

# 蓬草：拉不倒

## No End to It

By Peng Cao

Translated by Louise KO

Lu Xun<sup>1</sup> left the following instructions for the disposition of his mortal remains: “Put me directly in a coffin, bury me in the ground and let that be an end to it.”

Compared to those who buy a burial plot and place an order for a splendid coffin before their death, and demand to have a grand and elaborate funeral to the din of gongs and drums, Lu Xun clearly wished to dispense with the vanities of life. However, instructions for one’s body to be put directly in a coffin and buried are not, on second thoughts, so simple to follow. Since he required a coffin and a burial, it was inevitable that his instructions be carried out by specially assigned people. They had to go to the graveyard to find a plot before the burial could be performed. After all, his friends and relatives could not secretly move his corpse to the small park at the end of the street, and have it buried under any old tree there. Buying a coffin and looking for a burial ground took time and energy. And money, of course, to pay for them. It turned out that energy and money still had to be spent—and others put to trouble.

I can’t help thinking how much we human beings have seized or stolen, intentionally or unintentionally, from various sources—particularly from Mother Nature. It seems only right that we should let go of them after death. However, it is difficult to alter traditions or change customs. Burial places such as the pyramids in Egypt and the tomb of Qin Shihuang in China have for thousands of years caused visitors to feel that those in high positions cannot die a simple and modest death. Yet those were feudal times when the likes of the pharaohs and Qin Shihuang

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<sup>1</sup>Zhou Shuren 周樹人 (1881-1936).

believed in supernatural beings and sought eternal life. We small potatoes living in the present age might as well take the simplest way of disposing of our dead body, say, having it cremated. It is really not necessary to stake a permanent claim to a piece of burial ground on this earth. As for the rites, they should all the more be dispensed with as far as possible.

The problem is that even though some people want to do away with vanities and make a will well beforehand to ask for simplicity, they are not allowed their wish. For example, the former French president Charles de Gaulle, who stepped down from the political stage a disappointed man and retired to the countryside to spend his remaining years, stated clearly that he refused any kind of official memorial service in his honour after his death. This, however, still did not prevent succeeding political dignitaries from giving him a grand funeral. Among those who attended the service were many of his former political opponents, and there were even some who really had a grudge against him. They were there because they regarded their positions as very important. On such a major occasion, how could they be absent?

After all, Charles de Gaulle was once a president. The French government thus had every reason not to let him go quietly. They were determined to make a pageant of the occasion, and did not care whether or not that was contrary to the wishes of the deceased. It seems that the more successful a person is in his lifetime, the more difficult it will be for him to find peace after his death. It turns out that everybody can meddle in his obsequies. All of a sudden, there emerge so many 'friends of the deceased' or even 'bosom friends' who describe how intimate they were with the deceased, and 'recount' what the deceased said to them in his lifetime. Most of what they say cannot be confirmed. Indeed, to whom should one go for confirmation?

If only a memorial service is held to let those living have a shindig in the name of the deceased, there is nothing wrong in that. At least it's soon over with. Even if the deceased knows about this in the underworld and is annoyed, he can turn a blind eye and a deaf ear. Perhaps by thinking that he will have peace and quiet once the service is over, he can put up with it for a while. But then, unfortunately, there are people on earth who are too warm-hearted or excessively compassionate. When they see that the will of the deceased (for example, Eileen Chang)<sup>2</sup> is "to have the body cremated, not to hold any funeral and to scatter the ashes over any piece of open countryside", they feel extremely uneasy. They think that if the wish expressed by the deceased in his lifetime is to be followed, that will be too 'miserable'. They will therefore get together to oppose it, debate the matter vehemently and start to organize themselves. In their opinion, a funeral must be

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<sup>2</sup>Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920-1995). See *Renditions* No. 45, special issue on Eileen Chang.

held and, of course, a memorial service cannot be dispensed with. Besides, it seems a bad idea to cremate the body, not to mention scattering the ashes over the countryside. Hence, amidst the hubbub, the wishes of the deceased will be completely forgotten.

Eileen Chang lived as a recluse. She avoided meeting people and did not even answer the phone or the door. For whatever reason, that was the lifestyle she chose. Since it did no harm to others, nor affect the rest of the world, we should respect her choice with understanding. We really should not make wild guesses, or even worse, spread rumours about her. People who do not like to socialize are not necessarily misanthropic. People who live it up every night and keep open house are not necessarily philanthropic either. If Eileen Chang had been a person who liked company, she could have made herself so busy that she would not have had a moment to herself. This we can be sure of. There were so many people who were willing to make a long and hard journey to 'look her up'. Maybe she adopted a reclusive lifestyle only because she wanted to enjoy in peace the little garden of the mind. Why couldn't she do so? "Since life in this world is full of sorrow / I will loosen my hair and take a small boat tomorrow".<sup>3</sup> This perhaps was the state of mind that she wanted to preserve. There is no need for us to think that she behaved the way she did because she was weird and misanthropic. It is even more ridiculous to be offended and make snide remarks about her simply because she refused to receive us in her lifetime. Eileen Chang was a writer, not a staff member of the Social Welfare Department. Why should she have opened her door wide to all those who went to her for advice? Many years ago, I adapted Eileen Chang's short story 'Love in a Fallen City' for the screen at the invitation of the film director Ann Hui. Even so, I never intended to make use of the opportunity to meet her, mainly because I respected her reclusive lifestyle and did not want to disturb her.

She requested her ashes be scattered over any piece of open countryside, and did not specify that it should be the Gobi Desert or the Grand Canyon. In this way, her friends and relatives were spared the toil of running about. She made the will not only because she did not want to cause excessive trouble to others, but also because, as we can see, she had genuinely seen through the vanities of life. Those who did not like being around people in their lifetime, we believe, will definitely not like to have their ashes put in an urn and locked in a small hole in a wall to be visited and worshipped continuously by so many people. If that is indeed the plight that the deceased fall into, they will be truly miserable.

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<sup>3</sup>The last two lines of Li Bai's poem 'A Farewell to Secretary Shuyun at the Xie Tiao Villa in Xuanzhou'.

I don't oppose others holding a funeral. That is their right, as long as they do not overdo it by borrowing money left, right and centre, pestering those who attend the funeral, or letting themselves be fooled by swindlers. Most important of all, however, is to comply with the wishes of the deceased. A request to cremate the body, scatter the ashes over the countryside and not to hold any service is simple and can be carried out easily. If we choose not to act according to the wishes of the deceased, what 'respect' or 'commemoration' is there to speak of? Besides, whether a lifestyle or a way of death is miserable or not is not to be decided by the subjective thinking of other people. A life full of social functions may be enjoyable for some people; for others it may be a physical and mental torment. A simple death may seem too unworthy for some, but for those who want only simplicity in death it is a great release and a great mercy. Why must we make a fuss and wear ourselves out over a cold corpse? The problem is that there are too many meddlers in this world who will not let others die quietly. You want your death to "be an end to it", like Lu Xun. The fact is, they keep pulling and tugging and won't let it end. That indeed is the real sorrow of death, because everything is beyond your control. It's not merely that others can joke and criticize all they like; if you are so unfortunate as to have your corpse moved from here to there, all you can do is heave a deep sigh from the underworld and groan, "Dying has always been the most difficult thing." \*

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**HU Yongkai** 胡永凱

Faramita, 1996.

Hanging scroll, ink and colour on paper,  
141 x 171 cm.

*Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial  
Exhibition 1996.*