

How does the death of pets reveal or change
people's perspectives of life?
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Introduction

When I was 4, my grandfather died. At that time, as much as I wanted to, I did not feel sad. So I did one thing which I still feel deeply ashamed of – I pretended to weep such that I would not be the odd man out in the grandchildren group.

As ironic as it might be, when I was Form 6, the death of my guinea pig pet had turned me into a vegetarian. On the day of its death, I wrote a poem and uploaded it onto Facebook notes, bidding farewell to it and reflecting on the possibility of afterlife of all souls.

Is it simply the age difference to be accounted for my starkly different reactions towards the death of my grandfather and my guinea pig? Or are there more underlying reasons behind such reactions? When I began my reflections on my relationships with the guinea pigs, I was astonished by how much my experiences with them have shaped my understanding about life.

What I just wrote might appear to be nonsensical to many. In fact, in the eyes of plenty of people, a guinea pig can hardly be called a pet at all. However, if we think more deeply, pets like guinea pigs are indeed more than just stupid animals. Throughout their lives, they occupy a liminal position – shifting between the roles of human and non-human, a family member and an outsider, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible.

Indeed, a great number of pet owners liken the relationships they have with their pets to close human relationships, especially a familial one (Chur-Hansen, 2010: 14; Martins et al., 2013: 213). However, according to Adrian Franklin (1999: 56), in the age of post-modernity since 1970s, social ties have either been weakened or broken. Human relationships have been less enduring and stable as they used to be and, in particular, family relationships are now fragmented and imbued with uncertainties (ibid.). Hence, despite the prevalence of such analogy, a paradigm of pet-human relationship can hardly be found, let alone human's response to the death of pets. Hence, it is highly interesting to study the way pet owners position their pets in real life, especially at the period before and after their death when individuals are faced with different options as to how to draw a proper close to their pets' lives. It shall be remembered that the decision made upon the positioning the liminal objects often, if not always, inform us more about the decision-maker than the objects themselves.

Informants in this thesis showed a wide-ranging response and practices in grieving their pet loss. These diverse reactions precisely demonstrate a high degree of autonomy of human-beings in handling the death of pets, which cannot be found in handling the death of humans. Therefore, much freedom and sometimes even determinations (due to a general atmosphere of society which discourage people from taking pets too seriously) could be seen in treating the passing of pets, making this issue all the more worthwhile to study.

This thesis attempts to explore and explain the close bonding between humans and pets, followed by an investigation of the practices adopted and responses made by informants in face of their pet loss. Analysis will subsequently be made to understand their implications in relations to the perspectives of life of the owners.

Instead of focusing on studying the effect of death of one particular pet such as dogs, which are often hailed as human companions, I chose to study the effects of death of pets on human in general. The reason is again related to my personal experience in confronting my guinea pigs' death. Sitting in front of her before her last hours, with her big watery eyes, she gazed outside the window into darkness and remained still for hours. That was the first humbling experience I had concerning my human identity, when I was fully open to the possibility that I might be the only ignorant species between the two of us in understanding the mystery of this journey on Earth. Once again, my personal thoughts perhaps says more about me than it does about my guinea pig, yet it somehow reveals the potential of any pet to inspire humans or, the way round, our ability to be inspired by any kind of pets. In view of this, I wish to remain open-minded to include any pets and their owners into this thesis.

Methodology

(1) Semi-open Interview

From November in 2015 to March in 2016, I have conducted semi-opened interviews with 15 informants regarding their experiences in pet loss. (The sheet of focus questions has been attached into the thesis). The informants found include my relative, secondary and university schoolmates, a tutorial student, parents of my tutorial students, an university a clerk and a lecturer.

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Apart from the interview conducted on 4th December, 2015 which is a group interview involving two informants, the rest are individual interviews.

Date of Interview Conducted	Name of the informant (In Pseudonym)	Age Group	Deceased Pet Type
26/11/2015	Aster	18-25	Dog
4/12/2015	Sandy	35-45	Bird (C), Guinea Pig, Cat
4/12/2015	Mark	35-45	Cat
10/12/2015	Edith	25-35	Dog (C), Dog
7/1/2015	Donald	35-45	Turtle (C), Dog
5/2/2016	Fiona	25-35	Dog
17/2/2016	Megan	18-25	Hamster (C), Dog (C), Dog
18/2/2016	Kelvin	35-45	Bird (C), Fish (C), Turtle (C), Dog(C), Dog
25/2/2016	Sam	18-25	Goldfish (C), Dog
5/3/2016	Crystal	18-25	White Mice (C), hamster (C), snake (C), lizard
6/3/2016	Suzanne	18-25	Turtle (C)
10/3/2016	Anita	15-18	Goldfish (C)
13/3/2016	Roland	18-25	Goldfish (C), Dog
17/3/2016	Tony	25-35	Cat
28/3/2016	Thomas	18-25	Dog

*(C) = Childhood experience of pet loss

(2) Therapy Groups

On 2th April and 15th April 2016, I attended 2 therapy groups of 15 and 10 participants each on issues related to bereavement coping after pet loss. The first one mainly focused on overcoming self-blame after pet euthanasia, and the second one mainly dealt with moving on and start planning a new life.

Both of the therapy groups were held by the same non-profit animal organization. Each section lasted for 2.5 hours each, with activities include talk, sharing of songs, pictures, and stories related to pet loss by the therapy speakers, sharing of personal stories by the participants and guest speakers, discussion of hypothetical cases (including whether to carry out pet euthanasia or not). In the second therapy section, there was a section of candle lighting and writing messages to the deceased pets before it ended.

It is worth noting that the participants in the therapy groups might be amongst the kind of pet owners who have the more extreme responses towards pet loss. Such opinion might also be valid in describing those owners of the columbarium niches of pets. Nonetheless, they are precisely a case in point demonstrating how far humans could go upon losing their pets.

As confidentiality pledges were made in both therapy groups, I am not at liberty to disclose in details the personal pet loss stories of the participants in this thesis. However, major characteristics which recurrently appeared in their narratives were identified and included non-specifically in the paper.

(3) Field visits

Two sites of interests, namely the are crematorium and columbarium hall, were included in the research.

Overall, I conducted 2 days of field work. On 28th March, I visited a columbarium hall located in Yau Ma Tei commercial complex. On 4th April, 2016, Ching Ming Festival, I went to Kwai Chung Industrial Area to visit 2 crematorium halls held by different companies in order to study their environments and the crematory procedures. Afterwards, I visited 4 columbarium halls which were of different styles run by these two companies.

Findings of my field visits will be discussed in detail under the section 'Rituals and other personal commemorations' of this research.

Overview of pet keeping and its bereavement study in Hong Kong

According to the World Society for the Protection of Animals in 2014, an increasing number of families are welcoming pets into their households. In Hong Kong alone in 2010, it was estimated that approximately 0.25 million households raised dogs or cats, which accounts for 10.6% of the overall number of households in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department [C&SD] HKSAR, 2014). In fact, the number of households that raised dog had risen by 20% over 5 years from 2009 (ibid.). All these data show that the popularity of pet keeping, be it globally or in Hong Kong, is on the rise.

As stated by Chur-Hansen (2010: 14) and Martins et al. (2013: 213), the decline in fertility rate and the nucleated family structure in developed societies might be the main reasons to account for the increase in importance of pets to the pet owners. In fact, many have referred their pets as family members, with some even saw them as 'surrogate children'.

Undeniably, as pets have far shorter lifespan as compared with that of humans, it is almost inevitable that pet lovers would face the demise of their pets and experience the pet bereavement (Westgarth et al., 2013: 102).

Pet owners' responses over pet loss, especially for those in Chinese society, is an under-researched topic, let alone studying it from an anthropological perspectives. Therefore, it is hoped that this thesis can cast light on the meanings and vastness of pet bereavement research to the academia.

Reasons for the close bonding between pets and humans

In this part, wide-ranging reasons are explored in the biological, social and cultural lenses in attempt to account for the close-bonding between pets and humans.

1. Pets as Children

From the names given by the owners to the pets, it could be seen that pets are highly related to the imagery of a child. Besides Edith and Fiona who straightforwardly named their pets 'baby', If one looks at the names given by pet owners to

their pets, especially when the names are given in Chinese, s/he would be expecting plenty of names in repeated syllables, such as 'lok lok' (樂樂, joy joy), 'dou dou' (豆豆, bean bean), 'duc duc' (德德) and 'gut gut' (桔桔, tangerine tangerine). One of my informants, a man in mid-30s who remained quite serious throughout the interview, would only address his pets as 'dog dog'. As it is commonly known, repeated syllables are used in Chinese 'baby-talk', and names with double syllables are nicknames Hong Kong parents used to address their children. Such finding resonates with Part (IV) concerning pet owners seeing their pets as surrogate children.

Apart from naming, Kelvin, one of the informants, had expressed his distaste when people attempt to convert the age of his Corgi to human's age. 'I hate it a lot when people told me "Oh, so she is 13 now? So she is like a granny in the human world." I mean – NO! To me she is always a baby.'

