense curiosity, wondering more about this group of volunteers.

These stray animal volunteers are from different backgrounds, they could be any ordinary one from society. Thus, studying human-animal relationships from them is not only tied to the volunteer community but also reflects the human-animal relationships in Hong Kong society. The main goal of this ethnography research is to understand the human-animal relationships of volunteers through their post-death care practices for dead stray animals. The above stories will be reexamined in detail in the following chapters.

## **Research Questions and Methodology**

For this research, I had three main questions that I wanted to answer. First, I wanted to understand why people volunteer to deal with dead stray animals. Second, I wanted to know how funerary practices are performed as a ritual for the sake of animals and volunteers. Finally, I also wanted to find out what the vision of the volunteers was for their organization.

Participant observation was of paramount significance in this research. I have carried out fieldwork to gather ethnographical information through executing the death care volunteer works with my volunteer informants. I found my informants firstly by contacting the organization's webpage where the person in charge of the webpage referred my contact to my first informant, I was then introduced to other informants on different occasions such as regular meetings and usual cases handling, some of the informants were met through snowball sampling and some were through random sampling. Six major informants who worked with me, together with other volunteers, have a huge range of ages (aged from 22 to 60), educational levels (from middle school to postgraduates), occupations (from professional to working class), and personal experiences with animals, for instance, some of the volunteers are also volunteers for rescuing living stray animals, pet owners and veterinary assistants. Besides, I would also give an account of my personal experience since I worked as a volunteer, I could also be regarded as part of them, and I could compare my resonance or difference in feelings to other volunteers. Moreover, in-depth interviews are also conducted with the six main informants to

discuss the personal experiences of volunteers and controversial topics.

List of main informants<sup>1</sup>:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Place of living</b>	<b>Religion</b>
Noah	Early thirties	New Territories	Non-religious
Lucas	Early thirties	New Territories	Non-religious
Jane	Late twenties	New Territories	Non-religious
Esther	Mid-twenties	Hong Kong Island	Non-religious
John	Mid-thirties	Hong Kong Island	Did not specify
George	Mid-forties	Kowloon	Non-religious, but married to a Buddhist

Note that the only explicit requirement for the volunteer is being able to drive; most of the volunteers are drivers. As I do not have a license, this may have limited my experience as I could not experience certain processes that require driving. For example, my experience might be hindered by not sharing the driver's experiences of noticing and searching for animals' bodies on the road.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the informants have been changed to protect their identities.

## **Literature review**

Former studies of human-animal relationships and animal deaths will be discussed to provide background for the research. The most significant aspects of the field for this study would be the transformation of animal death care practices, animal statuses and hierarchy, and human emotional engagement in animal works.

### Transformation of animal death care practices

Death practices for animals are not a modern item; funerary practices dedicated to non-human animals have developed throughout history. From archaeological findings to recent statistics, animal burials can be carried out for numerous reasons. For instance, animals may have been sacrificed in rituals, killed as population control in pastures, or established special relationships with humans while alive (Collier 2016). Margo DeMello, an anthrozoologist has gathered cases of animal funerary practice from the prehistorical period to nowadays (2016), the transformations and differences in animal death care include commercialization, changes in ritual practices, types of animals, demonstrations of grief, and meanings underneath. Studies about the evolution of animal funerary practice provide a background in understanding my research participants. Comparing cases around the world in various contexts with the funerary practice of the volunteers in this project could shed light on examining the process, especially on the meaning of rituals.



### Animal status and hierarchy

Animal statuses and hierarchy could be defined by distinct meanings. In this project, animal status is defined as the role of animals and how people regard animals in human society, while animal hierarchy refers to the differences in the classification of animals asserted by humans. Perceptions of animals in human society can be diverse and variable due to circumstances; the idea of “flexible personhood” introduced by Dafana Shir-Vertesh (2012) demonstrates the fluidity of animals’ images. Recognizing the fluidity of animals as perceived in society facilitates understanding how and why specific types of animals are chosen to work with.

Contexts behind the development of animal status and hierarchy could be complicated; one such context is religion. The religious background of society and individuals has a vast influence on the statuses and hierarchy of animals (Collier 2016), some animals are sacred while some are not. For instance, from a religious perspective, the soul of animals and animal rights are still controversial topics under the Christian framework (Linzey 1995). Animal care works are thus “moralized” in society (Warawutsunthon 2021). In my research, some volunteers volunteer for religious reasons no matter whether they define themselves as religious or not. Hence, religion is an entry point that benefits evaluating volunteers’ motives for caring for dead animals. Furthermore, if the funerary practice and cremation of animals are religion-based, the understanding of religious beliefs from volunteers helps to explain the symbolic meanings

behind the ritual practices, and how and why the rituals are carried out.

### Human emotional engagement

Perceptions of humans towards animals are very important in human-animal research. In the discussion about human attitudes towards animals, anthropologist James Serpell divided the causes into two dimensions: the utility of animals and the emotions of humans (Serpell 2004; Herzog 2010). Anthropologist Lila Warawutsunthon also pointed out the “human-centric interests” of classifying animals and that categorization of animals is sometimes just an impression of their characteristics (2021:82). Emotion from love to loath, utility from useful to useless or detrimental, the two dimensions interlinked with each other would engender how people think and categorize animals into different groups. The categories assist the research to evaluate and explain the differences in attitudes towards animals; and how people’s attitudes to stray animals are different from their same species pet, or wild animals.

Aside from the categorized evaluation, the emotions of humans are sometimes unexplainable with critical logic and may at times conflict with themselves. In animal studies, factual analysis could be done for evaluations; however, despite how many critical evaluations are, it is also an irrefutable fact that the emotions of humans could be subjective and arbitrary. Anthropologist Naisargi Dave who has been researching posthumanism on human-animal relationships also expresses the point of arbitrariness in human-animal in his interview that most animal activism is “driven by emotion rather than reason” (Gupta 2014). Therefore, in

some parts of my research, the emotions of the volunteers would be emphasized to demonstrate the intricate and quality constituent in the grey area of human-animal relationships. It is notable to acknowledge the “unreasonable” feelings and behaviors are also comprised in the group which could reveal their values.

### ***Research Significance***

This project is an endeavor to document stories of volunteers in stray animal post-death care. Remarkably, in the past studies of human-animal, categorized animals such as pets, industrial animals, and wild animals constitute a chief proportion in animal-related studies. Especially for the funerary studies on animals, the pet is the dominant subject of the area. While stray animals are defined as domesticated animals without an owner in a broad sense, the species and uses of the animals are wide-ranging. Hence, stray animals are outcasted from the usual animal classifications above but have certain overlapping characteristics at the same time. Stray animals are an overlooked topic in human-animal studies and literature about them is scarce, not to mention the minority of death studies on animals. In Hong Kong, there are a lot of stray animal volunteers but those who target dead animals are merely a handful. Therefore, studying volunteers in stray animals’ post-death care hopes to unveil an uninvestigated relationship dynamic between humans and animals. The rarity of this project about the death of stray animals aspires to contribute to the research gap in the human-animal field and to record

and acknowledge the unnoticed group of volunteers and stray animals which are both parts of our society.

## Chapter 1 – Undertakers of Strays

Informants in this project are volunteers from an association whose name encompasses the meaning of “see-off person”, a person who bids farewell to stray animals, in their volunteer community, they seldom claim themselves as volunteers but as “undertakers”. To facilitate the discussion, the volunteer association studied in this project would be known as the “**See-off Person Association**” or the “**Undertaker Community**”<sup>2</sup>, to differentiate the group from other dead stray animals’ helpers. This chapter will discuss the reason why people volunteer to deal with dead stray animals, firstly by introducing the background and organization of these undertakers.

### Being the Undertakers

#### *Procedures & Organization*

A call received - several messages about time and location - that’s how the work of undertakers begins. Starting from finding the dead body, undertakers’ works rely on the information provided by the public. Three hotlines are disclosed on their social media page for public reports; separate hotlines for New Territories, Kowloon, and Hong Kong Island correspond to make an efficient reporting system. Note that the hotline is available 24 hours available for calls. Once the call is received, the volunteer who answers the phone would spread the information of the case reported in a WhatsApp group which consists of around 150

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<sup>2</sup> This is a paraphrased version of the organization’s Chinese name and has been changed to protect its identity.

members, describing the location and time of the body found. Message sent would wait for volunteers who are available to accept, generally, cases would be responded to within ten minutes since time is dreadfully tight in the undertaker community, “We would go there as soon as possible! The more minutes we miss, the more the body might suffer from decaying or human damaging,” said John, “imagine the animal is crashed by car, it would be running-over again and again on the road until somebody picks it up.” “Even if it is found elsewhere, like this case, it was bitten by dogs and the reporter said he put it under a tree along the pedestrian,” John noted, pointing to the cat body we had just cleaned, “but guess where I found it, I found it in the open channel under the pedestrian, someone threw the body deliberately!” John is an experienced volunteer who works as a truck driver, the mobility and flexibility of his occupation allow him to travel all over Hong Kong and be responsible for more cases compared to other volunteers who normally only accept cases near their neighborhood. Every case is an urgent case to the undertaker community. When and wherever they receive the message in the instant chat group, they would try their best to reach the location as soon as possible. Cases located in New Territories, particularly in Tuen Mun, Yuen Long, and Tin Shui Wai districts, would need to be driven back to the storehouse for clean-up and refrigerated for preservation before being sent to the cremation company located in a neighborhood between New Territories and Kowloon; for other cases located in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island which are far away from the storehouse, tasks would be more demanding to volunteers. They have to carry out the clean-

up procedure instantly – if they could ideally find a place to wash and wrap up the body, the packed body would then be directly driven to the cremation service company. The funerary practices before cremation are rather just cleaning and packing up but entail complicated steps including beautification and restoration of the dead bodies, this is also the foremost reason for volunteers to identify themselves as an undertaker instead of just a volunteer collecting dead bodies. Further details about the funerary practice will be shared in Chapter 2.

### ***Selection & Requirements***

Due to the demanding nature of the work, the selection of volunteers is carefully considered since the schedules of volunteers are sometimes challenging when it comes to meeting with the cases reported anytime and anywhere; the undertaker community is often undermanned and they have to use a relay approach to handle a case. A volunteer shared with me, “There was once I had to go out during work to pick up the body and bring it back to the office, and waited for another volunteer to take over afterward.” When the schedule and location of the volunteers are uncoordinated, the nearest and available volunteer would rush to collect the body first, then deliver to another volunteer who is available to carry on the next steps or to deliver again to another volunteer available. The undercoordinated schedules combined with the urgency to complete the funerary procedure have created predicaments for the community. Besides, because of the voluntary nature, no one is paid, and the operations of the undertaker group are fully organized by the collaboration of undertakers. Aside from running a daily social

media page and occasional charity events, the major work of animal death care is mainly managed in two ways – shiftwork and daily standby. Volunteers with flexible working schedules could spare days to take up the shift and rest near the storehouse to stand for case reports, while for volunteers who have fuller schedules, their action depends on their accessibility to the case reported at that moment. Therefore, a larger pool of volunteers implies a higher probability of having more available schedules and locations to deal with unpredictable cases. To attract more people to join, the requirements to be an undertaker are few; the only specific requirement stated on their social media is having a car and knowing how to drive. “I had to stop in the middle of Tuen Mun Road and rushed to pick up the cat on the road last time,” said Lucas, “I was afraid that I would be hit by cars.” The requirement is understandable, given most of the animal death cases reported are located on traffic roads or other remote areas that are difficult to reach on foot.

