

Culture

“White Affairs”

Chinese Beliefs and Rites

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Part I

Inspiration and Origin

The standardization of ritual is central to the creation and maintenance of any unified culture. To be “Chinese” is to understand and accept that there is a correct way to perform rites associated with each element of the life cycle. In China, where great reverence is displayed for the departed, it is only natural to expect that the rites associated with death and the dead are of primary importance, central almost to the definition of Chinese cultural identity. The commonality of these rituals cuts across boundaries of region, time and social strata.

Ancestor worship grew from the Confucian philosophy concerned with the social organization of daily life. The worshipped ancestor became a symbol of family unity, an indispensable element in a large and complex society. Confucius taught the Chinese people to serve one’s parents when alive, bury them when dead, and sacrifice to them--all according to “propriety”. This was outlined in the ultimate authority for all funeral rituals, the Confucian Classics. “Rituals for Family Life” by Sung philosopher Chu Hsi was another scholarly resource.

The object of Chinese death rituals is to control and transform the spirit. The proper performance of the death rites, in the accepted sequence, is important for the deceased to be reborn as an ancestor and truly “rest in peace”. A good life, a good death, and proper ritual will allow the spirit to become three, located in three separate places: in the ancestor tablet, in the grave, and in the reincarnated form. A bad life, death from a “bad cause”, or failure to properly perform the

death rituals may condemn the deceased to confinement in hell with continued punishment or to an afterlife as a hungry ghost, who, in turn, will work evil and bring bad luck to his living relatives.

I will begin by explaining several of the key practices that are performed throughout the death rites. Then, using a time sequence organization, my aim is to take you through each phase of the traditions surrounding death, providing information about the relevant beliefs which inspire and perpetuate the rites.

I hope that you will agree with me that the risk of being a bit morbid by studying the Chinese beliefs and customs involving death is more than compensated for by the understanding gained about the Chinese way of thinking and acting.

Burning

The Chinese believe that society in the afterlife is similar to life on earth. Consequently, they prepare the dead for afterlife by supplying articles of luxury and necessity that are required in their current life. Supplying ancestors with essentials is the fundamental purpose of ancestor worship. Even in the world of spirits, it is impossible to “live” without eating, or to obtain comforts without currency.

For centuries, burning has been the great means of communication between this world and the world beyond the grave. Burning paper effigies of material goods transfers them from this world to the next for use by the spirit of the deceased.

The most important of the burned offerings is money--and lots of it! A Buddhist practice (dating from the Tang dynasty), is aimed at delivering the soul from hell by smoothing the soul's passage. It is an important manifestation of filial piety to supply the money needed to bribe officials in the underworld. It is believed that the afterlife, like this one, is staffed by bureaucrats. Bribery is believed to be as effective with the gods in death--these gods are sometimes even called “civil servants in the sky”-- as it was in life.

To keep the spirits well-clothed, fed, and in luxury, many items in addition to money are burned during the entire funeral process as well as after burial. In Hong Kong, on Shanghai Street in Yaumatei, many of these paper effigies and other funeral items are

sold in paper shops. These shops sell necessities both for the here and for the hereafter; school notebooks and toilet paper are shelved next to items to burn for the deceased. The latter are gaily colored and relatively inexpensive. The items being sold reflect the times: VCR's portable telephones, and Mercedes cars, as well as the timeless and more practical, jewelry, clothes, utensils, fans for hot weather, and safes to protect the currency from burglary and fire.

Chi-Ma is another tradition involving burning. This ceremony must be performed by a Taoist or Buddhist priest. Colorful scrolls bearing pictures of various divinities of the underworld, who may render services to the soul in their jurisdiction, are burned to secure their good-will. Some of these divinities are: Pu-sah the funeral god, ten kings of the divisions of Buddhist hell, hungry ghost god, kitchen god who inscribes on the forehead of the soul its destiny, the mountain god who prevents violation of the burial ground, and Lao-Run who can blot out sins.

Priests also burn other talismans or charms such as official permits for transit (passports) to the next world, badges assuring protection at barriers on the way, "keys" to heaven, even letters of commendation from monks asking for merciful treatment.

Food

It is customary--a strict duty actually--to offer wine, meat, fruits, and vegetables to the dead. This is practiced from the moment of death (at least two times a day before burial) and continues on the anniversaries of the birth and death of the deceased for many generations. An important way to manifest filial piety, the food offering is a mark of undying affection and is done to furnish nourishment to the departed soul. Children sacrifice foods to secure protection and blessings from their parents. Descendants hoping for fertility sacrifice foods that are symbols of fertility. The deceased's views involving food held during life are believed to apply even after death; for example, favorite foods remain such.

Food has never been burned in paper replica form. Real food is laid out at a place where the ancestor's spirit can have access to it, usually in front of the ancestor tablet or at grave side. Since antiquity, this practice of offering food has never been neglected.