In fact, many informants have repeatedly made use of adjectives including 'simple-minded', 'innocent' and 'pure' to describe their pets. They pointed out that pets are unlike humans, for their desires are far simpler and can be satisfied easily through the provision of basic needs, such as food. One merely needs one step further to exhilarate them - give them with good treats and spend time to play with them. Humans are far more complicated, many expressed. 'Humans remember your wrongdoings and hold grudges against you,' Mark said in a rather frustrating tone, 'but pet are not like that. They are happy as long as you give them attention and play with them. You can make them happy with solely your presence.'

From what has been mentioned, I would argue that it is not 'humans' whom the pets are unlike, but 'human adults'. In terms of sizes, needs, and living-in-the-present attitudes, pets behave very much like 'human children', and which is also the way they are most commonly perceived and treated.

On the other hand, there are ways in which pets are highly dissimilar to children. First and foremost, they are unlikely to have any change in characters and become rebellious despite growing up (Katz, 2011: 159). Some participants in therapy group described their disappointments towards their children when they grew into the rebellious phase and performed poorly academically. Being unable to transfer her worries, they turned to their pets for comfort. Secondly, unlike children who would grow independent and leave their parents, pets would stay with their owners till the

day they leave this world. It could thus be seen that it is exactly these dissimilar qualities which make them even more loveable than their human counterparts.

2. Negotiable and multiple identities of pets

As written by Pellegrini in the book *The Role of Play in Human Development* (2009: 244), "all object-love participates in an endless chain of substitution". In reality, pet owners might also perceive their pets as substitutes and attempt to envisage multiple identities for their pets.

For example, Freud's Alastair, Wolf, was served as a paternal surrogate to protect his daughter during her evening walk (Suen, 2015: 29-30). Freud also admitted that to him, Wolf sometimes served as a replacement for his grandson who died of tuberculosis (ibid.). What was more, the name Wolf was actually recycled from the old dog in Freud's home who had passed away earlier (ibid.). The complex projections by Freud on his dog aptly demonstrates owners attempt to endow multiple identities on their pets.

In another case, Tony, being single and in his mid-30s, enjoys alternately and playfully addresses his exotic shorthair cat as his daughter, love and fiancée. When another friend pointed this out to him, he laughed and said 'Yeah I am confused too.' Had the subject of their talk been a human, the association of daughter with fiancée being might be unfathomable or even immoral to many. However, all these images can be put into the same basket of 'pet' without any controversy. Such interchangeability of address also fully exemplifies the ambiguous nature of pet in human's mind.

3. Intimacy without language

One of the most common arguments about pets not qualified to be human's close companions is that they are not able to speak. Admittedly, complex verbal communication is impossible between pets and their owners. According to Betty Carmack (1985: 153), however, an intimate relationship is developed 'when we are allowed to say what we want, the way we want it, and know that we will be understood.' As stated by psychologist George and Cristiani (1990: 105) state, "silence communicates to the client a sincere and deep acceptance." In light of this,

we can see that intimate conversation can absolutely take place without the use of verbal language from the opposite side. When the owners are speaking, they still enjoy conversations with their pets. In fact, without the assault of words, the conversations might be even more restorative and fulfilling to the speakers. In addition, as noted by Homans (2012: 33), as there was less understanding between human and dogs due to language barrier, it at the same time creates less misunderstanding. Hence the expression of emotions can be deemed 'purer'. 'When you study carefully by heart, you can read behind those simple gestures. Sometimes, it is the simple gestures which carry the most powerful meanings,' said Roland, an informant who had lost his dog recently.

Despite the inability to converse verbally, humans are allowed to touch, cuddle or even kiss our pets with little social restrictions and hardly any rejections, all of which are highly unlikely amongst human communities (Carmack, 1985: 153), especially not in the Chinese context. The ability to touch provided humans with a strong sense of intimacy. From my observation, this effect is particularly salient in men. Their behaviors change drastically when pets are around – they could rush to the dogs, talk to them affectionately and hug them dearly without challenging any social norms and risking their image of 'masculinity'. As men are under even more social restrictions to touch others than women, it was not difficult to understand their enthusiasm towards pets.

In books which advice the technique of counseling of human beings, it is often stressed that besides silent company, one of the most comforting responses is the reflections of feelings (Rogers 1986: 375-377). Reflection of feelings refers to restating and exploring client's feelings hidden in their messages (ibid.), which can be achieved through animal gaze (Berger, 1980: 1-3). Through prolonged gazing, humans could see ourselves, especially our eyes which are constantly regarded as "the window to our souls", from the eyes of pet. We might hence feel a sense of nakedness and therefore start to reflect upon our spiritual themselves (ibid.: 10-15). Such meditative moments, which are believed to be deeply pleasing and reflective in nature, are far and few in between in modern society (ibid: 16-20). Sometimes, besides reflecting upon ourselves, we might also have an esoteric experience and start wondering the world as seen from the eyes of our pets. In the book *Animal and*

Suffering: Philosophy and Culture, author Elisa Aaltola (2012: xi) dedicated the book to a street puppy she adopted but did not survive with the sentence 'In the memory of Hulda, in whose eyes hid a whole universe.' In the acknowledgement, she again mentioned 'the hope and love lingered in her gaze' before Hulda's death (ibid.).

Through reflecting the possibility of the existence of high-order spiritual thoughts of pets, humans could feel their bonding with pets strengthened. As mentioned above, although such gazing experience appears quite enlightening, it is virtually impossible between any humans, as social rules often restrict us from looking into other people's eyes for too long.

4. The 'Selflessness' belief about pets

Plenty of informants have expressed their appreciation towards the loyalty of their pets. Their virtue of loyalty regardless of how their owners are is constantly praised by their owners – even if such loyalty is not directed to them but to the former owners. One participant in the therapy group told the story of her client dog's (a personal story agreed to be shared publicly by the client and was hence included in this paper) constant desire to go back to its former owner's home despite its former owner being the one who abandoned it in the first place. Instead of feeling outraged, understanding and appreciation were expressed amongst the group. Perhaps the thoughts of owners on the virtues of their pets (especially dogs) can be best summarized by John Grogan's ending speech in the movie *Marley and Me*, 'A dog has no use for fancy cars, big homes, or designer clothes. A water log stick will do just fine. A dog doesn't care if you are rich or poor, clever or dull, smart or dumb. Give him your heart and he'll give you his. How many people can you say that about? How many people can make you feel rare and pure and special? How many people can make you feel extraordinary?'

Apart from this, one therapy speaker in the group praised pets by saying 'they have the greatest capacity to give and accept our love.' Indeed, apart from the unyielding loyalty, the fact that they are at forever available to receive pet owners' attention and affection is also a contributory factor in making them so loveable to humankind.

In addition, many pet owners spoke highly of the strong empathetic power of their

pets. In fact, many informants, including Thomas, Fiona, Roland and Edith, etc., expressed that dogs have strong empathetic power. When they came back home sad, their pets would immediately sense it and accompany them everywhere in silence, making them felt a lot better. Once again, such silent company can be considered as the most supportive company as it makes human feel that they are not judged by their companion and would always be wanted regardless of what they have done.

5. Potential biological and evolutionary reasons for humans to love pets

Owners have the tendency to anthropomorphize their pets. Eugene O'Neill (1999), a Nobel Prize laureate in Literature, wrote a prose, *The Last Will and Testament of an Extremely Distinguished Dog*, following the death of his much-loved dog Benjamin in 1930. In his prose, O'Neill turned himself into his deceased dog and wrote the last will for him. In fact, many pet owners attempted to read the emotions and feelings of their pets by interpreting their facial expressions or body languages in a humanised way.

In Herzog's (2011: 95) argument, he believes that this strategy, which is called 'Theory of mind', has its evolutionary significance. 'Putting ourselves into the other animals' shoes' allowed our ancestors to predict the way animals would attack and escape, therefore they could hunt and survive more successfully (ibid.). With the belief that non-verbal languages are suffice to understand their pets, Over 80% of pet owners were convinced that their dogs were sensitive to their feelings, especially feelings related to depression and anger (Carmack, 1985: 153). However, a finding from the recent scientific experiment revealed that it is actually the belief of the owners that the dogs had done something wrong rather than the actual misdemeanor of their dogs which induce the 'guilt' look on their dogs' face (Herzog, 2011: 97). Although the ability of understanding pets through non-verbal communication was not supported by science, personification is one of the crucial factors for owners to endow meanings onto their pet keeping experiences and hence their death.

Herzog (2011:63) accounted for the reasons of pet keeping by proposing that humans have a predilection towards cute things. In the theory of babyfication he put forth, as human have the natural propensity of parenting, anything with big eyes and other features which resembles babies would elicit our affection and caring (ibid.).

This theory might partially explain why dogs and cats are so popular amongst pet owners.