However, apart from the explicit requirement told by the organizers, being an undertaker is not just about driving skills. Another requirement is the capability to face sometimes morbid and sanguinary scenes in addition to handling the emotion of facing animals’ death. According to my interviews, some of the undertakers were not applicants but instead were invited to become an undertaker. My informants Lucas, Jane, and George are examples of this; before they were invited, Lucas and George were once reporters who reported their finds of stray animals’ bodies, they stayed and assisted the undertakers at that time, and their quality of being



calm and helpful attracted undertakers to invite them becoming a volunteer. For Jane, she is a friend of Undertaker Noah, working as a nurse, Jane's capability to deal with sanguinary scenes is unquestionable, for Noah's acknowledgment of her tenderness to animals, he introduced Jane to the group, and she thus became an undertaker. This reflected that even stated requirement to be a volunteer is not much, certain aptitudes are more favorable to join.

Apart from these explicit and fathomable requirements, in my fieldwork, I have found some implicit characteristics in the selection of volunteers. The first unspoken prerequisite is to follow the funerary practices of the group. In Hong Kong, the "see-off person" association is not the only group that provides voluntary service for dead stray animals; however, in my observation, other "non-undertakers" volunteer groups are mostly not acknowledged by the undertakers. The dissents to other volunteers are not directed against their caring act for sending strays' bodies to funeral cremation, but their procedure of practices. During my first field visit, my informants Noah, Lucas, and John were curious about the objectives of my project, when Lucas got me a ride and we were on the way to the storehouse, Lucas asked me why choosing the undertaker group to be the subject. I was not much aware of the differences between their group with the others since my preference was only a coincidence that they were the first group to let me know about this voluntary care for dead stray animals, and I had been planning to join them. Therefore, I explained my unsophisticated reason and told him that I noticed that other similar groups provide similar services, when I was naming the other groups, Lucas just gave

some “oh I see” reaction and did not mention much about the other groups, the chat soon moved to other topics. I thought it was because of his unfamiliarity with other groups. However, after we completed a post-death care case in the storehouse with other undertakers, Noah and John, they asked me about my feelings for my first of handling a dead animal. I emphasized my astonishment at the meticulous detail of the funerary practice process, especially for the massaging part which loosened the stiff muscles of the body and rearranged the cat into a sleeping posture. I was surprised since photos posted on their social media page are mostly well-packed bodies which are wrapped with a towel and only the head of the animal is visible, I had no idea that the post-death care for stray animals had that many procedures. The most experienced volunteer out of the three, John, seemed stuck by my response, nodding his head slowly, “Yes! You will notice that we are not just collecting bones like THE OTHERS. We make the stray clean and neat, and put them back if they are broken into pieces...we are not just dead bodies collectors. Did you watch the Japanese film ‘Departures’? or seen any funeral makeup artist? We are doing those characters’ work, like a mortician, an undertaker!” John looped their specific mortician work several times by mentioning extremely fragmented cases and showing me the before and after photos. Some of the “before” photos taken right at the accident scene, the animals are unrecognizable, not even looked upsetting, like a rug with furry edges; “if these cases were reported to others, they would be simply shoveled then send to cremate” John added on and swiped to the “after” photo of the restoration, “in fact, they could be restored if you are

patient and care about them.” “Wow!” I was amazed. John's stresses on the “others” made me curious and enquired about the group that they were talking about, they told me the name of the charity, and underlined the charity accepts donations. When they asked me again the reason for choosing them as the subject, they were very welcoming to my explanation and expressed relief for me that I was lucky for not finding another group that received money from the public but doing the work without a caring heart, John appended, “a director found them (“the others”) before, but he turned back to interview us at the end because of discovering their wicked practice.” Since then, I realized that the requirement to participate in the undertaker community tacitly includes conformity and support to the procedure, as well as the values behind it. Post-death care has to be done in this way and level to show care and respect to the animal that died. The second implicit quality is not a prerequisite but a condition, which is a “vibe check” that evaluates whether the overall energy and personality of the volunteer could fit in the atmosphere of the community and get along with others. However, this quality is far less important than the first one mentioned. According to my informant Noah, my second field visit was a regular meeting of the See-off Person Association that is held occasionally depending on the schedules of volunteers, the purpose of the meeting is to gather volunteers to distribute supplies for their daily tasks, such as disinfectant sprays, towels, headlamps, etc., as well as for volunteers be acquainted with each other. As this entails many tasks, volunteers would spend time together during tasks sometimes but the short time spent together is not enough for them to get along

with each other; the meeting thus acts as a platform for them to chill and make friends in the community. In the meeting, however, the chemistries of volunteers are obvious, while the experienced volunteers were playing and chatting around happily comfortably, some volunteers were just sitting and having their meals silently. Lucas and Jane had both volunteered for only half a year so they were not very experienced when compared with others; nonetheless, Lucas chatted with people around and engaged in the playful atmosphere while Jane sat on a couch with a slightly hunched posture, holding her food plate close to her body. Only a few people engaged in fleeting small talks with Jane, and she appeared out of place; in contrast, Lucas seemed to be enjoying the moment. The differences in their involvement convey a phenomenon that vibe-suitable people are more appealing for undertakers to invite them to join and engage in their community, not just for carrying tasks but also for friendship building no matter their social statuses, identities or experience if they care about animals; however, the less vibe-suitable people have a lower chance to be invited, truly engage in the community as one. The second condition is a slightly subjective impression that affects people joining the undertaker community; yet, it is modifiable through time and person, and it is not necessary to impact funerary work.

Owing to the demands of volunteers, the selection of volunteers is usually welcoming without any specific requirements. Consequently, volunteers come from diverse backgrounds with different reasons for becoming undertakers.

## **Becoming the Undertakers**

Undertakers come from various backgrounds; when I was investigating their reasons for becoming a dead stray animal volunteer, one of the most interesting and unexpected things was when I asked my informants “Why do they volunteer to deal with dead stray animals?”<sup>3</sup> all of them answered “How do they become the volunteer who deals with dead stray animals?”<sup>4</sup> as their first reaction before I asked and explained the same question again. This slight contrast during interviews inspired me to consider the reasons why people become undertakers for stray animals. Informants have some universal answers later about the reasons “why” they volunteer, the two principal reasons are their love towards animals and thoughts about animals being poor and suffering. Linking their reasons with the contrasting phenomenon during the first Q&A, their answers to “how they become a volunteer” reveal that they have assumed and defaulted others to know about their reasons. Hence, their assumptions, love, and thoughts about stray animals are good materials to examine their reasons for becoming undertakers, who provide post-death care for dead stray animals.

In a storehouse located deep inside the remote area, the meeting was held on a Saturday night, and I was introduced as a university student who was doing a project about volunteers. There were around sixty people that night, aside from a table placed with food and some couches, the relaxing ambiance allowed everyone to socialize, and most of the volunteers were

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<sup>3</sup> 「『點解』你會做義工？」

<sup>4</sup> 「點樣」成為義工

moving around to chat and smoke in the outdoor space. Circles were formed, and people were sitting on camping chairs to chat and play under the night sky. When I was holding semi-structured interviews, trying to have some deep talk with my informants, curious volunteers often wandered around to check on our conversations. Some of them preferred just to listen, and some of them were interested, moving their camping chairs toward us to join in, many welcoming volunteers thus became my informants. Examinations below are sourced mainly from the interview during that night, and from experiences from carrying regular funerary tasks with others.

### ***The Soul of Strays -- Beliefs and Religions***

Beliefs and religious values are some of the prominent motives behind the choice to volunteer as stray animal undertakers. Whether animals have souls is a controversial foundation of animal issues since the existence of immortal souls is relevant to their capacity for an afterlife. This metaphysical debate has been recurrently explained by different religions; for instance, Buddhist and Hinduist cosmology believe both humans and non-humans have souls and can be reborn, while in Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, animals do not have an afterlife as they do not have a soul (DeMello 2016: xix). For my informants, there is no specific religious doctrine in their volunteer work; volunteers have various religions depending on their own, and they may have some small ritual added to their funerary procedure. However, all of my major informants claimed that they were not religious, so I did not experience any additional personal

rituals from them. Nonetheless, even though they defined themselves as non-religious, some of their religious principles and other beliefs can be revealed from their reasons for volunteering. Foremost, my informants believe that animals have souls, when I asked them about whether they think animals have souls or not, Jane answered instantly without a doubt, “Sure!”, then realized she had no explanation for her answer. She tried to explain but failed so she elaborated more “I think everything has spirits. Though I can’t explain but it is unreasonable for me to say those living things moving around have no soul” pointing at a pet poodle brought by a volunteer to the meeting. The same thought is shared with Esther, who also has no hesitation about animals’ souls, she developed further that the souls of lives are equal, making a point that she thinks differences between animals and human is just a matter of perspectives and because of the world is dominated by humans. This prerequisite reflected that although they are irreligious, their beliefs are influenced by Buddhist cosmology unconsciously which has become reasons for them to deal with dead stray animals.

Values implied for animals include the belief that funerary practice for them could make them rest in peace and head to reincarnation. Once, I was invited to take part in the cleaning and restoration process for the first time during my field visit. The massaging process requires strength to relax the muscles of the body, I was worried that I would break the body but Lucas and Noah kept reminding me that I was helping the cat and did not have to feel guilty for spending force on the body. At the same time, they whisper to the cat’s body, “Hey you are

brave. There is no pain anymore... don't be strays in your next life!"; after the cat was packed, it was passed through to everyone there to give it a hug. In their whispering to the cat, it is revealed that the volunteers believe the cat would be reincarnated into the next life and the post-death care and funeral service of the dead animals are necessary for their reincarnation. Furthermore, they believed the dead animal is able to know and feel the warmth, care, and love from volunteers, caring for the animal would make it rest in peace about its tragic death. "How does the funerary practice help them?" I asked. "Objectively, I could only say the practice makes me feel better but subjectively, I somehow believe that they can feel our work, maybe this could let them relieve, feel some warmth and awareness from humans at the end of their life," Jane answered.