Food offerings, especially rice and pork, play a key role in the transformation of a corpse into an ancestor. It is interesting to note that immediately after death, ready-to-eat food is provided for the deceased. All the food is cooked and served hot, with rice, a bowl and chopsticks provided as well. As the spirit becomes an ancestor, the food sacrifice turns from ordinary, ready-to-eat fare to honorific, elaborate, uncooked unplucked chicken. It is thought that the new spirit, busy on the path to the nether world, needs the assistance of cooking and utensils, while an ancestor is capable of his own preparation. In addition to providing food for one's ancestors, food such as raw rice with no chopsticks may also be offered for the ghosts or evil spirits to distract them during a vulnerable time, without providing them with nourishment.

Often those in mourning refrain from eating pork themselves before the burial. They want to provide more pork to appease the gods during that crucial time. Pig's head and tail are primary offerings of farewell at the funeral banquet. The "essence" is consumed by the deceased, while the "remnants" are often eaten by the mourners.

Ancestor Tablet

As indicated above, one of the departed souls rests in an ancestor tablet. The ancestor tablet, or *ling wei*, consists at first of a red envelope in which is placed a slip of blue paper. The envelope is later replaced by a narrow wooden block, about one foot high, painted red. It contains the name, surname, and titles of the deceased. It is kept in the home of the eldest son, often placed in a position overlooking the daily life of the descendants. Large, wealthy clans own ancestral halls for this purpose.

The tablet is "dotted" in an elaborate ceremony. The highest ranking person available (which means affordable) is hired to complete one of the characters which is always written on the front of the tablet. The deficient character meaning "king" becomes "lord" with the addition of a small dot. After this rite the tablet becomes a suitable residence for the spirit.

Music

To accompany the corpse and settle the spirit, music is always provided. The music is not soothing, rather loud and sharp to alert the spirit and mourners to danger. Two forms play key roles. They are high pitched piping--similar to an oboe--and percussion, mostly drums.

The piping, called *di da*, alerts people to the danger of death pollution and alerts the spirit to stay with the corpse, not wander away. The piping is played especially loud whenever the body is moved.

The spirit and corpse are ushered through the sequence of rites from death to burial accompanied by piping. Cymbals, gongs, and drums are used to accompany the chanting of the priests. Coffin shops even offer entire brass marching bands for hire.

Professionals

The goal of all funerals is a "peaceful" burial, which requires that rites be performed according to custom. If the proper rites are not performed, there is risk of creating a dangerous ghost and disturbing the entire community. Correct performance is critical; the beliefs and emotions of the participants are far less important. It is generally not possible to do this yourself or by using untrained and unpaid friends or relatives. It must be accomplished by paid professionals.

To achieve the desired quality of performance, priests, musicians, and two corpse handlers are a minimum. The status and wealth of a family is gauged by the stature and number of specialists hired.

The hierarchy of these specialists is interesting; it is based on training, skill, experience and literacy. The geomancers rank the highest. The task of this feng shui man is to calculate the time and place for burial. The correct choice holds tremendous power to influence future fortune. Next are the special priests for the dead, who perform the rites. Of middle rank are the musicians and Buddhist nuns who chant sutras. The lowest rank consists of the corpse handlers, grave diggers, and helpers who carry the coffins.

All of these professionals, with the exception of the geomancer, are only involved in affairs of death. They have been so polluted by their constant exposure to death, that they have almost

been taken out of the realm of normal people. Because contact with the dead is thought to remove the *yang* essence, a condition which creates vulnerability to disease, these jobs are the ultimate form of human degradation.

Now we shall look at each chronological step in the death ritual procedure.

Dying

Death must not be allowed to occur on the family bed, which would be haunted as a result. Another bed is prepared, often from a simple door or a brightly painted rented bed. This is placed in the central room of the home, the head lying eastward. Pillows are removed, because should a person see his feet when dying misfortune will befall his children. At this point, a will can be taken down if desired.

Once death appears imminent, a ceremony called "summoning back the soul" is performed. A procession bearing a statue of the god *Pu-sah* and beating gongs, goes to the door of the dying person's house where they are received and begged for a cure. A delegation will then go to an apothecary shop in a final effort to find a remedy.

When it is feared that a child may die, the child is ceremonially adopted by another family, taking the new family's name. No contract of inheritance is involved. Superstition holds that a child's death is an indication that bad luck has fallen on the child's own family. Consequently, the child must be passed to a more fortunate household in an attempt to reverse his own family's luck. When a child is dying, his parents do not stay with him, and often do not even attend the funeral, as they believe they have done something wrong to cause their child such a punishment.