6. Socialization of human to love pets

Humans do not simply see animals as they are. We had our way to classify them. And it is through this classification that shapes our actions and behaviours towards them. (Tester, 1991: 31) In another words, it is a cultural belief which portrays certain animals which we treat as pets as 'lovable'.

Amongst my informants, there is only one, Crystal, whose family chose animals include spiders, snakes and lizards, the rather atypical kinds of pets in Hong Kong, to be raised. In her account, she used to be unafraid of these animals when she was small. Nonetheless, after growing up when she was surrounded by girls who were scared of these animals, 'although I still am not afraid of the snake and spider at my home, I am quite afraid of snakes in nature now,' she remarked. Such account highlighted the influence of enculturation of children in the understanding of 'lovable' animals.

In fact, media also serves to increases the lovability of pets. Apart from possessing traits such as loyalty which are well-liked by humans, movies in different countries tend to assign their aspired and appreciated characters onto pets. For example, in popular American pet movies including *Marley and Me* (2008), *Turner and Hooch* (1989) and *Bolt* (2003), pets are portrayed as carefree, cannot be retrained and sometimes even a bit crazy. Yet they are the brave ones with big hearts who achieve/ help human achieve something heroic in the end. As for Japanese movies such as *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (1987), *Girls in the Sunny Place* (2013) and *Quill* (2004), pets which touch human hearts are those who are mild, obedient, remember the good deeds done by humans to them for a life-time and dedicate their lives to repay such kindness. Overall, the epitome of a social person in different countries, namely the 'individualist' of the America and 'collectivist' in Japan, are projected on these well-liked pet characters in the movies.

Responses of pet owners to the death of pets

In this part, the emotional responses, religious discourses, rituals performed and insights gained of pet owners from pet loss would be discussed and analyzed respectively.

1. Emotional responses: Gratitude, Grief and Guilt

Although the emotional responses of pet owners varied, this thesis focuses on studying the three most common, conspicuous and distinct emotions found in the pet owners, which are gratitude, grief and guilt. In the discussion of grief, major factors such as the age of occurrence of pet loss and the effect of socialization of owners will be adopted to explain the varying intensity of grief of different owners; whereas the discussion of guilt would lie on its relation with pet euthanasia.

Through studying the emotional responses pet owners have to their deceased pets, we could gain more insights into both the meanings of pets and their death to the owners.

a) Gratitude

'To you, your pet might be a part of your life; but to it, you mean the whole world.'

This sentence was constantly said in one way or another by the informants. In reading the eulogies of the deceased pets on the bulletin boards of the columbarium hall and online, the feeling most frequently expressed was gratitude. They thanked their pets for selflessly spending their entire lives on them.

Other than gratitude, there is actually a strong sense of 'indebtedness' in some pet owners' mind. In the therapy group, besides the general agreement on the shrinking of social circle of pet keeping, some expressed that they had abstained from travelling as they lack confidence in others to take good care of their pets.

It is intriguing to think of the contrast between a pet and a trip. Indeed, pet owners might feel worried that others might not be able to take good care of their pets, or that their pets might not be able to handle strangers well. In addition, their reluctance to leave their pet might also stem from their guilt of spatially confining their pets when they go out to explore how unlimited this world can spatially be. In view of this, some owners might not only be grateful towards the all the time their

pets are willing to spend on them but also indebted to, if not feeling slightly sorry for, having confined them at their homes for most of their lives

b) Grief

(i) Intense grief

Many of the pet owners suffered from intense grieving over pet loss. Many a time, the grief that had was so great that it exceeds the grief that had over the death of their parents (Straub; 2004: 46). Donald, whose father had passed away a few weeks ago before the interview was conducted, told me bluntly that the sadness he had over the passing of his father was less intense than that of his dead Pomeranian at the top. 'It was a more complicated feeling when it comes to humans,' he confessed, 'you would not only think about the good things, you would also think about the bad things they did.' When he was asked about the immediate feeling when he watched his Pomeranian dying, 'I just wanted to commit suicide,' he stated succinctly.

As mentioned in the above section, pets are perceived as children by their owners. As a result, as agreed by psychologist Debra A. Katz (2011: 1163-164), however how long pets have lived, their death would always seem to be premature. In addition, the above section also explained why pet-human bond can actually be tighter than human-human ones. Moreover, as pointed out by lots of participants in the therapy group, as they no longer live with their parents under the same roof now, it is natural for them to feel more distant to their parents than with their pets, which they might even hug to sleep at night. As a result, they might grieve the passing of their pets more than that of their family members.

(ii) A general lack of grief over pet loss during childhood

Generally speaking, informants felt less saddened by the death of pets when they were small compared with they are now. Such reaction can be accounted for by three reasons.

Firstly, the intensity of grief is likely to be affected by the kind of pets that died. For informants who recalled raising fish, turtles and birds when they were young, most of them did not grieve their death. From their accounts, they recalled that there was little communications between them. However, Kelvin and Edith, who raised

dogs when young, bitterly said that they still hold a strong grudge against their parents for not treating their dogs well and sending them away without letting them say goodbye. The difference in emotional response to these pets has been explained in the section 'potential biological and evolutionary reasons of humans to love pets'.

Basically, dogs as mammals bear more baby-like traits to be considered loveable and hence grievable. In addition, the prolonged emotional responses of the two informants who raised dogs were agreed by the belief that death of pets could produce distress which is profound and lasting on people who are close to them, especially in children (Serpell, 1986: 26). If their grief was not acknowledged by other family members, especially by parents if the subject is a child, it could possibly disrupt the family organization (Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 2007: 155).

Secondly, it might due to the complicated concept of death to children. Roland who studied English, used 'Song of Innocence' and 'Song of Experience' to describe his feelings of overcoming the death of his goldfish when he was small and the recent loss of his dog respectively. "Song of Innocence and Experience" was a collection of poetry by William Blake in 18th century (Walker, n.d.). The first part, Song of Innocence, described the time when children understand and explain the world through their innocence, and the second part, Song of Experience, described the time after children have grown up and start to experience the world with a loss of childhood vitality (ibid.). In Roland's account, it was not that he was unable to know that his fish had died, yet at that time, he could not 'grasp the essence' of the meaning of death.

Another reason to explain the less intense in sorrow by some informants might be the lesser degree of involvement in their caring for the pets. For example, Sandy recalled that 10 years ago, she helped her devastated daughter to bury her goldfish under a tree with a mini-funeral service. She smiled to me and said that she had raised so much goldfish and grew numb of their death such she usually would just flush their bodies away. I later brought the incident up to her daughter, Anita, and found out that she was responsible to tend for the feeding and pregnancy of the goldfish. The goldfish which she felt particularly devastated upon its death was the one which was pregnant. Before its death and she helped protecting it by taking it out to tend for at a separate tank. In fact, Crystal provided a rather special remark by saying 'I believe the

biggest reason for children's inability to grieve is not because of their inability to understand death, but because of their inability to establish any close bonding with others and with the world yet.' Such remark might provide us with an answer to the common mockery as to why people do not grieve for millions of humans who die everyday but for the death of a pet at home. It might appear that those who ask this are solely expressing their dissent towards pet owners for valuing the life of pets' over that of human. If this was all that they concern, they would also have questioned the validity of the joy of people when a kitten or puppy is born. However, such happiness are readily accepted by the public. In fact, I would argue that it is implicitly known by all that death of those without bonding is not grievable, for it is our love and attachment towards the death which define the grievability' of death. In light of this, the challengers are in fact also expressing their disbelief to a close bonding between humans and pets, which is the prerequisite of people to grieve death.

The above findings, apart from explaining why most children do not grieve as hard for pets' death, in a way explain partly why the informants would now grieve hard over pet-loss – the majority of the informants were having dogs and cats as their pets, they understand death better and are able to love their pets more as they are the pets' major caregivers.

(iii) Effect of socialization on grief: Facing the death of unordinary "pets"

Megan, an informant who once studied high school in the UK, recalled to me in shock about a pet-raising incident of one of her classmates, Lucy, who was born and raised in a big farm. One day, Lucy had brought a few sheep to her classroom and said to her classmates that because those few were particularly cute, their family had decided to keep them at their house and raised them. A few months later, when Megan asked Lucy about her lambs, to her utter shock, Lucy simply replied in a casual tone that she had eaten her.

The case of 'pet eating' for a farm girl might come as a shock not only to Megan but to many urban dwellers. Interestingly, however, there was another case recalled by my informant, Crystal, which was in a sense the reverse of the 'pet eating' incident. when she was small, Crystal raised a snake at her home. One day, she decided to raise what supposed to be the food of her snake, a tiny white mice, out of

its cuteness. Unfortunately, due to her negligence, the mice was starved to death. In her recount, she was 'very sad' when she realized it was dead. In one way, one might argue that her gross negligence to the white mice precisely demonstrated how lowly she regarded the mice, yet it also shows that the imagination on pets can be wide, especially when the definition of pets have not been firmly established amongst children.

