

Centre for the Humanities and Medicine  
The University of Hong Kong

Death: Philosophy, Therapy, Medicine

**Two Approaches to Death and Bereavement in Classical Chinese  
Thought**  
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The contrasting approaches to death and bereavement found in classical Confucianism and Daoism epitomize the fundamentally different orientations of the two ethical traditions. Confucianism, here represented by Xúnzǐ, interprets and seeks to manage death and bereavement through distinctive cultural practices, specifically elaborate rituals and associated norms of ceremonial propriety, which are intended to bring order, harmony, and beauty to human events and conduct. By contrast, Daoism, here represented by the Zhuāngzǐ, contextualizes and copes with death and loss through understanding and identification with natural processes. For the Zhuāngzǐ, to conform to natural patterns is at the same time to achieve order and harmony. Both approaches address death and bereavement as an integral part of a systematic, naturalistic philosophy of life that makes no appeal to a conception of divinity or a personal afterlife. In Xúnzǐ's Confucianism, the heart of this system is the concept of ceremonial propriety (lǐ), through which all human affairs, including inevitable, natural events such as death, must be mediated. To Xúnzǐ, such cultural mediation, or "patterning," of nature is what makes us fully human. The Zhuāngzǐ concurs with this link between cultural patterning and the human, but regards the rigid, ritualized cultural forms Xúnzǐ advocates as an obstacle to efficient coping with the flux of natural processes, such as death. Rather than constructing a sphere of "the human" as distinct from "the natural," the Zhuāngzǐ urges us to situate the human within nature in a way that removes the opposition between the two. The result is an understanding of death, and associated cultural practices, that may appeal to a secular contemporary audience.