

Culture

# *“WHITE AFFAIRS”*

## *Chinese Beliefs and Rites*

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*by Susan Goodman*

### *Part II*

#### *The Journey and the Judgment*

The Taoist concept of the after-world is an organization like that of the ancient Chinese government, with a king and his attendants. Buddhists believe that after death the soul either goes to the Western Paradise (Nirvana) or it must pass through eighteen departments of hell. The last of these involves a process which returns the soul to some form of rebirth

The road to purgatory, or path to judgment, serves the just and the unjust alike. The Chinese regard this journey as very serious and try to help the departed soul in every way. During this phase the bad aspects of the deceased can be expelled while the good aspects (especially those yielding fertility) continue.

The journey through the underworld is divided into seven periods of seven days, or forty-nine days. the deceased must “do the sevens”. During this period the red ancestor envelope must be exposed.

Several of the barriers are:

1. Demon Barrier Gate--money is demanded,
2. Weigh Bridge--deceased placed on scales, good man is lighter than air (no buttons)
3. Bad Dogs Village--good men are welcomed with wagging tails,
4. Mirror of Retribution--the deceased sees a glimpse of his future,
5. Homesick Spirit--the deceased is allowed to mount a high platform to have a vision of the homestead family life,

6. Inevitable River Bridge--devil's crossing composed of a slim rope suspended a hundred thousand feet over rapids with snakes; the good are taken over parallel "Fairy Bridge" to safety,
7. Wheel of Metempsychosis--deceased is placed between revolving spokes of a wheel, if permitted to escape at the top right-hand corner, he is reincarnated as a member of nobility, exit at the top left-hand means status of a widow(er), orphan, childless, or with physical disability, other exit places mean animals and insects.

Western Paradise is reached with the assistance of Kuan Yin. This paradise is believed to be total bliss, absent of all needs or concerns. Woodcuts picture a sacred lake with large lotus flowers. It is ruled by Amitabha Buddha.

### *Funeral*

The "killing airs" that are released from the decaying body must be absorbed into the flesh of the living so that the spirit of the deceased will be properly settled. All who attend a funeral volunteer to take a portion of death pollution, depending on their relationship to the deceased. The professionals assisting in the funeral must absorb some pollution, which requires some compensating payment. This burden is taken on only after money is publicly exchanged.

On the morning of the funeral, which ideally takes place within the forty-nine days of deepest mourning (time period for the spirit's journey), Buddhist and Taoist priests chant prayers. This is accompanied by loud music and wailing. the Taoist priest will strike the coffin with a heavy kitchen knife to awaken the deceased and warn him to prepare for the coming journey.

The coffin is carried out on a bamboo ramp, head first. At the door, the youngest son breaks an earthenware saucer at the head of the coffin to provide a drinking utensil in the other world. As the Chinese believe that all the water wasted during one's life must be drunk after death, a hole will have been drilled in the saucer to help the deceased escape this heavy drinking obligation!

Family members wear coarse white robes with pointed cowls, which partially cover the face. Grandchildren wear headbands of the same material.

### *Funeral Procession*

The funeral procession is generally made as showy as the finances of the family will allow. This is accomplished by hiring musicians, coolies, pavilions, sacrifices, effigies and banners.

The procession, which can be as long as one-half mile, has a definite order :

1. persons to scatter paper money --particularly at intersections thought to be especially dangerous--this money is not burned, but is thrown into the air to distract evil spirits from obstructing the procession--this is called "purchasing the right of way",
2. people bearing white banners with eulogies and paper lanterns on poles with the deceased's title in blue character,
3. musicians--pipers and at least two persons with gongs,
4. coolies carrying the ancestor tablet,
5. pavilions with incense, a roasted pig, and fruits,
6. retinue of priests carrying altars and lanterns,
7. relatives and servants with trays of refreshments for mourners,
8. shrine with a photograph of the deceased carried by nephews or grandchildren,
9. children carrying baskets of paper flowers,
10. chief mourner--supported under his arms by servants--he is not shaved or washed, carries a stick to hit the coffin bearers if they jolt the coffin too much,
11. coffin covered in rich silk embroidery with fringes to the ground--carried by bearers in multiples of eight, with a rooster placed on top (Chinese work for cock is pronounced with the word for good luck)
12. crowd of other mourners--women in order of wife, eldest son's wife, other daughters-in-law, wife of paternal nephews, wives of grandchildren.

### *Burial*

The Chinese have a saying that the most important thing "in life" is to be buried properly! Burial can be a very complicated affair for the wealthy, or a very simple rite for the poor.

Until relatively recent times, it was a custom to inter valuable clothing and jewels, even complete sets of household utensils with the dead. During the Zhou dynasty, people and pets were also put to death or buried alive with the deceased to attend important persons in the next world. Sixty-six persons accompanied the Wu King; one hundred and seventeen commoners and three persons of note were interred with the Mu King. Death was the penalty for violating the tombs. For practical economic and humane reasons, this is no longer done! Paper effigies replace actual valuables and flesh and blood.

Prior to every burial, a feng shui man determines the best site and time from the horoscope of the departed, yin and yang currents, and topographical and astrological variables. He may even consult the spirits of the tenants of the cemetery to obtain their permission for the proposed arrangements!