Indeed, socialization has a varying degree of impact on grieving. In the case of the Lucy the girl raised in an English farm, it is apparent that the nonchalant eating of 'pet' was due to the deep-rooted notion of seeing sheep to be killable and edible animal in her upbringing. As for the little Hong Kong girl's attempt to raise the 'food' of her pet, the very fact that she forgot to feed the mice might reflect how lightly she took the life of her newly-defined pet. Nonetheless, her grief of the white mice, demonstrated how the effect of socialization of perception of pets might not be definite, especially on children who are not fully enculturated by society.

c) Guilt and Euthanasia decision

Unlike euthanasia of human, people were more open-minded in euthanizing pets. In my fieldwork, 5 informants and a number of participants in the therapy groups had carried out euthanasia on their pets. However, even though they had accepted euthanasia as an acceptable option, some of them went through serious struggle in making this decision, and not everyone were comfortable with the decision they had made. Virtually every self-help book concerning pet-loss address the issue of the tremendous amount of guilt some owners bore after euthanizing their pets (Barton Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 2007: 50; Barton. 2005:153; Straub, 2004: 73). In fact, the theme of the first therapy group I participated was also about handling the self-blame and guilt which might emerge after pet euthanasia. During the whole therapy section, some participants expressed strong distress, deep remorse and guilt over their euthanasia decisions on their pets, even though some decisions were made over 5 years. One might assume that it the reason behind the owners' extreme guilt over the decision of pet euthanasia is apparent. Since the owners and the pets could not speak with one another, owners could not ask the pets about their will about euthanasia, and

hence the decision would remain largely uninformed. Owners might also feel guilty for seemingly betraying their pets by putting them to death without letting them know. As the owners love their pets so much, it is natural for them to be in deep guilt. This explanation is valid, yet it only explains part of the story., as those who agreed to perform pet euthanasia are the one who agree with the principle and accept with intrinsic limits of pet euthanasia. In fact, participants expressed deep guilt over the euthanasia decision still opted for pet euthanasia during the 'moral dilemma' study in the therapy group, in which a pet was said to be under great pain and terminal illness.

In view of this, I would argue there are two other major causes behind such guilt. The first reason is that pet euthanasia usually put the biological death of pet before its social death. As defined by Kalish, the other-perceived social death occurred when people 'now think of him as being, for all practical purposes, dead or nonexistent' (1968:254). Unlike the terminally-ill humans who would withdraw from social circle, leading to their social death preceding the biological death ones, pets hardly experience any social death before their demise. Since the metabolic rate of pets are far quicker than that of human, once they got sick their bodies would deteriorate quickly. Because of this, pets are unlikely to leave their small social circle, the household, for a long time when they fell ill. So euthanizing the pets is, to many pet owners, putting their biological death ahead of the social one. In light of this, the euthanasia decision might somehow feel more like an accident which abruptly ends the life of pets rather than letting them die in mercy. Some owners might subsequently feel psychologically unprepared. As a result, even if they put an end to their pets that could only have lived a few days more, they found it immoral and were in deep guilt of their decision.

The second cause is that the sense of guilt, although made the owners suffer, at the same time protect them by shielding them from the sense of helplessness in life. Pets are the one and only life form which makes urban dwellers feel that they have full control over life. By look at how the owners feel tremendously and prolongedly guilty over euthanizing a terminally sick pet, it could be seen that, rather than choosing between painful or relatively more peaceful way of dying, they perceived themselves as making 'life or death' choice for their pet. Their guilt is an indirect way of reinforcing themselves to believe that they could have controlled the situation of their

pets falling ill, meaning that they believe that they could control life. In this sense, extreme guilt implicitly shields them from confronting the powerlessness of humans under vicissitudes of life, especially concerning life and death.

2. Religious discourses on pet loss

In this section, the ways pet owners negotiated with their religions in relation to their beliefs in pets' afterlife are explored. In addition, their attitudes towards the existence of 'Rainbow Bridge', a place commonly known as the 'heaven for pets', are studied. Furthermore, an archetype which this thesis termed as the 'self-sacrifice discourse' used by some pet owners in explaining the meanings of death of their pets means would also be looked at.

From these diversified religious discourses on pet loss, we could explore humans' attempts to seek for consistency within the diverging paths of personal desires and cultural beliefs.

a) Pet owners with anthropocentric religious belief

Naturally, the degree of concerns for afterlife of pets of different people differs. A variety of reactions could be observed especially from people with anthropocentric religious belief.

To some of the informants who are Christians, they were certain that when God created animals, He did not blow the essence into animals. As a result, pets are, as a matter of fact, soulless and hence could not enter heaven. Such fact did not bother them much, for they generally believe that the meaning of their lives was to make the best of their God-given assets to create meanings for their own. Therefore, it is their freedom to signify the lives of their pets.

For pet lovers who were less devout but occasionally sought comfort in Christianity, they readily accept any Christian perspectives in favour of pets' afterlife. For example, an informant mentioned that he was in deep relief when John Pope said that Dog could also go to heaven. (I later found out that the was a fraud.)

Lastly, for those who were a devout Christians, had strong affections towards their pets, and were devastated by the mainstream belief that their pets were not permitted to go to heaven, they might be desperate to look for a big-scale discourse which are consistent with their religion so that they can convince themselves as well

as others. For example, participants in the therapy groups argued that after their rigorous investigation online, they believe that although the Bible had not mentioned that a pet could go to heaven, neither had it explicitly denied their entry. Other participants resort to the power of faith. In their beliefs, as God is kind to his people, he would answer the prayers and agree to send their pets to heaven.

As mentioned by Ammerman (1997: 30-40), the golden rule of modern Christianity emphasizes looser connections with institutions, diversity in belief and negotiations of doctrines. So even under the same religion, people are creating their personal identity through active search and selection (ibid.). The above reactions of the participants are a case in point. Each of them, though all being Christians, constructed their own versions of religious reality in attempt to fit in their aspirations and meanings of life on Earth. For the devout Christians who were heavily disappointed by the unsupportive environment of their religious community over their grief of pet loss, instead of being resigned to what they were told, chose to ignore what was preached by their priests and looked for other possible ways to interpret the doctrines through social media or simply came up with another interpretation of doctrine themselves. This shows the importance of institutional loyalties dwindled in comparison to owner's love towards their deceased pets.

b) Pet owners with non-anthropocentric religious belief

For people who believe in animals having souls, they naturally managed to face the issue of afterlife of pets with more ease.

Although most pet owners have little thoughts about religions, for those who do, some find it difficult to accept when their religions claim that pets are without souls. As mentioned by Bonanno in *The Other Side of Sadness*, when we were puzzled about where the deceased have gone, it was possible that our previous belief would shatter (2009: 132). Sometimes we might be more acceptive towards other spiritual ideas. In this regards, the effect of deceased animals on people had no difference to deceased humans, but the methods which they explore might be seen as more extreme in the eyes of others. For example, in the book *Going Home – Finding Peace after Pet Died*, the author who experienced multiple pet loss was surprised by himself when he started to look at alternative spiritual healers including animal

communicators. Nonetheless, instead of feeling inconsistent as he used to pride himself on being a 'rationalist', he believed that it was his spiritual growth as he was now able to realize that there are important and real things in life which is invisible to humans after his interactions with his pets.

In addition, the supernatural encounters of some informants might actually serve to reaffirm their religious belief. Baby, a Chihuahua which Edith had raised for over 10 years, was accidentally kicked to death by her Mongrel. Being a daoist, before informing anyone of the Baby's death, she and her husband went to his grandfather's grave to burn paper money and asked him to protect her Chihuahua. Later, when she briefly informed her grandmother of Baby's death, much to her surprise, her grandmother told her that she sensed the coming home of her grandpa a few days ago. Upon Edith's calculation, it was exactly the seventh day of Baby's death. In Chinese tradition, the dead souls would return home on the 7th day, and her grandfather's home was actually Baby's first home. Edith was much relieved after hearing this, as she was certain that this implied her grandfather had come back to take Baby away, and that Baby is now in good hands.

With Daoism which welcomes any creature to the afterlife, it could be seen that the supernatural experience Edith had after the death of Lena actually strengthened her religious belief.

Generally, for people who believe in the afterlife of their pets, they would wish to continue their relationship with their pets through imaginary bonding. For example, when Edith was giving birth, she prayed hard to her deceased pets in asking for reciprocal protections from them. At that very moment, all her deceased pets changed from the role of someone which needed much care even at their afterlife to souls with potential power of protections and ability to give blessings. As pointed out by Van Gannep (1960: 170), there actually exists a 'reciprocal relationship between the living and the dead.' While the living would pay respect, commemorate and make offerings to the dead, they sometimes depend on the dead for protection. In view of this, even when pets have passed, relationship between pets and their owners could be sustained through this imagined mutual relationship.

c) The 'Rainbow Bridge' belief

Rainbow Bridge is a theme concerning the afterlife of pets which first appeared in a poem by an unknown author in the 1980s and has been widely circulated since then. It basically describes another side of Heaven which is a green meadow with plenty of food and water and is a joyous playground for all pets. When pet owners die and go to heaven, their pets would run eagerly across the Rainbow Bridge to cuddle with their owners, with whom they would never separate again.