Contrarily, Esther has another feeling about the post-death care work even though she holds the same thoughts about the souls of animals. She shared an unidentified feeling when she deals with dead animals, "to be honest, I am that kind of person who cannot watch animal-themed movies because I will be emotional and cry so hard; however, till now, I have never cried or felt emotional during the tasks. I am surprised, wondering am I ruthless." Esther's sharing powerfully resonated with me, during my first visit and handling of the dead animal, I was overwhelmed with logic, emotions, and practical details, one of the contradicting voices inside my head was a sudden understanding of why some people would think dead bodies are just piece of meat. I shared my resonance with Esther, both assented to a certain extent, that



dead animals are more lifeless than we imagined. Nonetheless, though Esther does not know whether the funerary practice can benefit or receive the animal's soul, she believes that proper funerary practice is to show respect for the animal's life, which is very consistent with her beliefs that animals are equal to humans and deserve respect. Thus, undertakers volunteer because they believe the strays deserve the respect and care from humans that they have not experienced during their lifetimes, the funerary practice is thus necessary to let the animals rest in peace.

Other than benefiting stray animals, people volunteering to deal with dead stray animals have revealed their beliefs about humans. "I am irreligious but my Buddhist wife said helping these strays help me to gain 'yinde' (陰德; doing good deeds for the credits in the afterlife), maybe she is right," said George. The concept of gaining *yinde* or cultivating personal virtue through helping the strays to rest in peace reflected their beliefs that helping the animals would bring good results to them, this concept is also full of Buddhist characteristics (Warawutsunthon 2021:34). Other than gaining good returns, helping the animals also represent a redemption of human's immorality. George shared his experience of bodies collection agitatedly, "whenever I went to the accident scene, looking at the animals, especially for the car accident one, they are unrecognizable! Every time I looked at them, I have no idea how should I tell you..." he continued, "when I looked at that clot of mess, I thought, 'Damn! what did they do wrong?'" George considers the death of stray animals as the fault of humans, his role to make the dead

animal rest in peace is just compensation for humans' problems. Interpretate the assistance as redemption, George reflected the Buddhist value embedded in him that helping the animal would stop the karma cycle for him as a human (Warawutsunthon 2021:35). Therefore, from the religious and belief perspective, people become undertakers to gain good credits for their afterlife and redeem for the sins created by human.

### ***Strays vs Undertakers—Hierarchy and Statuses***

"After being the strays' undertaker, I become very attentive to the road. Every furry clot on the road would get my nerve, last time I picked a raven back," said Lucas. Undertakers usually just have rough information about the case, some of the extreme cases such as the bodies that found because of the rotten corpse smell and worms, carcasses are often unrecognizable by the reporters, John shared there was a case received at night and the location was a mountain trail, without a specific location, they had a night hike to find the dead body. In the end, they found a dead and rotten boar inside the bushes, because of the huge size and wildlife regulations in Hong Kong, they covered up the boar's carcass with grasses and leaves before calling the government organization to handle the body. Most of the animals have equal statuses for the undertaker community, like the values mentioned above, "lives are equal" and therefore the community believes that animals deserve respect and funerary practice as a human does. Every life deserves respect, but the association specifically targets stray animals for the reason that resources for stray animals are insufficient. Compared with other animals like pets and wildlife,

the position of stray animals is unclear, while pets are loved and cared for by their owners and wildlife is naturally adapted to nature and monitored by the government, stray animals are domesticated animals that are abandoned, having an outcasted definition, low hierarchy in human's attention. "Volunteers for living stray animals are a lot but volunteers for dead stray animals are few" noted on the association's page. The option of being a dead stray animal volunteer implies the notion of helping the bottommost hierarchized groups of animals to gain back the equal status that they deserve.

However, while the notion of helping strays implies that humans have the power to exert much influence over the lives (and deaths) of these animals, undertakers sometimes feel that their work is not as impactful as they would hope. Since I have been wondering about the hierarchy problem entrenched in the community, I discussed some relevant topics with Jane, Noah, and George, asking them whether they think their work is truly helping the strays (providing what the stray animals need) and whether having no more stray animals their ideal situation of the society. Jane meditated for a few seconds, telling me that she understood my implication that stray animals are not as poor as they usually tell but have their freedom in the space of urban society nowadays. Conversely, George had a much different answer, "Of course (for having no stray animal)! At least they would not become an unidentifiable rug! They do nothing wrong, why do they need to suffer like this, crashed by cars!", Noah then complemented George's answer, "it is a complicated question but the world is not perfect. In Hong Kong, space

is too scarce and crowded, conflict exists between nature and development, safe environments for strays are too few, and conflict with human society, like cats would trace the car lights on the road..." Although they acknowledged the freedom and wild nature of stray animals, their answers further disclosed an implicit hierarchy incorporated into their views on animals. Undertakers could not refrain but establish their ideas about what is good and more important for the animals, including their notions of stray animals' incapacity to deal with urban life. Their idea that the lives and security of stray animals are more important than their freedom is an anthropocentric claim that projects and reinforces human values upon stray animals; referring to their work, undertakers are sometimes not as "equal" as they think, more superior to discuss how an animal should be. Anyhow, undertakers' notion of "all life is equal" is the reason why they volunteer to help with the low-hierarchized stray animals.

### *Instincts of the Undertakers*

The last perspective to examine reasons for becoming undertakers is the "instinct" of people, which is the vaguest subjective factor that plays a tremendously critical role. The instinct can be explained in two parts. The first part is about personal experiences and emotions; in my field studies, most of the volunteers have pet experience and the rest of them also volunteer to work for living animals or have acquainted experience playing with other pets. Lucas shared his recent story with me when I talked about my experience of feeding stray cats, "I have two pet cats in my home, one of them is a tuxedo cat. One day I received a case, where

the animal died from a dog bite, when I arrived there, I realized it was a tuxedo cat with a similar age and size to my cat. That day I stayed calm but when I went back home, I cuddled and sniffed my tuxedo cat for a long long time,” Lucas giggled, “at the end, it got annoyed though. That case was the most indelible to me.” Cremation services for pets are common nowadays but the same funerary practice is rarely seen on other animals, especially for stray animals without an owner; except for the existence of an owner, funerary practices for pets and stray animals are fundamentally different in their nature. Funerary for pets represents the close relationships built between the pet and its owner, particularly in today’s contexts where pets are often treated as the child or as others roles of member in a family (Shir-Vertesh 2012:421-424), a funeral for the pet is not just because of it deserves as an animal with equal status with human but also for its “personhood” developed through the relationship built with its owner. Nevertheless, stray animals do not build a relationship with the volunteers through experience, in most cases, the first meeting of undertakers and the animal is the last meeting for them, emotions and funeral practices derived from the stray animal’s death thus differ from funerals for pets, and it might seem irrational. However, Lucas’s experience suggested the emotions derived from the death of stray animals are not unreasonably out of nowhere, the love of undertakers towards stray animals is possibly a derivation from their love for pets or other animals that they have bonding built. Hence, the love derived from the experiences of volunteers drives them to become undertakers to help stray animals.

The second part could be related to the emotional explanation; yet, it consists of more arbitrariness. The second part of the instinct is the empathy of undertakers. Informant John remarkably emphasizes the importance of empathy, and he deems empathy as the fundamental root for him to become an undertaker for strays. “Think about it, if you died, you would not want to be covered with blood and with no one there for you, so as the animals!” he said. The more profound impact of empathy in John’s eyes influences their work of restoration. None of the volunteers learned about veterinary practice but they have discovered ways to diagnose the cause of death and to restore the bodies, including those extremely unidentifiable cases; massaging the corresponding muscle, flipping the fur back to the original position, placing the eyes popped out back to the orbital plate by relaxing the maxilla, among others. All of these restoration skills are self-taught from their experience and passed on to the new volunteers. As an experienced undertaker who joined the community at a very early period, John was the first volunteer who probed the skills on his own and then spread them to others when they handled cases together. He regarded all the handling skills he has as a result of empathy and instinct, doing what seemed to make sense to him and learning from the experience. John said ordinarily with nothing special while I was jaw-dropping about their restoration proficiency, “Everything of our work is about empathy. Do what you would do to yourself to them”. For the above reasons, unexplainable empathy is like an instinct of the undertakers, driving them to volunteer to serve the dead stray animals.

\* \* \*

This chapter has introduced the background and organization of these undertakers to facilitate the discussion on why people volunteer to deal with dead stray animals through various perspectives. Religious values, concepts of animal statuses and hierarchy, as well as the “instinct” of people, are three of the most prominent findings in this project. Details of the cleaning and restoration process of the stray animals will be discussed in the following chapter to present a more holistic record of the undertakers’ work.

## **Chapter 2 – From Bad Death to Good Death—Stray Animals**

As in the previous chapter, the undertakers have a fundamental belief that animals have souls, and the existence of souls grants them “equal” status with humans and deserves respect. Through funerary practices, undertakers believe can demonstrate their respect for the lives of stray animals by helping them to feel the warmth and care of humans and assist their way to the afterworld. In other words, the funerary practice is the procedure that helps the strays rest in peace. The funerary practice consists of various steps depending on the case’s situation or even practice by volunteer individuals, the involvement of the undertaker’s practices represents rituals of their group which denote their notion of transforming the tragically bad death of the strays into the serene and good death. This chapter will examine the rituals beneath the funerary practices and the meanings behind them.

Funerary practice here does not only refer to the cremation but also other compositions starting from picking up the animal body. After the reported dead bodies are picked up, cases located near the storeroom would be carried back to the storeroom for further funerary practices before cremation while cases from distant locations would have briefer procedures and be sent directly to the cremation company. Since most of the cases received are from districts near the storeroom, funerary practices performed in the storehouse are the most common and would be the most comprehensive procedures. Hence, the following rituals illustrated mostly come from my first field visit which was performed in a storehouse, to illuminate a more holistic view of



the symbols and values embedded in the undertaker community.

### *Storeroom setting*

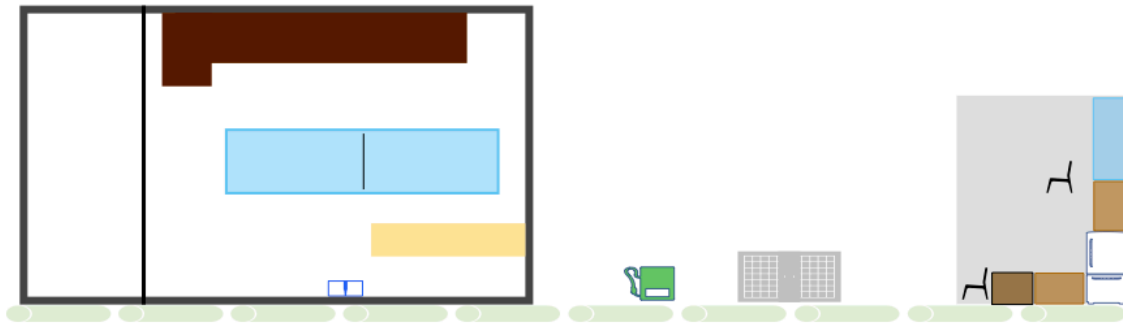


Figure 1. Storeroom Floorplan (from fieldnotes)

To begin with, a floor plan (Figure 1) might be useful for a better understanding of the storeroom setting. The storeroom could be divided into two sections, the container house indoor area (black rectangle on the left) for meetings and gatherings, and usually unused; and the outdoor area where funerary practices generally take place. The outdoor area can be further divided into two parts, the open-air area and the tin sheets shelter area (light grey rectangle on the right) where the fridge (bottom right corner) and other supplies for their daily volunteer work are stored.