The form of burial graves and their location vary by geographical region. In the South, the best spot is dry, elevated, with a good view of water. In the Northern provinces, cultivated, low land is desired. Because of the cold weather in the north, sometimes coffins can be stored above ground until the death of a parent or spouse, to allow the family to be reconstituted through simultaneous burial.

Priests surround the coffin and say prayers. An eminent person is invited (usually for a fee) to bow to the earth at the grave. The coffin, crockery containing food, and sometimes a lamp are lowered while mourners kneel and make loud lamentations. The musicians play a dirge while each family member contributes a handful of earth which is dropped on the coffin.

Finally, a bonfire of paper offerings is made, and as the flames die down, the ceremony ends. Firecrackers are set off. Nails, coins, and grains are distributed. Food may be left at the grave site for the gods of the earth. Also, tall bamboo poles with streamers bearing the name of the deceased are placed by the grave. The Buddhists teach that wandering souls use these as a landmark for their graves.

The descendants often provide a tombstone. This is inscribed with the name of the deceased, dates of birth and death, name of the district city, the name of the hill and the direction the coffin is laid. On the back side is written names of the family members who

contributed towards the expense of the tombstone--this also serves to provide information on who has filial responsibility!

In most parts of China everyone has at least six feet of earth for their grave, even valuable agricultural land. Hong Kong, southern China, and Taipei have special problems, however. Using land for anything other than building or crops to support the living is too great a luxury. For this reason, "second burial" has become a necessity. It is now only possible in these areas to rent an exhumable, or non-permanent burial plot. Each year, a week before the Ch'ing Ming festival, orders requiring the removal of remains of more than six years are published.

The second burial is accomplished by placing the bones in a brown or green glazed urn, called a Chin Ta or Golden Pagoda. A feng shui man selects a permanent hillside spot, always sheltered from the north by a steep slope, facing the sea or moving water. The geomancer indicates the location by tracing a cross on the ground with the bill of a live cock, then pouring wine on the spot. Although placement is again most important, the process is less intimidating, as pollution is thought to come from the flesh, not from the bones.

There are other times when the coffin or urn may be relocated. If the family should have bad fortune, it may be blamed on the poor location of the ancestor grave. The family may exhume the body and seek a better spot and corresponding luck. One story tells how families who cannot afford this process either pile stones in front of the tombstone to hide the name, or even scratch out the ancestors' name in order to reduce their association!

### *After Burial*

Elaborate twenty-four hour ceremonies, or Requiem Masses, are held on the days immediately following burial. The purpose is to comfort and expedite the soul on its journey to rebirth. The rites are performed by Buddhist nuns and Taoist priests. They determine the kind and number of masses necessary.

Following the funeral, there is a general cleansing of the house. A priest (other than the priest associated with the funeral) performs the final ceremony of purification the premises. Paper is burned in the corners of the room. Five old coins are thrown on the floor to bring money back into the house. A list of contributors is



read for the notice of the departed. The women and children wash their hair, which was disheveled as a sign of mourning. The dotted ancestor tablet is installed in the family altar room, or niche, and a glass of pure water is placed on the altar. This is a day of rejoicing, as the deceased is about to join his ancestors.

### *Remembrance*

The structure that underlies the Chinese death rituals is continued generation after generation in the rites associated with remembering the soul after death. These rituals take several forms.

Grave side visits start on the third day after burial. At this rite, called "returning to the mountain", more dirt is placed on the grave to round off the top. Four bowls of food--containing pork, fowl, fish and bean curd are sacrificed--as well as chopsticks and wine.

During the festival of Ch'ing Ming (clear and bright), which occurs each year during the first half of April, descendants are obligated to tend the graves, repairing, sweeping, pulling weeds and rounding off the mound. Doing this the first day of festival is the luckiest, but it can be done on any of the thirty days following. Candles are lit, incense and paper clothes and money are burned. Slips of red and white paper are left on the corners of the grave as evidence that the rites have been performed.

All Soul's Day, or the Buddhist Festival of Departed Spirits takes place on the fifteenth day of the seventh moon. This is for the purpose of saying prayers for solitary souls who may have died away from home or have nobody to perpetuate their memory through ancestor worship.

### *Special rites for certain causes of death*

Rituals may differ by type of death. Those who die in childhood, childless, unmarried, or without relatives need special consideration.

Infants were often buried in shallow graves or abandoned as they have little importance--they had not lived long enough to earn respect. Since marriage is believed to be the natural desired state, those who die young or unmarried need a posthumous wedding, or "ghost marriage". Strangers, poor and alone away from home are

provided with the essentials for burial by the community or the government.

Much simpler ceremonies are performed for those who die a “bad death” such as suicide or murder, in an accident, during childbirth, or while in prison. Special petitions made by priests, often using charms associated with the cause of death, are believed to alleviate the suffering by these tortured souls.

The Buddhists believe that all those who have committed suicide without sufficient reason are confined after death in the “city of suicide victims”. Buddhist priests have a charm to provide release from this dismal abode and delivery to rebirth. The soul of a person unjustly killed enjoys freedom to pursue his assassin to avenge him, bringing him to judgment and torture. With this threat, prison must seem a safe haven for murderers.

