

A guide to Chinese funeral rites

by [Khim Leclair](#)

Malaysian tradition and religion sometimes overlap each other so well that it can hardly be differentiated. For Malaysian Chinese, Buddhism and Taoism have blended and can hardly be told apart. Most Chinese will tell you that they are Buddhists but if you delve into their deities, you will see that they are Taoists. When it comes to the final rites, most still do it the Tao way.

An ordinary funeral with the required rituals would set the deceased family back about \$15,000 to \$20,000. The money usually comes from donations received as 'condolence' money as it is tradition for visitors to the wake to contribute.

The visitor's name and amount contributed is noted in a ledger. This ledger is kept by the next of kin to the deceased who will be responsible for the family's affairs. What this means is that he is to keep track of every visitor to the wake and should any deaths occur in the families of anyone, this next of kin is responsible to visit and donate an equivalent amount or more towards the funeral.

I think it is a good way for goodwill and pooling of resources. A similar ledger is kept for weddings too and returning the favour is also expected with similar or larger amounts of money.

The bereaved family and newly weds are given time to recover financially as they are excused from everything for a period of 100 days from the event. In fact it is considered taboo for them to be seen at any weddings, funerals or any other celebrations for that period.

There are a thousand and one things to attend to in preparation for the last rites. The easily seen costs are of course the plot, coffin and tombstone. Then the unseen ones include fees for the Taoist priests which is about \$2,000 - 3,000 a night, the joss and paper paraphernalia that is to be burnt as offerings to the deceased, about \$5,000, buying clothes for the deceased to be dressed in, buying food, titbits and cigarettes for the mourners and people coming to the wake, hiring kitchen cook and helpers, undertakers, buying outfits for mourners to wear and other minor things like sweets for visitors to the wake etc..

Let me start from the top. When a person passes away, all the deities and mirrors in the house of the deceased which is also where the wake is usually held are covered with white paper. This is because the deities would never allow the deceased (who is now a spirit) in the house and the non-reflection of his/her image in the mirror would scare him/her.

Then the undertakers are called to discuss the coffin and the dressing of the corpse. Usually a longevity suit is ordered for the elderly because the deceased has to be at least 60 years old to qualify for that suit. Otherwise someone is sent out to buy a new suit of whatever clothes that has been agreed upon by the family. The coat and tie ensemble is favoured. Another oddity is that all the pockets of that suit must be cut so that it leaks. It is believed that if the deceased tries to take anything away with him in his pockets will just leak back into the family.

Then the bereaved family members or mourners will take their showers and dress in their mourners' outfits. We can differentiate the relation to the deceased by looking at the outfits but this again has

been simplified in modern times. What used to be black outfits with different head coverings have been changed to black pants with white tee shirts for all the mourners. The only way to differentiate now is by looking at the small patch of different coloured cloth on their left sleeve. During the period of the wake the mourners are not supposed to bathe (hence the shower before changing) nor wear shoes. Modern times and hygiene have allowed the mourners to put on white socks instead of going barefoot. In olden times they were not even allowed to sit on chairs or eat with a pair of chopsticks. Food was served to them beside the coffin with only 1 chopstick.

Then the mourners gather around the deceased who by now has already been placed inside the coffin to witness the placement of items with the deceased. Sons always receive a pair of the deceased pants which when pronounced sounds like prosperity. The rest of the clothing is then placed in the coffin with the pockets duly cut of course.

There are lots of superstitions and beliefs which vary slightly with the many dialects (people from different provinces in China) groups but the basic rites remain almost the same. What I have been stating here are from the Hakka dialect group, my dialect.

Chinese can be very selfish when it comes to giving away a part of their prosperity so before the ceremony begins the Taoist monk will bring the mourners to a chosen spot outside the home to 'carry' water (the word water can also mean money) for use in the burial ceremonies. This is only symbolic and only a can of usually drain water is brought back.

The combing ceremony is a very significant event on the wedding eve. An elderly lady who has led a good life usually does the combing. Bride and groom do it at the same time in their respective homes. The hair is symbolically combed 3 times while reciting, 1st comb stroke...till the end, 2nd stroke...to grow grey together...3rd stroke...descendants aplenty. So when one partner dies this pact has to be broken to allow the deceased to go in peace. A similar ceremony except that this time it is the undertaker doing it with the husband/wife standing by his side. The comb is broken into two and the deceased is told that they have come to a parting of ways. One part of the comb is placed in the coffin and the other is thrown onto the ground. It is believed that this will help the deceased go without worrying about the surviving spouse believing that he/she no longer values the relationship. It is also for this reason that spouses do not take part in any of the rites involved in sending the deceased off.