My informants had thoughtfully welcomed me with a “full set” demonstration in the storeroom on my first visit in November 2022. Their persistence in making the animals clean astonished me since I had never expected a basic cleaning process would be that intricate with details. They reminded me that there could be variations depending on the situations and conditions of both undertakers and the bodies of the deceased animals. Regardless of the

variances of cases, however, the cleaning step is always the first procedure after the animal is collected.

### **Empathy for the Purity**

The funerary practices could be generally divided into three parts: 1. Cleaning, 2. Restoration, 3. Recording and wrapping up. Cleaning is the first procedure of funerary practices which consists of various steps, acting as a ritual to remove dirt, sanitize, and dry to prevent rotting.

#### ***Cleaning--Showering***

On the day when I first arrived in the storeroom, John had already picked up a case, he got out of his truck with a transparent plastic bag in his hands, and a tabby pattern was clearly visible through the bag. He walked closer and led me to the uncovered area while my other two informants Noah and Lucas were taking gloves, underpads, and towels from metal cabinets (light brown rectangles) inside the shelter. In the open-air area, the plastic bag was placed gently on a table made with two plastic grids placed on top of a cross-shaped rack (grey rectangle with grids), and a gardening hose reel (green icon) was installed on the fence wall (pale green sticks), next to the table, and a hole was drilled at the bottom of the wall and under the rack. It is obviously a place for rinsing. Showering is the foremost practice among all processes.

The knot on the bag was loosened with a bizarre smell coming behind, a light whiff like mixing wet mud with blood smell, John supplemented when he opened the bag, “It might have

a bit smell, might be stinky to you.” “But this case is quite fresh and clean already, no worries, should be acceptable for you,” Lucas added, taking the tabby gently out of the plastic bag with both arms, and John assisted in pulling away the bag. The cat was finally placed on the rack, its stiff body was still curved as it posed in the bag. Beyond my expectations, I was invited to participate in their funerary practice when Noah handed me the gloves. “Just like our daily shower, we use body soap and water to clean them if possible,” said Lucas. The body was wetted with the hose water and cleaned with body soap. It was my first time to directly touch a dead animal, I was bewildered and had no idea what to do while my informants kept telling me to treat it as just a human shower. Using soap to rub throughout the body, from head to body to legs and finally to tails, during the process of rubbing soap on the cat, I was advised wherever which part I was cleaning. The delicacy of showering, being cautious around different body parts, is certainly not just showering as a human being.

The fur and skin of the tabby were soft but I could feel the flesh beneath was hardened, I rubbed the fur gently since I was worried that I would break or separate tissue from the body. Despite that, Noah reminded me that scrubbing the dirt away requires strength to make the animal truly clean, solely rubbing soap on the main body had cost two minutes to scour foam towards every fur, bear in mind that the main body is the most straightforward part of showering already. “You have to clean it, the joints, the neck, the earholes...” said Lucas, “You could clean it firmer, it would not feel pain!” Some of the body parts have to be handled with extra care, for

instance, the ears need to be cleaned with additional attention to avoid water getting inside the body. “If water gets in, the bacteria will germinate inside the body” John noted. After using soap to rub the pinna, foam, and grime cannot be rinsed with water but to be wiped with wet wipes. For the legs, similar to the ears, toe beans and joints on paws are other spots that require extra attention for it is commonly jammed with heedless mud. The mud wiping has to be cleaned toe by toe while volunteers’ gloves are easily snagged on the claws adjacent. Lastly, for the bottom part, it was the only step that I was asked to not participate in. Lucas demonstrated to me, using his fingers to knead and press around the anus, “It is essential to get the poop out of their body,” said Lucas, trying to push all excretion out until there is no more coming out. Finally, the showering is complete when the lather covers the whole animal body was rinsed off. The wet animal would then be transferred to the sheltered area, placed on several underpads to blot the fur on a long folding table (light blue rectangle), waiting for the next steps and rituals.

### ***Cleaning-- Sanitizing***

The second step of storeroom cleaning is sanitizing. After pat drying the body with underpads and towels, the disinfectant spray is sprayed once more on the animal’s body for a final sanitization, and wet wipes are used for a final clean. Since the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2019, disinfectant spray and other sanitization products, such as wet wipes, have become common items for cleaning in Hong Kong, the See-off Person Association thus has

received a lot of sanitization products from their supporters' donations. Sanitization is a secondary cleaning method in the storehouse. However, sanitization products have significantly benefited cases in remote locations, sanitization become the essential procedure that replaces the showering practice when water is unavailable, saving the journey for the undertakers to travel back to the storehouse. John recalled a dog case he received, a deceased dog was found in a ditch in a rural area and was covered up with mud. "I used two bottles of sanitizing sprays and three packs of wet wipes to clean it!" he stressed the effort of using these disposable cleaning methods. Reflecting the challenges of receiving cases and their insistence on attaining an ultimately clean state for the deceased animals.

The cleaning practices mentioned above are the usual practices of the undertaker community. The intricacies and undertakers' insistence on cleanliness are not without purpose, and I explain it with the concept of purity below.

### ***Ritual of Purity***

During my fieldwork and interviews, I asked my informants why they would clean the animals with their "standard" approach, and all of them answered in the same direction, the functional explanation, "to slow down the decomposition process" they said. Keeping the body away from rotting for more convenient to store since the animals might not be sent to cremation right after the funerary practices, slowing down the decomposition helps to maintain both the hygiene of the animal body and the storeroom environment until a pile of cases is gathered and

transferred to the cremation company. Another “functional” reason they claimed is the practices represent their respect for the animals, letting them pass away with dignity. As mentioned in Chapter 1, John regards their post-death care service to dead stray animals as a result of empathy, “Think about it, if you died, you would not want to be covered with blood and with no one there for you, so as the animals!” he said, “it’s all about empathy!” John’s speech reflects the undertakers’ belief that their funerary practice could let the animals rest in peace, transforming from bad death to good death; nevertheless, reasons explained by the volunteers had never explained why their funerary care has to be done at this level to animals that died. This mystery drives me to analyze deeper into their community context, the cleaning procedure is not just a functional practice but a funerary ritual with symbols embedded with the undertakers’ beliefs, connecting the undertakers’ desires in life with the stray animals’ bodies in death. making the practice could result in a good death for the stray animals.

The cleaning procedure demonstrates undertakers’ consistence belief in animals as innocent victims with souls. Cleaning for stray animals is not only for physical cleanliness but also symbolizes spiritual spotlessness, a state of untainted. During the showering step, Lucas shared with me his habit of scrubbing blackheads on the cats’ chins as he would clean his pet cats in the same way, “they had suffered enough for being stray, let them enjoy their last moment and die virtuously”, the physical cleanliness of the cat has altered into a spiritual enjoyment in Lucas’s view, referring that the subtleties of cleaning epitomize the love from human to stray

animals, making the strays as precious, clean, lovable as pets do.

On the other hand, in some extreme cases such as decayed cases with maggots propagated on the body, animals would be bathed in bleach to kill the maggots. While bleach would damage the fur and hair of the animal at the same time with the maggots, a few of my informants said it is an unavoidable outcome, “keeping them clean is more important than the fur” they commiserated, “there is no way to let them die filthily.” Being an animal too, killing the maggot seems contradicting to the “all lives are equal” value in the undertaker community, or reflects the community is ironically not engaging the maggot as life; these “irrationalities” validate how the community is full of contradictions, yet, these are not the spotlight of this studies and having contradictions has no conflict in revealing their beliefs. Maggot symbolizes dirt which is a matter out of place that polluted the cleanness since the animals do not include maggots as part of their lives (Douglas 2002: 44-45). With this explanation, it is less complicated to understand why the undertakers devoted so much to seeking a high standard of being clean. Moreover, as George in Chapter 1 who was emotional when I asked him the reason for becoming an undertaker, “When I looked at that clot of mess, I thought, ‘Damn! What did they do wrong?’”, his drive for being a volunteer is to cultivate personal virtue by redeeming human immorality on stray animals, his understanding of the stray animals “did nothing wrong” indicates that he considers animals with an innocent and pure persona. Hence, the cleaning procedure is the ritual that restores animals’ original untainted state by removing all the matters out of their place

which had been inserted into the deceased animals, including the dirt, maggots, untied fur... caused by human abandonment, neglect, and killing. In a way, the undertaker's care for the animals is to make up for the pains and suffering that humans as a collective have caused these animals, the perspective of rituals intended for humans will be explored in Chapter 3.

Additionally, I was curious about the religious beliefs of individuals in the association, I interviewed my informants about whether they are religious and how they would carry out the work on their own, for instance, Lucas's emphasis on the blackheads is his personal preference only. Unfortunately, none of my major informants is religious so I was not able to participate in the individual's religious practices. However, from my informants and chit-chats with the members, two religious volunteers are Buddhist and Christian respectively. Coincidentally, both of their religious practices are carried out during the shower, the Buddhist would play chanting scriptures to release the animals' souls from suffering, and the Christian would play hymns during the process. Nonetheless, the Christian mentioned that playing hymns is just her personal preference that she would feel better for the animals, "I play hymns just because I am a Christian. The hymns make me feel like the animals will rest more peacefully, and I feel calmer and more comfortable with the hymns," she shared, "but there is no actual power from the hymns to the animals' souls I think." Despite the intentions of the two religious volunteers being different, their preference to have their religious rituals carried out, relating to the animals' souls or personal calmness; especially from the Buddhist's perspective, the chant that releases the soul



from suffering reveals a correspondence to the notion mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the notion of helping the animals to get rid of unwanted pollutants. Moreover, the variation of cleaning rituals according to individual undertakers' beliefs is remarkable, as it indicates a certain degree of openness of the ritual to religious diversity. Still, the key point of the ritual is the physical cleanliness of the animals' bodies could reflect on the animals' original purity which is believed that they should leave this life with.

Therefore, the cleaning procedure is a ritual that represents creating a good death for the stray animals. The ritual transforms animals' bad deaths into good deaths by resuming their purity by physically cleaning the dirt that does not belong to the animals, and the act of cleansing represents both redemption and love from humans.

### **The Peaceful Sleep**

The second part of the funerary practice is carried out in the shelter area, acting as a ritual for pacifying the souls of the animals.