Women who die in childbirth cannot be buried for three years. The coffin may be covered only with straw. Prayers must be said to release their souls from a “bloody pond”. They are especially punished because in giving birth polluted blood, which offends the spirits of the earth, was discharged.

### *Women*

When dying and death rituals are involved, women who are usually subordinate to men, act in ways otherwise forbidden. They are important players in the rites.

When death is imminent, before any professionals are summoned or able to arrive, old women, usually widows, are called in. They act as advisors, assisting and directing the mourners in the proper conduct.

I mentioned before the fear of “death pollution”. The Chinese believe that flesh is a strong yin element. Consequently, the flesh lost by the deceased is better reabsorbed by females. It later becomes their contribution to a child at birth. In fact, during the funeral, daughters and daughters-in-law of childbearing age wear a piece of green cloth, which is thought to help absorb the pollution. Later, it is passed over fire for purification and becomes the main piece of the back strap harness used to carry infants. Women generally outnumber men at funerals by three to one.

Only women can communicate with the dead through a spirit medium, who is almost always a woman herself. She asks the deceased if he is settled, in need, or has any advise for the family. This is somewhat reminiscent of my own overseas telephone calls!

Probably the most important contribution that women make to the process of a successful funeral rite is their lamentations. Lamenting satisfies the demand for the group's expression of grief and also allows the expression of the singer's personal suffering.

### *Mainland China and the Communist system*

Many traditions were suppressed when the communist system took hold during the 1940's. The communists do not believe in a supernatural world or a hereafter. Man is the master of his own fate. Loyalty to the party and nation is most important. Spending time, money, and energy on religious rituals is wasteful and rivals authority figures. The Communist aim is for a society devoid of all superstitions and harmful religious rituals.

During the Cultural Revolution there was great hostility to traditional practices. Coffin shops, feng shui geomancers, and incense makers were taboo. Red Guards destroyed religious items in private homes.

A strong duality has developed between death practices in the more controlled urbanized areas and in the rural areas. Officials in urban areas encourage funeral services in the hospital or in a meeting hall. These services are often officiated over by the leader of the deceased's work unit. Expenses are kept to a minimum and are paid by the work unit. No special mourning clothes are worn, only a black armband, white pocket patch for men, or a white flower for women. Cremation is often required. In rural areas in spite of the pressures and restrictions, much of the old customs remains. Permanent burial is still the rule.

Since the death of Mao Tse-tung in 1976, there has been some revival of traditional practice. Funeral rites still vary according to wealth and social status. The obligation between generations persists, despite the communist doctrine that actions have value only to society and not beyond.



### *Modern Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas communities*

From antiquity to the present, the rituals associated with death have helped to hold this society together. The structure has traveled and is very much alive in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese areas (such as Canada, US, and Australia).

In Hong Kong, however, the spread of urban development, the growing shortage of services, and the uncertain future after 1997 have forced some changes in practices. Development and emigration often necessitate the removal of existing ancestor graves. Relocation is usually either to a place further into the New Territories or to the country where the descendants have emigrated.

In Hong Kong proposed building sites are very often old burial grounds. To regulate the process of locating sites and responsible relatives, every death must be registered within twenty-four hours at a Death Register Office. The Certification of Registration of Death permits either burial or cremation.

About 90% of the deaths in Hong Kong now result in cremation. There are at least two very practical reasons. A non-permanent burial plot in a cemetery costs about HK\$10,000. Also, there is further expense involved in the second burial. If the family emigrates, ashes can be more easily removed with them. There are three public crematoria in Hong Kong; the cost is minimal.

An alternative for the terminally ill is to return to rural mainland to be buried permanently. This may be too far away to allow the descendants to take proper "care" of the deceased, however.

A growing problem especially in these areas, and in China as well, is the surge in the number of suicides. Psychiatry has traditionally been regarded as evil and ineffective. The open expression of emotions is not acceptable. For those who have emigrated, especially, the stress of adjusting to a new culture and the lack of extended family support have led to emotional problems. A conflict exists between the Western ideologies of individual values, freedom, and equality, and the Chinese values of filial piety, loyalty, and respect for authority. Progress is being made in the form of research, suicide prevention centers, and "hot lines", but overcoming the taboo and changing attitudes will take time.

## Conclusion

Researching this report has been an extraordinary personal experience that I am happy to be able to share with you. Death is clearly a cornerstone of Chinese religious and family life. It is not separate from life, but rather is an integral part of it.

Ways of coping with death have provided the Chinese people with social organization and continuity in this world and the "next". Understanding the give and take between human existence and ancestors, the present and the past, offers many clues to the nature of this society.

No one is allowed to wander at will either in life or death. Death does not terminate relationships. Married couples are reunited and families reconstructed in the spirit world. Even relationships of reciprocity remain. This concept of a transformation, rather than an ending, has been the essential stimulus for the elaborate and important death ritual practices. For all of these reasons, even though a Chinese person cannot escape ultimately dying, he is never "dead".

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