Wakes use to be held over a period of 3, 5 or 7 days but due to economic reasons and busy [lifestyles](#), it is now more common to find 1 night wakes with the 3 or 5 done by the more prosperous or well known. As I had explained earlier Taoist priests do not come cheap. Some people have even started to opt for the services of nuns reciting prayers instead.

Taoist priests start their sing song prayers which are essentially just like story telling. It starts with how pained and saddened the mourners are. Good Taoists priests can make it so real and sad that you sob out loud in spite of yourself. The prayers are held in chapters with each chapter dealing with a different phase of the journey. The mourners are called to follow the priest and kneel / bow as per his lead. Each chapter lasts about 30 - 45 minutes. The mourners follow the priests in line as per their rank in the family i.e. sons then daughters then daughter in laws, grand children and so on.

The next chapter deals with medication, where the daughter in law is required to symbolically boil the herbs for the deceased to recover and gain strength for his journey to Hades.

Then comes the long journey over mountains, valleys and rivers. All this is done symbolically with paper paraphernalia and props brought in by the priests.

The next part of the journey is where the spirit reaches the gates and the eldest son sends him in but in order to keep the father safe from the evils on his track, he is required to run a maze. The 4 gates (North, South, East and West) are symbolically put up and the run is done by one of the apprentice priests with the eldest son running close behind him. This is the comical part of the night and the chase can get pretty funny, especially when the heir is elderly and cannot keep up.

The last chapter is where the deceased's spirit is required to drink a potion to enable him/her to forget this life and look forward to the next reincarnation. This crossing over is symbolised by a bridge manned by an old lady. To cross over, it is mandatory to drink her soup (potion) and forget this life first. It is said that people who are born with memories of past lives have tricked this old lady by not swallowing that potion when crossing over.

With that the journey is complete and all the paper stuff which includes a big house for the deceased, car, bicycle, servants are all burnt in a bonfire with the mourners surrounding it in a final goodbye.

The paper dolls that are burnt as servants are first given names and 'activated' by the Taoist priest. The family is required to remember those names and not to give anyone in the family the same names.

In between performing the various chapters of prayers, the priests have been busy working out the auspicious times for the cortege to leave the house and also the performing of last rites at the gravesite. They also work out the times and date that the spirit will be allowed to return to the house.

Before the appointed time for the cortege to leave the house, a veritable feast is set up for the deceased. The feast includes whole roast pigs which is a gift that is a 'must' from the sons in law. The number of items at the offering table gives a rough indication of how 'well off' the deceased was in terms of friends and respectability in the community rather than in monetary terms. The number of people who have gathered for the last journey is an even clearer indication of that.

The mourners are asked to turn away while the coffin is carried to the hearse. This is to show that the family no longer takes an interest, thus allowing the deceased to go in peace. On the way to the cemetery, the elder siblings will ride on the hearse and will need to call out to the spirit when they cross bridges or other bodies of water as the spirits are 'simple' and will not know how to cross.

On reaching the cemetery, the roasted pigs and other offerings at the earlier feast will be eaten at the main temple by all while the coffin proceeds to the grave. The lowering of the coffin into the grave is not witnessed by anyone other than the priests and the undertakers.

After they are ready, the mourners and others are sent for.

The sons are asked to confirm that the coffin is lying in a position that is acceptable, i.e. not askew and the last chapter is now conducted. Amidst offerings, the deceased will also be giving out

'presents' in the form of rice, tea, salt and money. These are symbolically mixed into a little bag and scattered out by the priest with the mourners instructed to kneel and attempt to catch with their shirts. As the 'presents' are just basic necessities of life, it is believed that the quantity you are able to catch is related to the life that you are going to be leading. Again this has been modernised with the priest simply distributing to the mourners' hands.

With that the rites are complete and the mourners return home with the eldest son carrying the picture that was on the front of the hearse which will be used for the temporary altar to be set up. As the spirit is still 'new' it will not be left at the cemetery but allowed to return home for 49 days.

Back at the house the cooks have been busy and the house has been cleaned, the deities have their coverings removed and a piece of red cloth is hung across the main door to celebrate. The mourners return but before being allowed back into the house, the spirit is received and set up at a separate temporary altar. After which the mourners wash their hands, face and feet in water containing petals of 7 kinds of flowers and pomelo leaves to rid themselves of bad luck. The socks are discarded and the mourners then shower and change before feasting.

It was normal in the old days to observe at least 1 year period of mourning but this mourning custom has also mostly been discarded.

Learn more about this author, [Khim Leclair](#).