#### ***Diagnosis—What Causes Your Death?***

After the cat was pat-dried with towels and underpads, John held the tabby with both arms, Noah placed a new underpad on the table and the cat was gently placed on the table again. There was blood slowly bled out from a few tiny spots on the body. "It was bitten by dogs", John counted the holes on the body, "maybe it was torn by two dogs, the tooth marks are inconsistent with the dog's dentition." "Usually, the bleed would stop after the shower but if it

keeps bleeding like now, we would find some ways to stop it first” Noah explained to me and rolled and placed tiny tissue beads inside the marks to stop the bleeding. John put the beads inside the body and patted it softly, “yes, it should be close to my hypothesis, it was bitten and torn by dogs,” John announced whilst he touched a spiked, dislocated lump on the spine of the cat, used two hands to simulate the directions of the dogs’ mouths, one from the front and one from the back, “maybe it was bitten like that.” – the cause of death is diagnosed. The See-off Person Association would record the cases received on a Facebook page, and information including the cause of death would be posted. Even though most of the volunteers do not have veterinary training, and they could be mistaken about the cause of death, their posts are meant to be records of possible causes of death. Diagnosing the cause of death is essential to pacify the soul, a clear acknowledgment of the cause is the method to vindicate the death of the animal, its death is not caused by its fault nor obscured by the perpetrator. Especially in the Chinese context, death without a clear cause would be seen as an injustice and death in vain, the soul of the decedent would have more resentment and become unable to reach the world after death<sup>5</sup>. Hence, acknowledging the cause of death reveals the undertakers have been unconsciously embracing the values that the death of stray animals has to be vindicated even though the true cause might be inconsistent with their approximation, it is a vital element for a good death.

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<sup>5</sup> In Chinese folk belief, souls died from unnatural death would be trapped in “city of death in vain”(枉死城) and would not be able to enter the ascension. (From: Kuo, Chien-Wen(郭建雯). 2022. Blessing and Transcendence: The Christmas Ceremony of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva in Xinzhuang (祈福與超度:新莊地藏王菩薩聖誕法會). Master thesis, Graduate Institute of Religious Culture and Information Management, Aletheia University(真理大學宗教文化與資訊管理學系碩士班), pp.53.)

### ***Restoration, Massage, and Posture***

Simultaneously, restoration and the diagnosis procedure are performed together, like the tissue beads put in to stop bleeding, whenever the received body is not completed, undertakers would try to restore the body. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the restoration procedure is one of the core values of the undertaker community which differs their “See-off Person Association” from other associations that also provide post-death care for stray animals. The undertaker community regards themselves as the undertakers or see-off-person for they are not just picking and sending animals to cremation but act as morticians to “beautify” the body like the funeral makeup artist for human funerals. The restorations of all the cases I handled were relatively easy, compared with the other two cases, the cat on my first visit was already the toughest.

Once the bleeding was blocked, Lucas introduced the principal part of their “beautification” work, tabby on that day was very complete, restoration was not much needed, but it had a stiff and tensed look, it was time to let it rest, relaxed, eyes closed. “The next step is to let it relax,” said Lucas, starting to massage the cat's body with his palm, “the body will be stiffened after it dies. The longer the duration after death, the stiffer the body would be, we could approximately estimate their time of death. For instance, this case’s muscles are stiffened but it is not the stiffest already, I guess it died around this morning, not too long ago since it is clean without maggots.” “Would you like to try?” Lucas made a space for me to stand in front of the cat, taught me to use the palm and the root of the thumb to massage the stiffed muscles, “massage

in a circular direction, follow the muscles.” I tried to massage the cat but it was not working, “You could massage it with more strength”, “it would not feel pain, its bone wouldn’t crack”, “Remember you are helping it!” my informants reminded repeatedly, suggesting me to massage with firmer strength while I was worried that I would break the body. “Imagine it used all of its strength in its last breath to live, animals we received are common with opened eyes and tensed straightened legs, sometimes, their tooth might bite through the tongue,” John elucidated, “we are helping them to relieve from its last discomfort. We are helping them.” Each stiffened leg had to massage the joints one by one, stiffed muscles became more flexible after a while, and the legs were bent gently close to the body, posed with a softer posture like it was sleeping. With the same logic and method to massage the glabella with fingers, the eyelids gradually loosened to close. Paper flowers and a Buddhist Darani Blanket might be optionally put on the cat as a blessing. The cat was lastly warped with a towel with its head showing up, just like a baby burrito. The cat looked like it was sleeping calmly. Putting the burrito-wrapped cat into a new plastic bag the procedure of restoration, massage, and posture is finally finished.

After the restoration and massage, I was surprised and overwhelmed by their skills in handling the dead body and I shared my amazement with my informants when they asked me about my feeling. John seemed stuck by my response, mentioning their differences with other associations that undertakers are not just dead body collectors. He repeated their specific mortician work several times by showing me some before and after photos of extremely

fragmented cases. Some car crash cases were unrecognizable, looked like a rug with furry edges on the accident scene, broken into pieces when they were picked up; but they were recognizable again with a calming sleeping posture after restorations. My informants especially John, shared a lot of their self-taught skills of restoring the bodies with different conditions; massaging the corresponding muscle when the body is stiff, flipping the fur back to the original position for the high fallen or roadkill cases since the fur should be still attached but furled inside the body after the accident, placing the eyes popped out back to the orbital plate by relaxing the maxilla when the head was hit with pressure, etc. No matter what condition, the goal of the restoration is to restore the stray animals to identifiable and peaceful looks. Again, the goal is to restore the animals to their original state of purity, enabling their good death.

### ***The Whispers***

The restoration process is sometimes accompanied by another ritual, whispering. During the restoration and massaging work, after the cat was identified as dying from a dog fight, and when I had to press harder throughout the massage, my informants whispered to the cat's body. "You just had a rough fight with the dogs, how brave you are, there is no pain now", "Hey! You are brave. There is no pain anymore... don't be strays in your next life!", "Have a sweet dream," they whispered, like comforting the cat, appreciating it for being brave during its lifetime. This whispering could be understood as communication with its soul, in an attempt to calm and pacify the animal, allowing it to leave this life in peace. The key point is that they could now

depart from this world of suffering and move on to a better “next life”, ensuring that death is therefore “good”. As a result, a good death is not only about physical cleanliness and original purity but also about moving to the afterworld in peace.

### ***Ritual of Pacify***

Although practices inside the sheltered area could be separated into parts to evaluate, different practices are synchronized with each other. In my sentiment, procedures inside the sheltered area are calmer than the cleaning rituals before, and it grants me a sense of serenity. I asked different informants about why they would restore and pose the animals as sleeping, and their answers were diverse yet consistent with each other. Identical to the previous chapter, John deemed the restoration as a result of empathy that all practices are just “do as you would be done by” while “you would not want to be covered with blood and with no one there for you”, animals should be treated like humans. To John, restoration and sleeping poses for animals are equal to the funerary practices of humans, trying to make the deceased one look peaceful. For the whispering, undertakers tend to think the dead animals could feel their work and might be more relieved; for another informant Jane, “objectively, I could only say the practice makes me feel better,” she said, she was objectively unsure about how the procedure could help the animals to rest in peace but at least she found the animals grant her a more peaceful feeling after the ritual as I do. Apart from these reasons for holding the practice, Noah told me that he thinks the sleeping pose has a practical purpose in that it is more space-saving since animals

packed with the pose have a flat surface and could be piled up, refrigerator in the storeroom could store more bodies before transporting them to the cremation company, and the tidy body is also easier to handle during transportation.

Apart from the purpose mentioned by the undertakers, practices carried out in the sheltered area are different but the whole procedure has the same function, to act as a ritual to pacify the souls of the stray animals which would make a good death for the animals. Elements of transforming bad death into good death are further revealed in this ritual, including diagnosing the cause of death – a piece of information, while it may be mistaken, marks a vindication to exonerate the vain of death of the stray animals. Besides, the restoration refers to the completeness of the departed both physically and spiritually. Physical completeness represents the meaning of John's saying that animals would like to be treated like humans do, the completeness of animals is equal to the completeness of humans, and being incomplete is seen as a cursed death. At the same time, spiritually, being intact represents that the departed animal is cared for and loved by humans, the physical practice is an expression of blessing that the stray's death is blessed invisible, wishing it to pass decently with dignity and respect. The blessed meaning is more obvious especially when the ritual includes the whisperings, as the content of the whisper, "don't be strays in your next life" is the blessing for the afterlife of the animals, and "there is no pain" is the blessing for it to relieve and let go of the tragedies in the present life. Lastly, regarding the sleeping posture, my informant Lucas who is a cat owner

explained that the sleeping posture is “the most natural posture of the animals when they are relaxed and comfortable”. The sleeping posture grants a softer sense than the tense and stiff looking which represents the animals passing away calmly and peacefully. In addition, the sleeping posture and the burrito-like way of wrapping are similar to human infants, resemblances between babies and animals symbolize the original state of lives, how they were gone as how they were born. The original state like a newborn is the most peaceful condition without impurities from earthly concepts. Thus, the posture is a demonstration of purity and calmness, making the death peaceful without turbulence and pain.

Hence, practices in the sheltered area are a set of rituals that epitomize a transformation from bad death to good death through pacifying the animal both physically and spiritually, letting the stray animals rest in peace by seeking justice for its death, showing care and blessings, and removing the earthly pain it had suffered.

### **Names and Hugs for the Treasured**

The last section of the funerary practices is momentary, carried out within merely a few minutes, meanwhile, it acts as a ritual for acknowledgment and a better reincarnation.

### ***Naming--Form Outcasted to Recognized***

After the tabby was wrapped burrito-like and put inside a new plastic bag, “So this is the end of our work! You could think about its name,” said Lucas, “the rest of our practices are to



give it a name, put it on record, and put it inside the fridge, John will drive them to the cremation company few days after when his car is available.” Undertakers usually regard their funerary practices as having come to an end after the animal is restored and packed; however, from my observation, the ritual is not over until the body is put in the refrigerator. While Lucas was briefing them about their work of sending the animals to the cremation company, Noah took out an invoice book from the cabinet. The invoice book is given by the cremation company with their logo printed, it was originally for the private use of the company but since the See-off Person Association has been handing over a certain number of cases, the book was handed to the association to let undertakers write on their own, saving time and effort for the company. Noah wrote about the location, time, and date of the case found, the cause of death, types, and other general information about the animal, such as whether it is sterilized and implanted with a microchip, the name of the undertaker, etc. “The name?” Noah asked after he had filled in the information above. I was clueless about naming, “Usually we would give it a name with positive and happy meanings,” Lucas advised, “like one of our volunteers has a collection named with the word ‘happiness (樂)’ in the names. But it is up to you, feel free to name it, it is just for record use.” I had not much idea but remembering a repeated comforting word from their whispers, the cat was brave and tough to combat its enemies till its last breath, we named it “Little Tough (硬頸仔)” to memories his bravery. The name of the tabby was finally written on the invoice. The bagged tabby was put in another translucent plastic bag with

the invoice placed, like a newborn baby with its name tag on the blanket. From being an unknown stray animal to being recognized with a unique and customized name, sometimes when my informants mention cases that they remember the most, they always talk about the pickup location or the name that they entitled for the animals, names of the stray animals are more than just for record use. The individuality of the animals is marked by the naming of death, not just a body, but an independent existence on its own.