From my observations, the image of Rainbow Bridge was occasionally brought up in drawings and animal hospice websites. However, it was far less used in the orations of owners to their pets, in which the owners still prefer to use the word 'Heaven'. In the conversations with informants and therapy groups, Rainbow Bridge was spoken highly of its beauty, and some informants, including a Buddhist, expressed that they were deeply impressed. Nonetheless, no informants truly buy the idea. One informant simply told me 'it is too good to be true'.

There could be a few reasons to account for Rainbow Bridge being such a perfect imagery of the afterlife destination of pets to pet lovers. First, not only is rainbow widely considered as one of the most beautiful and fascinating natural spectacles, it is amongst the rarest form of mystical natural phenomena which could be seen in the urban area once in a while. Seeing a rainbow hanging on the sky reminds us both of our possibility to be connected to Nature and the fact that we are within Nature. Meanwhile, pets are almost the only form of animals (that we regard as pleasant) which we could stay close to in urban area. Somehow, they also remind us of our connections with Nature as well. When they pass away, even though we might wish that they could continue to stay socially alive, we might also wish that they, like us, would go back to the most beautiful place, Nature, the ultimate home where we originated from, to rest in peace. Secondly, in plenty of the childhood fantasy, including the song 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', rainbow symbolizes a Utopian and carefree place where all dreams come true. The fact that it constantly appears in childhood literature also makes rainbow a reminiscence of childhood. In light of this, it is not difficult to see how the impression humans have on rainbow resonates with that on pets. Lastly, rainbow is by nature flawless in being a perfect arch, and contains almost the full spectrum of colours. However, it is short-lived and elusive,

and one can never know when it would eventually fade away. All these elements of rainbow are very similar to the way many owners think about their pets that have passed away.

However beautiful the imagery might be, as suggested by Wallace (1966: 107), in face of the diffusion of 21st scientific knowledge and of realization, supernatural belief is no longer plausible to many. As most of us are aware of rainbow's formation being a natural science phenomenon, we might not find it plausible and wise to believe that our pets are at the other end of the rainbow. So the image of Rainbow Bridge might live in our heart, but rarely would anyone take it seriously and write it in oration.

d) Self-sacrifice discourse

Similar to human's death, there were multiple ways which lead to the death of pets.

First and foremost, they might die out of sickness. However, it was not easy to discover the health problems of pets. Once their illness has been discovered it would sometimes be too late - their fast metabolic rate might lead to a quick deterioration of health and a somewhat abrupt death to the owners. In face of this, some informants, in retrospective account, attempted to explain such unexpected death of their pets by endowing meanings to it. For example, some informants shared with me that they believed their pets knew their illness long ago. But they purposefully hid it to the very last moment as they did not want to make their owners worry about them. One informant, Suzanne, told the story about her beloved dog fell ill and died soon after she had recovered from cancer. Initially she felt a strong sense of unfairness about her being able to recover yet it did not. However, with the benefit of the hindsight, she believed that her dog might have known its own illness all along. Nevertheless, in order to accompany her through her cancer, supported her and lessened her worries, it did not show her how sick it really was. It was when she fully recovered that it finally allowed itself to fall down, so that she could accompany it through its final hours.

Apart from pets that died naturally, same set of discourse is used to describe pets which were killed – even by the owner himself. The following two cases were examples of this:

Edith, whose beloved Chihuahua was accidentally killed by her Mongrel in a fight, did not blame the Mongrel but believed that the killing was done according to the will of her Chihuahua. At the time of her Chihuahua's death, Edith had just given birth to her first baby. In Edith's account, the Chihuahua which she had raised for 10 years and was also named baby, was heavily spoiled and was chronically ill. Had it continued to survive till this day, she might have a very hard life taking care of this baby and her first baby. So, looking back she believed that it was her Chihuahua who sensed that its mission on earth has completed and used her Mongrel as a tool to put an end to her life.

In the book *Going Home- Finding Peace when Pets Die*, John Katz (2011: x – xviii) was at first in deep guilt for euthanizing his aggressive dog, Orson, as it had already bitten three people. First, he was aware that its aggressiveness was its real nature and he was killed because it could not fit into the human world. Later, however, he believed that he 'sees it better now', and trusted that the euthanasia decision was purposefully designed by Orson so as to force him to learn the lesson of self-respect regarding to his own decision.

It is not difficult to observe the underlying pattern of their accounts, a pattern which I term as 'self-sacrifice discourse'. Through such discourse, the owners convinced themselves that it was the pet that have preplanned their suffering. Self-sacrifice discourse transcended the deceased pets into spiritual beings by arguing that their death, like that of Jesus Christ, was pre-planned by them. Jesus is believed to suffer voluntarily to complete his mission on Earth, which is salvation of the entire human race. By the same token, the pets in the above case studies are believed to have let go of their lives in order to complete their mission on Earth – to teach human beings lessons about love. Similar to Jesus Christ who possesses an 'half Human and half God' image. As discussed, pets are also liminal creatures which are endowed with an 'half Human and half non-human' image. From the discourses made by pet owners, we could see that the non-human part might be seen as holy or even god-like by some owners.

Self-sacrifice discourse might shed lights on the degree of pain and guilt the owners have towards the death of their pets, such that they need to elevate the whole story into a mythical religious level and endow their death with meanings which are

larger than lives, so as to avoid the terror in acknowledging that after all, their deaths might indeed be futile. By empowering the pets, their death might then appear deterministic and their owners might also be alleviated from their sense of guilt. On top of this, the case studies discussed set good examples of modern heroism. Although the pet is believed to have performed the self-sacrifice, it was the pet owners themselves who are the ultimate heroes. Looking at characters such as Joseph Cardinal Bernardin in his book *The Gift of Peace* (1997) Prof Morrie Schwartz in Mitch Albom's book *Tuesday with Morrie* (1997), late modernity has witnessed an expansion in the interpretation of hero archetype. The hero's journey, as described by Joseph Campbell in his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), has been modified (Green, 2008: 12- 17). Major venue of drama of late modern heroism takes place in the 'inner world of private experience' rather than the 'outer world of action', with the 'inner adventures of self-exploration' becoming the main story plot. Instead of concrete sacrifice, emotional labour is depicted as sacrificial (ibid: 17). The pet owners, who struggled hard with the passing of their pets, went through the journey of coming to terms with the past and acquired new perspectives about life, then they came back to the physical world again and to share their new insights - they have gone through spiritual rebirth and are now heroes.

3. Rituals and other special commemorations

In the 21st century when scientific knowledge and realization are stressed and diffused, supernatural belief of rituals might not be taken seriously (Wallace, 1966: 265). However, rituals continue to stand on their own as they possess more functional use than merely spiritual needs. Because of this, as suggested by Robert Orsi in the book *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005: 74), it is more important to look at what people do other than what they said they believe.

Below are the findings and analysis after my field visits to two crematorium and five columbarium halls. I argue that the major functions of crematorium services are to legitimize the grieving of pets and affirm their human-like social status in their pet owners' hearts, whereas columbarium halls are sumptuous display of various imaginations pet owners put on their pets in regards to their identities and afterlife.

Apart from crematorium and columbarium, some other personal

commemorations, especially those which are considered as the more 'extreme' types, are included and analyzed as well to explore how different owners attempted to overcome their bereavement in accordance to their needs and imaginations of pets.

a) Crematorium

In the two crematorium sites I have visited, there are basically three funeral styles which pet owners could choose from— secular, Buddhist or Christian. People could hire funeral halls in Christian or Buddhist style to mourn the passing of their pets or sit at a quiet room to wait for the crematorium to begin and complete. Similar to human cremation, pet owners would be in charge of pressing the button to initiate the cremation process.

From the two companies I visited, one company permits pet owners to observe the whole cremation process, while another company uses a large glass observation window to separate the body and people, and would draw the curtain closed once the cremation began. Despite the options, from my observations and the informants' accounts though, they preferred not to witness the cremation process. They could choose to wait at the quiet room, pray or chant lotus sutra for pets' transgression at the funeral halls, or offer paper and any personal objects at the combustion room. Objects available for paper offering include dog figures, dog house, lotus pagoda which was believed to remove karma, etc. There are also pet souvenirs displays including DNA necklace, paw print set and crystal necklace which stores the ashes of pets. In fact, these companies tend to provide one-stop service from body pick-up service, sterilizing of body, cremation, designing urns and pet souvenirs to providing columbarium storage areas.

The 7 informants who held a funeral service all agreed that the service was important to them. Sam invited his primary friend which he had not contacted for a long time to attend the service, another informant who missed the opportunity to accompany the passing away of her pet said that it gave her one last chance to see it peacefully asleep. Thomas mentioned in particular that his family had changed the hospice care company at the last minute after they have delivered his dead pet to the crematorium center. In his recount, they used a container and attempted to stuff his dog inside, 'they simply treat it as an object,' he recalled. 'It is very easy to observe

whether one did that with heart. As we did not feel comfortable with that, even after Max's body (his dog) had arrived the crematorium site, we finally decided to call another animal hospice care company to take care of Max. In the end, all of us travelled a long way to another crematorium site.'