Immediately following death

Wailing, disheveling hair, and baring feet are immediate tokens of grief. Women announce death by high-pitched stereotyped wailing. This is initiated by breaking a rice bowl on the head of a dog, who will howl, signaling the start of the wailing.

Notice of death is made by placing blue and white or yellow and blue streamers or lanterns at the front door of the house in mourning- -on the left side for a male, on the right side for a female.

The number of these strips represents the age of the deceased. A sieve and a mirror are suspended over the doorway; the sieve allows only good influences to pass, the mirror can change evil to happiness.

An astrologer is called immediately. He foretells the day and hour the spirit is to leave the body in the form of a visible vapor -- including its color, height, and direction of movement. This knowledge insures that there will be no obstacles in its path. It also allows people to know when to stay away, since it is an omen of death to see the vapor. Sometimes notices are posted to warn off family and strangers. This is an example of the preoccupation with controlling the spirit.

Responsibility is designated for managing the funeral arrangements to a senior relation or friend, as immediate relatives are absorbed by grief and are the principal actors in the rituals. The first duty is to notify the local gods at the nearest shrine, then to invite all relatives and friends, hire the necessary professionals, pay the bills and keep the financial records.

When the master of the house dies, the ceremonies are led by the eldest son or grandson. In all other cases, the master of the house leads the ceremonies. Married daughters or sons adopted by others cannot perform this function.

The body is washed an uneven number of times. When the water is procured, a lucky penny is left in exchange. This is called "buying the water" and is accompanied by incense burning and firecrackers.

The body is swathed in wadding and then dressed in new clothing, most often white cotton, silk or satin, depending on the family's wealth. White is the color of death; death matters are often referred to as "white affairs".

An altar table is arranged with the following items: the ancestor tablet (this will belong to the eldest son and can be used as proof of inheritance), vases containing blue and white flowers, a pagoda-shaped stand containing sesame oil which burns during the whole lying-in-state, food at each mealtime, a cup of wine, wash basin, shoes with soles cut, toothbrush and tooth-paste, and candles. The altar furniture can be rented from an undertaker.

The family takes the appropriate positions, kneeling on mats around the deceased. In cases where the father has died, the eldest son

is at the left shoulder, at the right shoulder is the wife. Next come their sons and paternal nephews, followed by grandsons and their wives. Unmarried daughters are last.

As people come to pay their respects, their arrival is announced by musicians at the gate. After signing a book, guests bow three times then kneel at the head of the coffin. They are served with a brass cup from which wine is poured into a bowl of scallions. A banquet is spread for guests at tables for six--women and men sit separately. Visitors might bring gifts of money in yellow envelopes with a strip of blue, banners carrying inscriptions, gold and silver mock money, food, candles, or incense.

Before sundown on the eve of the funeral, paper effigies are taken to an open space and burned. An attendant beats the burning effigies with a long pole to prevent wandering spirits from misappropriating this property. Boiled rice and water are also scattered on the ground nearby to distract other ghosts. Entertainers such as blind storytellers, acrobats, and opera singers perform. Some mourners stay awake all night to say good-bye to the soul.

Encoffining

The Chinese believe that it is best to die with the body intact. They do not consider their bodies to be personal property, rather a gift provided by parents and ancestors. Confucius taught that only those shall be truly revered who at the end of their lives return their physical bodies whole and sound. Thus, most Chinese refuse donation of organs after death.

A geomancer's advice insures that the body is placed in the coffin on a lucky day, even if it means waiting for several days. The usual day for this is the third day after death.

The coffin is made of planks called "longevity boards". It resembles a section of a tree trunk. The expense of the coffin varies according to the weight, fragrance and durability of the wood. As most coffins are quite expensive, they are much appreciated gifts even on happy, healthy occasions. Filial sons often buy a coffin early for their parents to show that proper respect will be paid, or buy them as soon as death becomes likely. The coffin is usually kept available in the house. Coffins may even be reused after second burial.

After placing the body in the coffin, a veil of white silk or cotton is placed over the face. New white clothing without buttons is used. Buttons are heavy and may weigh down the spirit. Feet are bound to prevent leaping.

Women wear a seven-cornered "Lotus Flower Hat", often seen on statues of Kuan Yin, the Buddhist goddess of mercy. Their hair is dressed on top of the head and ornamented with gold or jade. Men wear boots with soft soles. A gold leaf or a pearl is often placed in a man's mouth.

In the deceased's hands may be placed: a willow twig to sweep demons from the path, a fan and handkerchief, and/or rice to appease hungry dogs. The bottom of the coffin may be lined with little bundles containing dry lime, ashes and earth. The number of these parcels equals the number of years lived. A pair of cords, crossed over the mouth, suspends a coin. Later, this coin is worn around the neck of the eldest son. The custom of placing jade near the body is very old and it is constantly found in early tombs.

End of Part I