### ***Ritual to Granting Personhood***

The naming procedure is very important in undertakers' work since the name is a record for them to document their work and expenses. Yet, in their manner of naming with positive meanings or even personal prospects to the animals, my informants Lucas, Noah, and John were not aware but have to acquiesce with my point that the naming is more than "just for record use". The practice of naming has two purposes; like human names under Chinese tradition, the name given by parents is a blessing to the newborn child, expressing a wish for the child's future (Watson 1986: 621); names for deceased stray animals likewise embedded the same value. When I asked Lucas whether he is religious or not, he shared some practices about the religious undertakers, aside from the hymns and chantings, a Christian undertaker would name her cases with the word "sky(天)", embodying the meaning of "heaven". Thus, naming is a ritual of conveying blessings to the animals, both for their peaceful rest and future life in reincarnation or the world after death.

Moreover, some undertakers tend to name the animals with more pet-like names such as desserts and food names, or even literally meaningless names with euphonious articulations; this kind of names is more likely to demonstrate the second purpose of the naming practice, acting as a ritual of granting personhood. Giving names to animals is a ritual of recognizing them as an entity, an acknowledgment of their existence. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the association targets stray animals for their ambiguous position and scarce assistance compared with pets. The position of stray animals is vague since they are neither pets nor wildlife but vastly share similarities with them; especially identical with pets that are also domesticated, or even share the same species, pets are loved and cared for by their owners while stray animals are domesticated animals that abandoned without people's attention. They are outcasted in the huge spectrum of definitions and have a low hierarchy in society without attention from humans. Stray animals are neglected, they are born, live, and pass away silently around in the same society we live in. Undertaker community has the belief that "all lives are equal", therefore, name-giving is the act that acknowledges the existence of stray animals. Furthermore, it elevates the status of stray animals from the outcasted to the recognized, being loved and treated equally like pets; besides, since pets are often treated as members of the family, treating stray animals as pets implies that the personhood is also diffused among the stray animals. Therefore, naming is a ritual of granting personhood to stray animals, acknowledging their existence and uniqueness like all other equal lives. In addition, having a name refers to

having an identity, in Chinese traditional beliefs, identity is crucial for reincarnation, avoiding the souls becoming solitary souls that wander around without a dwelling<sup>6</sup>. Hence, the personhood and entity granted are important for funeral practices to secure the reincarnation of the animals. Consequently, naming is a good death ritual through blessing, granting personhood, and safeguarding the afterlife journey of strays.

### ***Hugging--The Warmth from Human***

The final step of the funerary practices is the most “unreasonable” that it was the only act that none of my informants gave me a functional explanation for. Once the tabby was finally wrapped in two bags and sealed with a cable tie, Lucas held the bag with both his arms and cuddled it for a few seconds, then the bag was then passed to Noah, then to John. Watching them doing the same act one by one, I felt the act was so naturally behaved but I was also curious about their cuddling. A few seconds later, John passed me the tabby, I held it the way they did, like cuddling a baby, Lucas said, “Give it a hug as you like, it is the last moment of its life.” I gave the cat the last hug, but at the same time my nervousness and rationality were interrupting me to throw into mood, I was contradicting, on one hand, kept thinking that the cat had died, and it was different from living animals, it was lifeless; on the other hand, I had an impulse to hug it like sending my tenderness to it. I didn’t know what to do after hugging the

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<sup>6</sup> Nameless soul would become fierce ghost to wander around for having no one to worship and offer sacrifices. Fierce ghost cannot enter to reincarnation. (From: 王志宇：〈台灣的無祀孤魂信仰新論——以竹山地區祠廟為中心的探討〉，《逢甲人文社會學報》，2003年5月，第6期，頁183-210。)

body for moments, I passed it back to Lucas, and the cat was finally placed in the refrigerator.

The funerary practices had finally been completed.

### ***Ritual for the Earthly World and the World After Death***

The naming and hugging practices act like an understated finale of the whole funerary practice in the storehouse, almost all of my informants do not count it as a process, especially for the cuddling part. Even though these practices seem trivial, they centered on two functions rituals, letting the animals feel the warmth and care of humans, and conferring a status for the animals. Eventually, these meanings of ritual represent a good death of animals through benefiting their reincarnation. For hugging, the purpose is very intuitive that the hugs represent love and care from humans. Just as my informant, Jane shared her feelings about the funerary practices, “subjectively, I somehow believe that they can feel our work, maybe this could let them relieve, feel some warmth and awareness from humans at the end of their life.” The general view from the undertaker community is that animals have souls and can feel the warmth of humans, the view is very consistent and well-explained with the hugging practice. Through the hugs, even though the animals are dead, they could be relieved and let go of the earthly hardness through regaining respect and care that they had not received during their lifetime; hence, the whole funerary practices including the hugs are all devoted to this fundamental value. As mentioned in the earlier paragraph, Jane answered she could only “objectively” say the practice makes her feel better when she tried to provide me with as much “factual” information

as she could, the “objectively” and “subjectively” she emphasized in her speech had drawn my attention. The declaration of objectivity and subjectivity reveals the uncertainties inside Jane’s heart; however, at the same time, consistent with my contradicting feeling when I hugged the cat, my impulse of hoping I could let it feel the tenderness before it is gone after cremation. The hugs or even the whole funerary practices for dead stray animals transform a bad death into a good death in the eyes of humans, through practices that let the undertakers intuitively think the animals are peacefully rested with love. Rituals of helping stray animals to the world after death are never just rituals for the departed animals but for worldly humans who subjectively love animals in their own ways.

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This chapter has examined how funerary practices as a ritual could transform the bad death of stray animals into a good death and assisted with the documentation of the funerary practices for the deceased stray animals. The rituals have revealed the elements of a good death in the undertaker community, purity and peacefulness of the soul are vital to receiving a good death at the end with love and blessings from others. Moreover, the good death ritual functions not only for the relief of animals, but it is also a ritual for the relief of the undertakers. The following chapter will review further on how funerary practices are also performed as rituals for humans, and how volunteers project their understanding of good death onto the stray animals’ corpses.

### **Chapter 3 – From Bad Death to Good Death—Humans**

In Chapter 2, we discussed how funerary practices have been used as a ritual for the sake of animals, demonstrating how these practices have been used for the purification and pacification of deceased animals, as well as for their afterlife. Apart from their purposes for animals, funerary practices are also performed as rituals for humans. This chapter will review these rituals from the perspective of revealing their functions for humans, and why humans consider them as rituals for a good death in comparison to hospice services for humans.

#### **Let go, “Hooman”**

Funerary practice as rituals for stray animals is mentioned in the previous chapter, the same funerary practice could be seen as rituals for humans. Compared with the stray animals’ perspective, ritual analysis for human purposes would not segregate the procedures into different fractions, the ritual would be examined as a whole for its functions performed for humans, the undertakers.

#### ***Ritual for Redemption***

The foremost ritual for humans is the ritual for redemption which has been slightly mentioned in the previous chapters. There are various causes of death in the cases handled by the undertakers, while some of the stray animals died from natural causes such as aging and disease, most of the cases died from human causes, for instance, roadkill and abuse. Especially within the urban setting where humans and animals often have conflict in the use of land, for

example, as Noah mentioned in Chapter 1, “cats would trace the car lights on the road”; the high degree of development had forced stray animals to live in an artificial urban setting, increasing their risk of being harmed by humans. Hence, the undertakers believe that dead of stray animals are vastly related to the fault including human abandonment, neglect, and intentional killing. While animals are innocent but are being killed with the carelessness of humans, funerary practice for stray animals is performed as an act to purify and pacify them; at the same time, it symbolizes compensation for humans’ fault for their deaths. As George said in Chapter 1, stray animals “did nothing wrong”, even though he defined himself as irreligious, helping the animals to rest in peace with the funerary practice is a ritual to gain ‘*yinde*’ (陰德) or cultivating personal virtue for him. Although George’s statement about gaining ‘*yinde*’ was about how the ritual benefits him as an individual, the ritual of redemption is a bit different from personal deeds, further, it is compensating for others’ fault in killing the animals. The ritual of redemption renders human beings as a whole, the faults of others are also responsible for the undertakers as part of the human being. Hence, the funerary practice is for reimbursing the death of animals caused by the fault of human beings, it is a ritual to redeem the inadequacy of humans.

### ***Ritual for Moving On***

One of the inexplicable points in explaining the reason why people volunteer as undertakers is that dead stray animals would not have any chance to build relationships with the



undertakers like pets or other living strays do, the first meeting is also the last meeting of the undertakers and animals. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1, most of the undertakers are pet owners or experienced in working with animals, relationships are developed between the pet and the owner from their daily experiences of getting along with each other; therefore, love and care for the deceased stray animals is likely to be an emotion that derived from the undertakers' love with the animals that close to them. Particularly when most of the cases reported to the See-off Person Association are cats and dogs which could be adopted as pets, the deaths of stray cats and dogs are easy to resonate with the undertakers about their animals. Therefore, even though the undertakers met the departed strays for the first and last time, their sentiments could still be tough and tense to accept the death of the animals, especially since some of the volunteers, like John, are renowned for being rich in empathy. As Jane shared "I could only say the practice makes me feel better", the funerary practice that prepares the animals' cleanliness with calm and peaceful posture is a very direct action to create external serenity which could provide an intuitive sense that the animal has been rested in peace. Consequently, through the funerary practice which is believed to help the dead stray animals to rest in peace, combined with the intuitive sense from the appearances of the bodies, the practices act as a ritual that helps the undertakers to overcome the toughness in accepting the death and emotions caused by handling the cases.

## **Projection of Good Death-- Hospice Care of Human**

Funerary practices in the storehouse are similar to the funerary practice for humans, while the undertakers believe the ritual could transform the bad death of animals into a good death, it reveals that the undertakers have introduced their belief about what is a good death onto the stray animals' corpses. The elements of a good death for the death strays' practice could be compared with the hospice care for living humans, through the comparison, it is easier to demonstrate how the ritual is believed to accomplish good death and how is the ritual comprised. Research on geriatric psychiatry has shown that there are eleven core themes of hospice care for elderlies that contribute to a good death, including 1) Preferences for dying process, 2) Pain-free status, 3) Emotional well-being, 4) presence of Family, 5) Dignity, 6) Life completion, 7) Religiosity, 8) Treatment preferences, 9) Quality of life, 10) Relationship with Health Care Provider, and 11) Others (Meier et al., 2016). The succeeding section will discuss how these core themes resonate with my informants.

### ***Pain-free status & Emotional Well-being***

Dead bodies have no feelings and sensations; however, from the whispering of the rituals it is revealed that the undertakers consider "Pain-free status" and "Emotional well-being" as factors that contribute to the good death of dead stray animals. During my first visit, "There is no more pain now" was a quote that my informants had repeatedly whispered to the tabby that died from a dog fight, "you must be brave!", have a sweet dream" ... "You could say something

to appreciate to him,” Noah advised me, “to let it calm.” Whispering to the animals’ bodies is believed to comfort their nervousness, from Noah’s whispering to the cat and advice to me, the content of whispering could be mostly classified into comforting words and encouraging appreciation which are responsible for achieving the pain-free status to relief from suffering and the emotional well-being to have positive sentiment respectively.