Overall, the pet crematorium is designed to be as similar to human crematorium as possible. Informants chose cremation possibly because there seemed to be no other alternatives in Hong Kong. If they do not look for an animal hospice team to collect their pets, their pets would end up be at the hand of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, which would eventually dump the bodies of their pets to landfill sites.

Through contacting the hospice team and joining the one-stop service package, however, they were able to pay the highest tribute to their pets. Through cremation, paper and object offerings and praying, pets could be thought of a display and testimony of the human-like status the pets possess in the hearts of the owners.

The main reasons for crematorium service to be important to the pet owners lie in its being a well-established structure for ones to channel their grief. As agreed by Radcliff-Brown (1968: 186), death rituals could be seen as collective expressions of feelings which are deemed appropriate to the situation. Such function might be of particular importance in pet funerals as dead pets are generally not considered as 'grievable' in society. But when it was put in a human-like funeral context with a proper setting of crematorium machines, animal-loving staff and a well-run company, the whole atmosphere legitimize the grief and bereavement of pet owners, and their love towards their pets. In fact, I am convinced that rarely would anyone ever purchase the paper dog, dog houses and lotus pagoda display for offering – because they really look a bit 'extreme'. Before I went there, my informants made no mention of the paper offerings, but they would offer the toys and clothes of their own to their pets. However, instead of rendering the paper-craft superfluous, I argue that their presence might further normalize the funeral practice of pet funeral to the owners, as they demonstrated the possibility of the more 'extreme' bereavement practices.

In light of the first reason, the staff committed an irreversible mistake to their customer when they attempt to put the body of the dog of my informant into a container which was not large enough to lay its body flat. Because such action of

objectifying its body, however inadvertent it might be, totally runs against the last wish of pet owners' humanizing and dignifying their pets.

b) Columbarium

In the 5 Columbarium I visited, 3 were of Buddhist setting which played non-stopped mantra chanting at the site. In the columbarium, pet owners rent cabinets to store the urns and any funeral objects they want. One might expect that the whole scenario creates a very human environment which serves as the final step to humanize the pets. Indeed, the crematorium settings for pets highly resemble those for humans. For those with Buddha settings, there were even Buddha statues, Buddha scriptures wall scroll and light offerings at the hall. However, this only tells part of the story. First and foremost, although photos were always used, no black-and-white photos could be found in all columbarium visited.

Moreover, each cabinet is highly individualized. Pet owners who opted for a simple style by putting only urn and water, sometimes accompanied by fresh fruits and flowers (traditional objects under Chinese memorial services), were increasingly uncommon. The more recent cabinets were elaborately, if not excessively, decorated. Cartoon dolls of different sizes were placed to accompany the urns. Some owners put a number of mini dog figurines next to the urns to create a sense of companionship. Some even put in mini furniture and transform the cabinets into doll houses. Besides heavy and colourful embroidery, some posted *fai chun*, an object which could not be more unlikely to appear in a human columbarium setting. Candies and even chocolate were accepted as offerings to the pets.

Special religious features could be observed in the cabinets. For the Buddhist owners, some of them had apparently undergone some rituals and obtained Holy Buddha water, yellow paper of the Mantra of Rebirth and even certificates of Three Refuges for their dead pets. Surprisingly, within a Buddhist columbarium, a few niches actually belonged to Christian owners. Urns with Christian decorations can be seen, with one even placing statue of Crucifixion of Christ in the niche – under an endless mantra chanting background

The atmosphere of the pet columbarium halls is welcoming, soothing and even light-hearted. Coloured photos used in the columbarium niches are the crucial factors

which set the atmosphere of the pet columbarium hall completely apart from that of a human one, which are more solemn and cold. Black-and-white photos were used to separate the deceased humans as a distinct 'otherness' from the alive. Since the appearance of pets already suggest the complete otherness, it was unnecessary to emphasize how they are different from us. On the contrary, pet owners actually desire to incorporate the deceased pets back to our world, and hence coloured photos might be the more reasonable choice.

In addition, we could also see the decorations of the niches as an attempt to continue the social life of the dead. According to Hertz's study of Olo Ngaju in Indonesia (Hertz, 1960: 61), instead of considering death as a singular event, it 'marks the passage of an individual from one form of existence to another'. By accentuating the 'liveliness' of the niches with various methods, such as using various colours to decorate the niches, adorning the niche with lots of faichuen and putting plenty of mini-furniture and groups of dog figurines inside the niches, owners express the hope of the owners that death is not only a destruction of life but also a transition, and that their beloved pets would arise from death.

What is more, from the things that have been offered, we could reaffirm that pet owners' tendency to project the child image on their pets. Apparently, sweets and chocolate are the favourite snacks for children but not for pets. Particularly, it is well-known that chocolate is lethal to many dogs. In fact, many of the niches are crowded with fluffy toys, and the setting of some niches look very much doll houses. In a nutshell, as their nickname 'furkid' suggests, some pet owners really perceive them as real human kid.

Moreover, intriguing religious tolerance could be found in the columbarium hall. It seems that as it is Buddhism rather than Christianity which agrees with the idea that animals have afterlife, Buddhists dignified the life of pets more than Christians. Due to this reason, some Christians are fine with resting their beloved at another religious setting so long as they placed the crucifixes inside the niches which bear their own religious identity.

How does the death of pets reveal or change people's perspectives of life?
YIU Wan Sze

Photos of Crematorium Halls



Photo 1: Prayer room in Buddhist setting

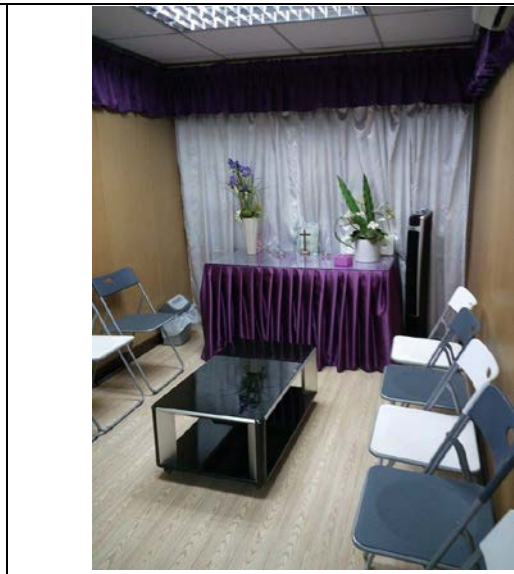


Photo 2: Prayer room in Christian setting



Photo 3 and 4: Paper offering (Lotus to remove karma on the left, paper dog and dog house on the right)



Photo 5: A drawing of Rainbow Bridge



Photo 6: Pet souvenirs (DNA necklace and

crystal necklace

Photos of Columbarium Halls



Photo 7: Columbarium hall in Buddhist setting with perpetual looping of Buddhist sutra music

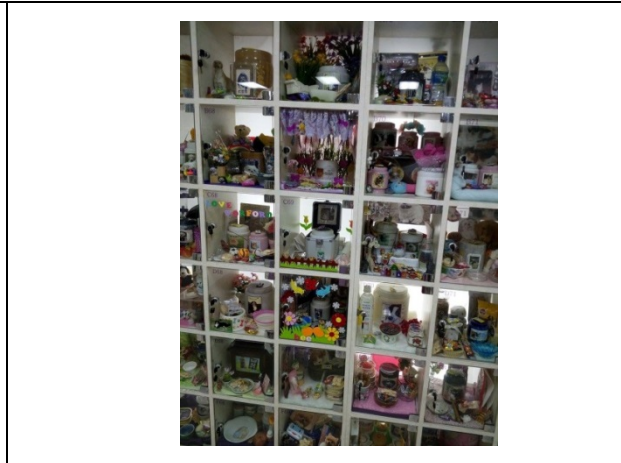


Photo 8: Sumptuous decorations of the columbarium niches by the owners



Photo 9: A meticulously decorated pet columbarium niche with plenty of mini-furniture, animal figurines and red as its theme colour – a colour signifying joy and life in Chinese context



Photo 10: A columbarium niche with fai chuen and tangerines, symbolizing new year, good luck and joy

	
<p>Photo 11: A simple columbarium niche with candy offerings and certificate of Three Refuge, meaning that the deceased pet was made a Buddhist by its owner</p>	<p>Photo 12: A columbarium niche with crucifixion and angels as decorations</p>

c) Other personal commemorations

As I have read from foreign news, some pet owners nowadays would be thrilled to order cloning companies to clone the look of their dead pet into a plush toy. When I brought this issue up to my informants, it was met with mixed opinions. One informant found the idea 'seemingly disrespectful to the pets'. Instead of accusing the practice as 'creepy', however, another informant implied her rejection to such idea suggested that 'maybe we Chinese are more conservative'. One other informant made stated that 'the most important thing is how you feel about this practice. If you find it ok, you can go ahead.' In fact, some informants, who had not heard of this cloning technology before, expressed their interest and asked me for further information. Some stated that they might consider this as an option in future.