### ***Dignity***

Dignity is one of the central values of the whole funerary practice. In the eyes of the undertakers, their restoration work is the most significant procedure that shows their respect and care for the dead stray animals, unlike the other groups that provide post-death care for strays. While the other groups would just pick up the corpse of the animals and send it to cremation, the animals’ bodies are usually incomplete or even unidentifiable; for the undertakers, disdain other groups since they regarded the funerary treatment of just cremating the body as disregard to the animals. Being broken into pieces is a way of death that humans would have seen as a taboo, and also not wanted by anyone, therefore, the undertakers’ restoration process restores not only the body but also symbolizes the meaning of completeness. Being treated like humans does demonstrate the undertakers’ projection of the value of how to preserve the dignity of humans in their service to dead stray animals.

### ***Presence of Family & Relationship with Health Care Provider,***

“You would not want to die with no one there for you,” said John. Accompany and being

present are other notable factors in undertakers' rituals. During the meeting where undertakers were socializing around in the storehouse, there were two cases reported and a few undertakers went to pick up the cases. The two cases were both in complete and clean condition when they were placed on the table for demonstration of the procedures to newcomers. At first, Noah and Lucas were the presenters of the demonstration, "For newcomers who are not sure about the handling procedure please come to the table," they announced to the outdoor area to invite newcomers to the table inside the indoor container house. The demonstration was not compulsory to watch but almost all of the undertakers went in and stood around the table, including those experienced volunteers who have joined for years, volunteers around the table were there to be a presence for the departed ginger cat. Even though the undertakers are neither family members nor health care providers for the stray animals, not to mention the one-way relationship between the undertakers to the strays, the undertakers' presence in taking care of the animals in post-death care is a form of accompanying the animals, substituting for the role of the missing family members and health care provider. Hence, the ritual revealed the undertakers' projection of the presence and accompanying elements and transformed them into their own featured rituals to contribute to the good death of strays.

### ***Religiosity & Others***

There is no evidence to validate whether animals have a religion or not; however, during the funerary practice, religious offerings such as paper flowers and Buddhist Darani Blankets

are often put on the bodies as offerings and blessings. Furthermore, religious volunteers would also chant or play hymns during the rituals. The offerings, chanting and songs played have demonstrated the religious element of the ritual no matter whether the volunteer is religious or not. Apart from that, the funerary practice of letting the dead stray animals rest in peace and reincarnate reinforces the belief of having faith in animals' souls and reincarnations, the practice itself is an emergence of beliefs of the undertaker community which could be also considered as the religiosity theme to the good death. Last but the least, the "Others" theme suggested by geriatric psychiatrists includes components such as "physical touch" and "being with pets". "Physical touch" has been demonstrated from the hugging at the end of the procedure. Exhibiting that physical touch element in hospice care for humans is proposed in the ritual for stray animals that hopes to contribute to a good death for them.

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This chapter reviewed how funerary practice for dead stray animals is performed as rituals for humans, letting the undertakers relieve the death of the stray animals. With the comparison of the good death criterion in human hospice care, it is divulged how and what elements of a good death are projected in the funeral practice, contributing to the animals' good death from the undertakers' point of view. Creating good death is the daily work of the undertakers; yet, undertakers and the undertaker community mean more than the funerary services they provide, the following chapter will discuss further the vision of the undertakers.

## **Chapter 4 – Visions of the Undertakers**

The previous chapters have gone through some cultures and beliefs of the undertakers in the See-off Person Association and have discussed their ritual practices for the deceased stray animals. Providing funerary service for the strays is the core work of the association for now; however, the visions of the association and undertakers are not limited or rendered to just their voluntary work. In their community, both as a group and as individuals, the undertakers have bigger visions for society which are revealed from their work for the stray animals. This chapter explores the visions of the undertakers with more ethnography work and interviews.

Despite the dedication and labour, the volunteers invest in their work, they have not been immune to criticism. In the midst of doing this project, the See-off Person Association had once announced a collapse because of the slandering attacks online. A Facebook page that claimed to post all the knavery and kompromat purposefully was the main “attacker” in this incident. The incident raised controversies online, on the See-off Person Association’s page, the attacker’s page, as well as public multi-category forums which include discussion channels for animals and trending topics in Hong Kong. From those on and on, back and forth discussions and arguments online, netizens’ voices had expressed their values and views on the association; the responses and interactions between the association, volunteers, the attacking page, and a huge range of public netizens had occasioned a chance for the See-off Person Association to clarify and publicize their content of operation as well as their visions of providing post-death

care service for stray animals. Hence, it is important to include findings from the online observations in this chapter, to document this momentous incident of the undertaker's community, and to examine deeper on their visions.

### **Anger to Men versus Pity to Nature**

The only prerequisite of the cases received by the undertakers is the animals have to be stray animals without owners, the cause of death is not under their consideration of case receiving, therefore, cases handled had died because of different causes of death which could be generally divided into two categories, the human factor one and the natural factor one. For instance, car crashes, poisoning, and falling from heights are human causes regardless of whether it is intentional or not; animal fights, naturally aged, and illness are natural causes. No matter what the cause of death is, every case is an unpleasant case in the undertakers' eyes since it represents that a life has been left without being cared for in the world. On my first visit after the dog-bitten tabby case, Lucas shared his feelings on the way driving me, "it is tough for me to receive cases like this sometimes. I am a cat person, on the one hand, I am sad to see cats die because of dogs but on the other hand, I can only understand that it is their nature, and it is sad for me when I receive dog cases too." A proportion of the cases handled came from the animal fights, for the undertakers these unfortunates are inevitable natural rules that they could only be grudgingly resigned to, and help to let the animals rest in peace. However, among all the causes, human causes are the most irritating and unacceptable for the undertakers since many of the

deaths could be avoided. Sometimes, the human cause is not even a direct action of killing it could just be generalized as a result of a careless or loveless attitude toward animals. My informant George is always agitated when he talks about cases caused by human neglect, aside from the car crash cases that he is speechless for, “in Kowloon and Hong Kong Island district, rural area like here (the storehouse located in Yuen Long) is rarer, we receive cases fallen from heights more than car accidents or animal fights,” he mentioned, “those animals are not strays but their owner are always careless to their pet. They knew they should put on window screen for their cats, but the responsibility is on us now...” George sighed resentfully. In his words, he was expressing the phenomenon that many deaths of animals are caused by the unawareness of humans which could be possibly shunned. “I hope pet owners would be more mindful of their cats, promotions of cat window screens have been spreading for years but many still ignore all these messages... I don’t know what could be done further.” Without an actual plan, George expressed his vision to raise awareness among individuals about treating animals with love and care. He believes that having a pet comes with the responsibility of taking good care of them, including ensuring a safe home environment that would not allow accidents such as “falling from height” to happen. Through the example of the window screen, George was expressing how cat owners could do more to prevent the unnatural deaths of their pets, and these actions stem from people’s cherished and cautious attitude towards their pets’ lives. In this sense, George and other volunteers are trying to make up for the inadequacy of other human beings,



expressing the care and love for animals that all human beings could and should be capable of.

Another undertaker in our conversation was Esther, other than individuals, her similar opinion on stray animal issues revealed her vision which points to a wider layer in society. Esther went along with George's sharing and shared about her journey of joining the association. Esther said, "I have known this kind of service for a while. I worked at Sha Tin and you know 2019 that time right? During that social movement, traffic in Sha Tin was completely jammed, and I went to learn motorcycle after that incident. In 2021 I saw this association was available for volunteering so I joined afterwards." Esther once discussed with me the news concerning how animals in 2019 were affected by the actions of the Hong Kong police, there was an increase in mass death cases of birds, strays cats were found vomiting in the alleyways around protesting areas, police dogs were caused incontinence due to the highly pressurized working environment... she added, "tear gases were everywhere in Hong Kong, they (the government) forgot the city is not just owned by us." Beyond the public as individuals, Esther's public is a collective cultural group in society, including the policies and decisions made by governments.

In her political stance, the government ignores the needs and rights of the public as well as that of the animals, "nowadays people always quote the saying that 'the greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated' but you can see the sad situation in Hong Kong now." From her view, the death of the stray animals also reflects the neglect and carelessness of society as a whole, structured in policies and culture from top to

bottom. From this perspective, learning to motorbike after the 2019 unrest was Esther's way to claim her autonomy and independence from the chaos that an uncaring government created. With her motorbike skills and love for animals, volunteering for the association became a logical extension of her love for a city that, in her view, has been on the decline. This decline is evidenced in the poor treatment of animals— all the unnatural deaths in Hong Kong. Esther's volunteering, like that of George, is also a way for her to restore the humanity deficit in the city. As George said, Esther does not know what could practically be done either. Yet, the undertakers believe their acts could be another way to exhibit their devoted love and care for animals which might be influential to somebody, performing as public education to raise awareness. Thus, their dream to cease the death of strays caused by humans reveals their vision of protecting the animals by influencing others, both as individuals and as the whole society, to love or at least be mindful of the animals.

### **City without Strays**

Many of the undertakers are pet owners or independent stray animal volunteers who would rescue stray animals, bring them to sterilization, and find them an adoption home. I had a chat with Lucas about my experience of feeding stray cats, during the conversation, Lucas shared his two pet cats had been strays before and asked me whether I wanted to adopt the cat that I had been feeding, I told him that I was not ready to take up the responsibility yet but Lucas seemed to be a little disappointed with the answer. He recalled a story, "I feed stray cats too,

there was a baby cat in my village, and I went to feed it every day. But just a few weeks ago, there was a case near my home, I accepted the call and realized the case was the cat that I had been feeding...since then, I have been regretting and feeling guilty for not trying my best to bring it home. Maybe I could have saved it..." Lucas said sadly, I could feel his wish to hear me adopt the cat, I tried to comfort him by mentioning the environment of the stray cats that I have been are distant away from cars and how they enjoy their own space and routine, but I could tell he was still concerned. Lucas felt responsible for the death of a stray cat that he had grown familiar with by feeding it every day. Wishing that he had adopted it to prevent it from becoming a roadkill, Lucas tried to convince me to adopt the cat that I had been feeding. Underlying Lucas's earnest attempt was clear a feeling that humans could do more to prevent stray animals from dying and provide them with a better life for them as pets.

The conversation then switched to another topic. On another visit where I met Jane, Noah, and George, as mentioned in Chapter 1, I asked them whether having no more stray animals is their ideal state of society after stressing my point that stray animals have a different kind of lifestyle from pets. George instantly agreed without hesitation for his stance that no more stray animal refers to no more tragic accidents, life is much more precious than the freedom of the animals in George's eyes. Noah then complemented James's stance with his view, "It is a complicated question but the world is not perfect. In Hong Kong, space is too scarce and crowded, conflict exists between nature and development, safe environments for strays are too

few, and conflict with human society, like cats would trace the car lights on the road...” “Yeah!

As he said, I think having no more strays is not the most perfect idea but it is the best solution for Hong Kong society” Jane responded, “if there could be no more strays, I believe it implies that a lot of work has been done by the government and the quality of residents must be superb, I would love to live in that city. But you can imagine how many practical policies and cultural differences we have to counter before we can accomplish that. And keeping stray animals in society peacefully is a stage further beyond that, it would be perfect, but is it even possible?”

Their responses disclosed their more probable ideal society is a society without strays, a step further from influencing individuals to respect animals, undertakers wish to bring influences further to the structural policies. “There are annual statistics revealed on our Facebook, recording how many cases we received. Sometimes, we have to deal with the police or the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department if they receive calls, for they would just throw the bodies into garbage bins, we have to pick up the bodies after waiting for them to leave, but they know what we are doing!” said Noah, “they know who we are and what we are doing. I just hope one day we are not just known by the staff but also the boss, the policy makers above.”

The city without stray animals in the undertakers’ dream is a city where animals are being well-treated, even their dead bodies would be treated with care and respect for their dignity. These volunteers aspire to affect the policies, public awareness, and general shift in human-animal relationships in Hong Kong to achieve their dream city through their actions and voices.

## **Everyone could be an Undertaker**

The news of the association's shutdown was first drawn to me on 12 March in a public forum which had been crammed with comments already when I clicked in. The forum was talking about how the See-off Person Association was being reproached by a page that accused the association of receiving a mammoth number of coupons and holding fleet fairs to make profits. Note that the association does not accept money donations and they are not a registered non-governmental organization, all members are volunteers and have to pay the cremation fees on their own. Among the controversies, some of the netizens and volunteers as individuals expressed suspicion that the accusing page is run by another organization which I will call the "Paws Concern Group"<sup>7</sup>. The Paws Concern Group is a registered organization that also provides funeral services for stray animals, founded in 2018, three years earlier than the See-off Person Association, and the Group accepts monetary donations. Netizens and volunteers of the See-off Person Association understood the Paws Concern Group as the key "opponent" of the undertakers, Undertakers and some of the netizens regarded the accusation as an act aiming to destroy the undertaker association with public trials on the internet.

Unexpectedly, a majority of netizens hit back at the accusing page and defended the work of the See-off Person Association. The comments on the forum, the Facebook page of the See-off Person Association, as well as the accusing Facebook page which is suspected to be run by

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<sup>7</sup> Paraphrased name (not the actual name of the association)

the Paws Concern Group, mostly claimed that even if the See-off Person Association is stopped, no other groups would handle the deceased strays. One of the biggest criticisms on the Paws Concern Group's page was "Are you happy now without the see-off person? We have no one to rely on after their collapse." The "no one to rely on" statement soon became the focus of discussion, "if no one does it, you could be the one", "everyone could be the undertaker! They are volunteers only, nothing different from you and me" are people's responses toward the statement. The day after the See-off Person Association announced shutting down, the association posted again on 13 March to make a long proclamation about their sudden decision to shut down, most of them are analogous to the predominant voices online, alluding to the accusing page that was run by the Paws Concern Group that they have been disdaining. The post also mentioned their sudden collapse was caused by unbearable pressure instigated by the doxing of the accusing page that one of the founders and admins, who posted the proclamation, had to seek medical treatment because of the depression triggered. The admin also clarified that the shutdown announcement on 12 March was only a hasty decision by the doxed admin and was not consented to by other undertakers, the association will therefore continue their service for departed stray animals but the three cases report hotlines will strike down to one after all admins discussion. At the end of the post, the association highlighted their gratitude for their supporters and their assent to netizens' saying that everyone could be the undertaker. In the announcement on the association's page on 13 March, the admin stated, "If it was not about

seeing off stray animals but instead about rescuing them, I would have given up right away because there are still many people helping the living strays animals. However, for the deceased strays, there is not much care. Now that more people are paying attention, I think it is already worth it.” From the undertakers’ perspective as a group, letting everyone know or even act out their work is the most ideal aspiration. Therefore, the vision of the undertaker community is to inspire the public to take up the responsibility of human beings to take care of stray animals and care for them both dead and alive. Their ultimate goal is for all individuals to share their respect for animals’ lives as well as their bodies.

### **The Outside World and the Inside Group**

Discussions and controversies online revealed different values and perspectives of people evaluating the undertakers’ work, like a spectrum there are supporting and opposing voices to various extents. Some people challenge their work are not helping the animals and their resources could be more well-spend to help with the living ones, while some people consider their work as not being perfect for the dead animals for they let the bodies cremate with collective cremation instead of individual cremations...these opinions outside the undertaker community reflects an ambiguous boundary between the association and the public, the values and beliefs embraced by the undertakers are not restricted to the group. From the Instagram page of the association, one of the founders responded to the discussion online, “We are happy to see the See-off Person Association is being discussed, no matter how the opinions are, our

volunteers would keep doing our best and stick to our initial goal of helping the stray animals, let them rest in peace with love and dignity.” I contacted Noah once after the online attacking incident, briefly asking about his feeling on this happening. Unexpectedly, Noah was not feeling very affected by the incident, “to me, it is good to see our work is getting attention from the public, no matter what kind of attention it is. But of course, it is delighting to see some people support us after realizing the value of our existence in the discussions,” said Noah, “I am happy as long as people treat animals well, it is not about expanding our work or business, the true happiness is no more case received.” The "happiness" of Noah and the association have consistently demonstrated a positive attitude on the discussions online which once again divulge their goal of spreading their values, drawing people’s attention towards animals’ issue. More significantly, it highlights the undertakers’ wish to strike down their scale, they do not want to expand but to advocate successfully that their existence would be obsolete. The less demand for expanding their service would imply their success in accomplishing an animals-friendly environment in a society where animals are well-treated and no more stray animals die without care.

In the online attack incident, the ambiguous boundary between values online and the undertakers have testified to the progress of the undertakers’ vision of influencing society, even though the undertakers are not sure what could be done to make real changes. The incident signifies how the undertakers' community is gradually up on the surface to talk about the death



of stray animals in society.

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This chapter has examined the visions of the undertakers beneath their funerary service for deceased stray animals, their visions are to influence the whole society from both individual and structural perspectives, educate people to acknowledge, respect, and love, or even act out the values of treasuring the animal lives in society. For the undertakers, providing funerary care is never just practice for departed stray animals but also for a better world in their vision, it is a world with harmonious human-animal relationships where animals can be cherished and can live blithely within the same society around us.

## **Conclusion**

Human-animal relationships are the core element of this project. Stray animals as an outcasted group live in the urban setting of society but do receive not much attention and discourse from the public, their deaths are furthermore being overlooked. Among a handful number of voluntary groups that provide post-death care for dead stray animals, the See-off Person Association was chosen to study as they are the only one that is specifically dedicated to serving deceased animals. Through participating in their funerary practice for the stray animals' bodies and in-depth interviews, the operation of the association, funerary practice and rituals, and visions of the undertaker community were studied to reveal their concepts, beliefs, and values. The human-animal relationships study is thus cogitated in this context and revealed

in the following perspective.

### Values Towards Stray Animals

So why do people volunteer for dead stray animals? People become undertakers because of their care and love for stray animals which refer not only to the animals' lives but also to their deaths. The undertakers are used to this loving attitude toward animals and see it as a default in humanity which is valueless to mention. Commencing from their care for animals' bodies, the beliefs of the undertakers are revealed that "animals have souls" and "all life is equal", therefore, deserve a funerary practice to let them die with dignity as what human does. Furthermore, since the undertakers consider the lovelessness of humans as a whole to have been the major cause of animals' deaths, the undertakers' work is a redemption for the evilness of humans, and their funerary practice is to compensate the innocent animals "killed" by human's faults. The funerary practice is necessary for the deceased animals to rest in peace and have reincarnation in the world after death. Funerary practices are performed as rituals to purify and pacify the animals' souls through the cleanliness and peacefulness of the physical body, which would also benefit them in entering reincarnation. The rituals from the undertakers demonstrate a projection of their notion of good death onto stray animals. Aside from the belief of all lives being equal, the importance of good death in the undertaker community suggested a kind of human-animal relationship that human's care and love for animals is initiated from a pure instinct of human—empathy, or originated from the attachments between human and their pets,

which are built with long term experiences of living together and the devotion to take care of the pet's life.

### Human-animal Relationship in Utopia

Through voluntary work for stray animals, the human-animal relationship in nowadays society is divulged as a means to evaluate the quality of society in Hong Kong. Cases handled by the undertakers reflect the condition of stray animals in Hong Kong, insufficiency in safe environments, deficiency in public awareness of animal protection, and inadequacy in government policies; the death of stray animals and undertaker's work symbolizes a structural and cultural inability since lives in the society are not accommodated, including both human and animals. In the undertaker community which was founded in 2021, some of the volunteers joined the association because of being "awakened" after the 2019 unrest in Hong Kong, noticing the carelessness for lives embedded in the structure and culture of society from top to bottom. Consequently, post-death care for stray animals from the See-off Person Association is a gesture of engagement in society, which aspires to influence, educate, and raise people's awareness to respect and love the lives of animals, moreover, the lives of humans. From this perspective, the ideal civilized society in the undertakers' view is a society where people are educated to have a universal value to respect and cherish lives of all kinds, it is a utopia for humans and animals where human-animal relationships are mutually respected and loving each other.

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While doing this research, the See-off Person Association went through many incidents, including the denunciations about their opacity of operation and use of people's materials donation, hypocrisy for using dead animals to gain fame, love scandals about the founders... innumerable online discussions about the association had been raised after the accusing page incident, and internal structure of the association had also been changed; when I started my research on November 2022, there were around 150 undertakers, and the association was still demanding for more volunteers; nonetheless, the number of undertakers had dropped to around 80 on May 2023 within two months after the accusing incident. Although the undertakers' community had emerged with a victorious gesture with a predominant supportive voice for them on March 2023, just before this thesis was typed, the See-off Person Association posted an announcement about their collapse again on 13 May 2023; however, this time, the collapse was an official decision made with the consent from all admins. After the first wave of accusations from the Paw Concern Group, around a month later, the accusing page exposed more kompromat (private information) of the See-off Person Association, including revelations that claimed to be from former undertakers. The discussion had been simmering persistently and the final straw was a collection of voice recordings about two of the founders (who were the targets of most accusations) who ridiculed an artist who was scared to handle the animals' bodies when he introduced the association in an episode of a TV program. The artist being

mocked is from a popular idol group in Hong Kong, the mockery instantly triggered unprecedented attention to the association, and even though the content of the recording is only about the personal behaviour of the two founders, hatred was still largely linked up to the association and their voluntary work for providing post-death care for stray animals. In the end, the collapse of the See-off Person Association reflects values from the others outside the undertaker community, how care and love for animals are linked with the rude behaviours of volunteers are contradictory? How do people regard the scare of animals' bodies as normal and coexist with their willingness to help the dead stray animals? A huge range of questions about the human-animal relationship in real-life practice are debatable and remain to be discussed in future research.

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