In another case, one informant, an artist suffering from depression and whose cat accidentally killed itself by jumping off the building, told me that she cut herself and used her blood to draw a portrait of her cat. Instead of frequently visiting the hill where she buried her cat, she decided to name her band with the name of her cat and used music to dedicate to her cat. 'I found it meaningless to go to visit its dead body, it is already gone,' she noted, 'I would rather spend time on composing songs, which are immortal, and pass her spirit on through singing.'

From these alternative personal commemorations, it could be seen that there

are others who have their unique practices to pacify their grief over pet loss. Sometimes they might be deemed as the more extreme ones, but they aptly exemplify that different people indeed have their own interpretations and desires towards pets. For example, when one informant accuses having a doll replica as disrespectful, it is evident that he believed that pets should be treated as soulful being which are irreplaceable and could not be equated with a cloned doll. On the contrary, for other participants who expressed desire to clone their pets in future, they might yearn to sustain the physical comfort they obtain from the softness and fluffiness of their pets after their passing. In the last case, the sudden death of her beloved cat in addition to her psychological suffering pained the informant so much that she had to cut herself to distract herself from the pain. Her use of blood, although simply stated the reason as 'the watercolour which comes in handy', must have deeper implications since human blood is rarely seen as a substitute of watercolour by ordinary people. I argue that using the blood of self to draw out one's own cat is both an attempt to establish a transcended bonding between one and her pet and a glorification of her cat, for it is worthy to have her blood as 'sacrifice' of its painting. In addition, and her belief about only music can immortalize her cat showed that she focused more on the spiritual existence of her cat. According to Diamond (1974: 199), when men perform rituals which are artistic in nature, they are said to have raised themselves above the purely biological level, and confirm their humanity and cultural characters in human beings. The spiritual focus of pet owners would be further discussed in the part of 'Insights gained from pet loss.'

Some people argue that nowadays, there are fewer rituals performed. From the way pet owners handle pets' death, however, we could see that it might not be deritualization that occur, but the transformation and integration of rituals into the secularizing religion (Wallace, 1966: 265). In fact, death rituals remain crucial for one to accommodate the major change of losing an individual (Hertz, 1960: 27-30), for not only do they provide a respite to time for a person to adjust to the loss, but they also make a person to slowly acknowledge the passing of an individual.

4. Insights gained from pet loss

Two major areas of thoughts, namely, the desire to connect with the deceased

pets and the reflections of one's relationship with self, other beings and society, are investigated in this section. The emphasis of the former is on keeping the deceased pets socially alive through us; whereas the focuses on the latter are more widespread, with issues including the social needs of humans, their understanding of love and their way to spirituality in the age of post-modernity.

This section mainly attempts to demonstrate the capability of humans to draw strength and personal meanings from death and devastation, and reminds the readers to see this ability through a cultural lens.

a) Connecting with the deceased pets

(i) Anthropomorphism of the deceased pets

Many of the pet owners found great comfort from the anthropomorphism of pets.

Throughout the grieving process, owners are constantly encouraged to think from the perspectives of their pets. It is suggested that they attempt to write anything from the view point of their pets back to themselves (Katz, 2011: 4-8). When doing so, all participants in the therapy group were extremely confident that the last will of their pets is to wish that they could stop their grief, move on and live their lives happily.

The famous prose, 'The Last Will and Testament of an Extremely Distinguished Dog' written by Nobel Literature Prize Laureate Eugene O'Neil (1999) (as mentioned in the section 'Possible biological and evolution reasons for the love of pets' of this thesis) has been cited by both the host of the therapy group and one informant. In the last part of the prose, Benjamin, the deceased dog of O'Neil, expressed that it would in fact be extremely happy to know that after it has gone, it left a hole in O'Neil's heart such that O'Neil would always wish to have a dog as his company from now on. According to Kelvin, before reading this prose, he was hesitant in raising another new pet. After reading it, however, he took in its perspective and is now happily raising another dog. Had the prose not written in a moving tone using Benjamin as the first person view, the informant would certainly buy into this notion less readily. 'This kind of literature which attempt to speak from our pets give us the insights to understand more about what our pets are thinking,' maintained the host of the therapy group. From her account, we could see that rather

than perceiving the personification of pets as merely a writing technique, it was seen as a powerful telepathic skill owned by those particularly sensitive human beings which helps the owners to connect with the deceased pets.

(ii) Upholding the moral values of the deceased pets

Many a time, people do not only mourn the passing of their pets because of the precious and memorable experiences they had with each other, but they also memorize their pets for being 'the source of moral value' (Savishinsky, 1985: 120). They praised their pets for their unconditional love and unparalleled loyalty. Quite a number of the informants and books regard the deceased pets as their life coach, teaching them how to be kind and to engage in life positively (ibid.).

According to Savishinsky (1985: 120), having embodied these moral values, the deceased pet had then transcended from merely a pet to a 'significant other' for many individuals. The reason for Savishinsky's saying can be partially explained by the Terror Management Theory (TMT) proposed by Solomon, S., Greenberg, J. & Pyszczynski, T. (2015) with reference to Ernest Becker's book *The Denial of Death*. TMT proposed that when the idea of death is salient in our mind, we would react more favourably to those whose behavior comply with our shared worldview (Bonnano, 2009: 119). This is because our shared beliefs "provide the universe with order, meaning, value, and possibility of either literal or symbolic immortality. (Bonnano, 2009: 119)" According to Mitchell in his book *Remember me: Constructing Immortality - Beliefs on Immortality, Life, and Death*, to many bereaved people, there is a desire for the deceased not to die 'in vain' (2007: 6). They would hence channel their grief into activism in ways which could keep the death 'alive' (ibid). In the aforementioned case, through stressing the way the deceased pets uphold certain culturally-acknowledged moral values, the worthiness of their lives were raised. When they pointed out that their deceased pets were their life coach, the owners reconstitutes them as an active participant in their lives.

In reality, in face of the passing of the beloved, we did not only lose a significant other but part of ourselves. This is because our self-identity was primarily formed in relation to the others (Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 2007: 24). Therefore, the death of our closed ones might threaten to take away the part of us which were bound

up with them (ibid.). With the creation of 'inner representation', we recognize how the bond we formed with them can inform our present and future, and thus our interaction with the dead can be continued, which in turns create a continuity of ourselves (ibid.).

b) Relationships with self, other beings and society

(i) Human beings as social beings

Sometimes, pets make their owners feel that they no longer need their human community. When they pass away, however, it suddenly dawns on the owners the importance of having a supportive social community. First and foremost, many of the participants in the therapy group identified themselves with disenfranchised grief, meaning that their grief of pet loss was not accepted or even belittled by their community. This makes them suppress their emotions in public but grieve harder within.

As mentioned in the previous part, death also implies an end of the relationship one once had with the deceased, leading to a loss of a specific identity of self. Hence the more attached one used to be with the dead, the more s/he would suffer from the crisis of identity loss. In view of this, the hollowness subsequent to pet loss would be especially crushing for those who live alone.

Being acutely aware of the suffering in being overly detached from human social circle, some might consider a restructuring of social life. For example, for those who have other pets, they might attempt to join more pet gathering events to look for new friends, change the feeding pattern of their pets such that they could have some spare night to go out to meet friends, and invite their family members to home to take care of their pets for a few days while they go out for a short trip.

For cases which are less severe, informants express that they treasured their family members more after the pet loss experience. This comes as no surprise. As many of them had equated their pets as their family members, the immediate reflection they have would naturally be the way they treat their family members.

Besides treasuring ones' family members, many have also experienced an expansion of empathy. All informants who considered raising a new pet or had already raised a new one told me that they would opt for adoption as they are now highly aware of animal welfare and the cruelty of breeding house. The therapy group

speaker labelled this kind of love as 'animal love' and expressed that it was the highest form of love which could be transcended after pet loss. However, the 'animal love' she referred is in fact only restricted to pets alone.

The 'animal love' stated above is seen as 'maternal animal ethics' by some animal advocates, as people are encouraged to protect animals out of their love and fantasy but not out of fear and dominance towards them (Suen, 2015: 44).

Nonetheless, it was not difficult to notice a change of word choice, from 'pet' to 'animal', when pet owners mentioned upholding 'animal welfare' and the spreading 'animal love' in society.

Owing to a movement of vegetarianism in modern society, pet lovers who equate advocating pet right with animal right is constantly challenged by vegetarian advocates as being 'inconsistent' or even 'hypocritical'. However, as noted by Mary Midgley (1983: 26), even the most prominent advocates such as Peter Singer had their blind spot in the promotion of animal rights, as they generally focused on mammals and ignore other animals especially insects.

As mentioned by Keith Tester (1991: 14) in the book *Animals and Society: The Humanny of Animal Rights*, the word 'animal' is in fact so broad a category which renders the word itself almost meaningless. For many who adopt the word 'animal' in attempt to make a statement of truth about them, they are likely to fail as animals are very different (ibid.) .both the pet lovers and vegetarian advocates are not really upholding "animal rights" but only the rights of a specific group of animals.

According Lori Gruen (2015: 51-55) who developed the concept of entangled empathy, although it is possible for us to empathize those who are non-human, we would only chose to empathize those we are in relation (entangled) with and care about. In light of this, it is understandable why most pet lovers concerns only the right of pets. In fact, in the book *The Speaking Animal: Ethics, Language and the Human-Animal Divide*, Suen (2015: 45) argued that advocate the rights of chicken and fish might dwarf the importance of pets and obligation pet owners have towards them, which might run against some pet owners' wish.

To summarize, as pet lovers mostly interact with their pets and that pets have the highest visibility in urban society amongst all other animals (which are pleasant in human's eyes), it was understandable as to why some pet owners readily equate

advocating 'pet rights' to 'animal right'.

(ii) Pet loss as a lecture to love

It was interesting to find out that the insights some people have after the loss of pets is very similar to the insights people have after intense love in romantic relationship and its break up.

Throughout my fieldwork, a narrative pattern concerning the cycle of recovery over going through pet loss could be identified. Typically, the pet owners first describe in detail how a pure, beautiful and unique relationship with their pets comes to an abrupt end. Then, different pet owners reflect on their relationships and search for their own interpretations of love. At the same time, they try to heal and recover. During this phase, they gain insights about their own needs and attempt to move on. For example, one participant of the group mentioned that "If you would like to embrace love, it is inevitable for you to embrace loss – and I decide to face it boldly" Another informant, Sam, noted, 'I believe vulnerability and strength come from the same source – it requires courage for one to be vulnerable and embrace the loss which is doomed to follow when one embraces his life dearly.' During the process of moving on, they are faced with the option of whether to raise a new pet or not. Some might become aware that it is not be a new relationship with pets that they need but a new approach to life. 'I do not believe in Plato's love theory in Symposium about the existence of another half for us – we do not need to look for anyone to complete ourselves, for each of us is an entity by ourselves. Anyone who comes to our lives is just additional, and so are our lives to others.' Roland pointed out. Instead of raising a new pet, plenty of the informants divert the discussion to treasuring their existing family members. For those who desire a new pet, many are also cautious of the possibility of treating the new pet as a replacement, an attitude which they speak strongly against as it would be unfair to the new pet.

It is generally agreed that a romantic relationship often involves many fantasized and unrealistic projections onto another individual. Through breaking up, these illusions suddenly lose all their charms. People have to learn to live through their disappointments and start life anew. The remarkable similarity shared by the effects of pet loss and breaking up reflect the possibility that after all, pets might

largely be a 'fantasized other'.

As for those who cannot get over their loss, they might prefer not to have another pet. Through this process, they also gain insights about themselves as regards to the way they cope with loss. For example, one informant mentioned that he became aware of his tendency to busily engage himself with other appointments in order to detach himself from the dying. Another informant even confessed that he had a short-lived love affair during the period when his beloved dog fell critically-ill. The affair became a surreal experience, as if he had dived into a new realm of reality, which gave him a huge relief. These methods might appear suppressive or even irresponsible, yet they indeed created a liberating experience for people to avoid direct confrontation to death. Instead of self-blaming though, many pet owners appeared to have more self-respect about themselves in regards to their own pacing in bereavement. In the therapy groups, participants constantly challenged the terms used in describing the duration of grief. For example, adjectives such as 'abnormal' and 'long' are generally disagreed with. They generally advocated that each person's pace of healing and practices adopted for grieving should be respected.

(iii) Modern humans as 'spiritual but not religious' beings

It might appear that some areas of reflections pet owners had over pet death overlapped with that of human death. In reality, amongst the similarity, there lies a major difference – although we might be enlightened by other's life and death, we would not claim they lived and died for our spiritual growth. However, such claim could be found amongst some pet lovers to account for their pet's death – especially those who love their pets deeply and labeled themselves as 'pet slave' (Katz, 2011: 116-124).. Actually, not only did they refer them as 'life coach', some, including the therapy speaker, even suggested that their death was the ultimate 'gift' to us, for the incident has provided us with valuable insights as to what love really means. Throughout my fieldwork, only Roland who saw fighting for justice and equality as his mission of life pointed out that it was self-centered to believe that pets live and die for the sake of teaching us lessons.

So, are the informants really objectifying and degrading the value of the life of their pets? I am convinced that their attitudes actually tell an opposite story.

In the course of human history, besides our belief that objects exist for human consumption, there are another entities – far more holy ones - which exist to teach us values about life, and they are scriptures, priests, and temples.

Contrary to devaluing pets' life, the pet owners' belief in the power of them being able to manifest the truth about life is an epitome modern humans being 'spiritual but not religious'. In the book *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington (1991: 27) asserted that modern humans have a vague desire to pursue spirituality, but are no longer convinced that churches and synagogues could cultivate spiritual growth within us. As a result, after the rise of religious activism in post 1960s, many shifts their spiritual pursue from passive dwelling to active seeking (ibid.). From that point onwards, some believed that religious imagery is no longer contained by the distinction 'secular and sacred', as we now attempt to deploy what we knows from the secular world to form our own version of salvational ethos (ibid: 29).

As a result, the very fact that pet owners can have any spiritual reflections at all towards the death of their pets (or the very fact that I was able to fathom the topic of this thesis) should not be taken for granted, as it is already reflecting the worldview of late modernity on its own.

Conclusion - Do pets have agency?

Despite their unwavering belief about their pets being able to understand them at the beginning of the interview, Kelvin and Sam, the two informants with philosophical knowledge, remarked towards the end of the interviews, that such belief emerged entirely from their subjective projections of feelings onto their pets. Alex borrowed René Descartes' well-known quote 'I think therefore I am' to point out that every feelings we seemingly derive from pets in fact comes from our own imagination. He then further borrowed French literary theorist Roland Barthes's famous argument 'the death of the author' to elaborate his point of what we saw depends largely on what we look for, therefore concluding that the strong attachment humans had with pets in fact bore no difference with a person's love towards another person or towards a manikin.

The idea proposed by Sam echoes with that of Judith Butler (2004: 22-30), who believed that grief existed because human subjects construct it from their point of views. So the grief of dead pets is, like any other form of grief or, to the extreme, any other form of feelings, a mere manifestation of human subjectivity and is irrelevant to the incident itself.

The idea of constructing grief was further elaborated by Kelvin, who pointed out that we grieve for pets because we were interpreting death of pets on human terms, providing us with a sense of self-awareness towards the death of others that was unique to any other species. From this perspective, the belief that pet loss is grievable in the first place already speaks about human's perspective of life.

However, going back to Sam's notion of our emotions towards pets, humans and manikins being basically the same as they all came from our own fantasy; I hold strong reservations towards this argument. Apparently, the degree of the projections we had on others also depends closely on our interactions with others. For instance, it is difficult for people to be insanely in love with another person who shows a strong sign of hostility towards us, nor is it typical to fall for a manikin which never responds.

But are these arguments enough to prove that pets have the agency in the human-pet relationship? If we take the entire thesis into account, this might be the ultimate question we seek to inquire -- Are humans' responses to pet loss based purely on pets' ability to inspire humans or humans' ability to be self-inspired?

In the introduction of the paper, it has been pointed out that pets are liminal creatures as it is part human and part non-human. The paper then attempts to shed light on a clearer position of pets. It is now clear that the 'human' part of pets does not merely refer to any random human but an image of an 'ever supportive and forever child-like companion'. As for the 'non-human' part, apart from referring to their animal nature, more importantly, pets bear the image of a 'spiritual and mystical being' whose actions are sometimes interpreted in ways which resemble Jesus Christ's salvation.

It is true that sometimes when pet owners anthropomorphized their pets, they misread certain gestures of their pets. But is this evidence strong enough to generalize that every interpretation of humans towards pets are based on humans' fantasy?

Certainly, it is not. Yet, it proves the humans' hegemony in the pet-human relationship. In reality, the 'part human' of pets by default creates a relationship on which humans can fully exert their discursive power.

Apart from the 'part human' of pets, it is worth-noting that the 'spiritual and mystical' part of pets has ascended the belief in pets to a religious level. In my argument, believing in the spirituality of pets is similar to believing in the power of prayers – humans interpret how both function with the benefit of hindsight, hence making their claims by default unprovable. It is evident that religious accounts often demonstrate humans' agency and one's ability to negotiate with his/her religions, but these could by no means rule out the authenticity of the religion. By the same token, it is out of anthropology's concern (and also ability) to verify the existence of free will within pets.

Nonetheless, we could see that pets allow much room for human to exert its agency, making it a valuable and vast treasure which await discovery in anthropology.

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