

DEATH RITUAL IN LATE IMPERIAL AND MODERN CHINA

James L. Watson and
Evelyn S. Rawski, Editors



ALBANY

Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China

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PREFACE

Our interest in systematic analysis of Chinese death ritual began in conversations in 1981 at a conference on popular culture in late imperial China which was held in Honolulu, Hawaii. As we wrestled at that conference with the question of how to study the behavior and values of ordinary Chinese who did not leave extensive written materials, it became evident that focusing on ritual would permit historians to explore nonelite culture in greater depth than heretofore. As is argued in the essays that follow, the rituals performed at marriage and at death were central to definitions of Chinese cultural identity. They affected people of every social stratum. Given the Chinese preoccupation with funerals, we chose to study death ritual. Ritual, of course, has long been the focus of attention by anthropologists and specialists on religion; we felt this would be an ideal topic for interdisciplinary exchange. A conference on Chinese death ritual, held at the Sun Space Ranch Conference Center in Oracle, Arizona, January 2–7, 1985, was sponsored by the Joint Committee on Chinese Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies and Social Science Research Council. The essays included in this volume are revised versions of papers presented at the conference. They have profited from the comments of Patricia Ebrey, Thomas Laqueur, Jonathan Parry, and Chün-fang Yü, who served as discussants. Two of the conference essays are being published separately in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1987); these are Ying-shih Yü, “O Soul, Come Back! The Ritual of *fu* (‘Recall’) and Conceptions of the After-life in Han China,” and Anthony Yu, “Rest, Rest, Perturbed Spirit! Ghosts in Traditional Chinese Prose Fiction.” David Keightley’s conference paper, “Dead But Not Gone: Cultural Implications of Mortuary Practices in Neolithic and Early Bronze Age China,” will be published as a chapter in the author’s forthcoming monograph on early Chinese culture and society.

Six of the ten chapters in this volume are written by anthropologists, largely on the basis of fieldwork in Hong Kong's New Territories and in Taiwan over the last twenty years. Two of the anthropological essays are based on fieldwork among Cantonese in the New Territories, two focus on Hokkien groups in northern Taiwan, and two on Hakka groups in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Three chapters are by historians, and one by a sociologist. The different disciplinary perspectives of the authors form part of a subtext, most evident in the two introductory essays but present in many of the other essays as well.

All of the essays emphasize the late imperial (Ch'ing) and modern eras. In designing the conference with a heavy bias toward the twentieth century, we followed the stratagem of "beginning at the end," when and where fieldwork observations could be tapped. We concentrated on identifying some of the underlying uniformities and ritual variations in contemporary Chinese communities living relatively close together. We have deliberately eschewed a historical survey. The actual evolution of practices associated with death ritual from ancient times to the present, with a few notable exceptions, remains largely unstudied, although the reader of this volume is directed to the papers, presented at the conference, that were cited earlier.

The conference papers and discussions touched intimately and frequently on the question of what held Chinese culture together. How was it possible for diverse and indeed widely divergent ritual practices, found in different localities and among different social groups, to coexist with the notion that there was a unified culture in China? We concluded that an underlying structure is evident in Chinese funeral ritual; this structure is reflected in rites associated with settling the soul after death. James Watson's introductory essay explores this topic in detail. Watson declares that the Chinese put less emphasis on burial and postburial rituals than on funeral rites as such. The sequence of funeral rites displays impressive uniformity; the burial customs vary significantly in different regions, although, as Martin Whyte notes, most Chinese are united in rejecting cremation as an alternative to burial.

The chapters in this volume treat both funeral and burial rites. If funerary ritual demonstrates the unity of Chinese culture, the rites associated with the grave express the accompanying marking of ethnic, status, and gender boundaries that were an equally important part of the social repertoire. One could not exist without the other; put another way, the existence of an agreed-upon normative sequence of funeral rituals, which were identified as central to Chinese identity, left room for variation and localization through changes in burial practices. Deliberate ambiguity, in part the product of the absence of a unified liturgy, permitted ethnic groups practicing a wide variety of burial customs to identify their own practices as "Chinese."

Here and in his own essay Watson argues that the integration of Chinese

culture was only possible because the state enforced orthopraxy and did not try to instill uniform beliefs among its citizens. The debate concerning the importance of belief versus practice runs through the various papers and is explicitly discussed in Evelyn Rawski's introductory essay. Rawski argues that China's rulers—its emperors, officials, and educated informal elites—saw belief and practice as part of a duality. Belief could stimulate proper action, but proper action (behavior, or ritual) was an approved means of inculcating desired beliefs or values as well.

The normative structure of ritual that existed in late imperial China was the product of complex interactions between actual practice and the codification (in written form) of earlier customs recorded by literate elites. Once ritual texts were created in early China, they became in themselves a major element influencing ritual practice. Officials and informal elites promoted standardization and increasing conformity by following the ritual canon. The interaction of this purposive activity with the response of Chinese to their own environmental needs and ethnic preferences forms the background for the rituals discussed by the authors of the chapters in this volume.

In the first chapter of part 2, Susan Naquin uses information gleaned from local histories (*gazetteers*) for north China to describe a ritual sequence that was common to the region. This survey leads her to conclude that "most Chinese appear to have assumed that these rites should not vary widely from place to place nor should they change over time." Although the ideal sequence could be modified by the age, marital condition, sex, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion of the deceased person, the overall structure remained essentially the same. The striking similarity of the north China rituals to funerary rituals reported for the lower Yangtze, and even to rites performed in southeast China and the Canton delta, supports the argument that a standardized Chinese "way of death" did indeed exist during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Naquin ascribes the integration of death ritual in the Ch'ing dynasty to the activities of ritual specialists, who relied on religious and Confucian texts that gave specific instructions concerning mortuary rites. She suggests that the difference between the uniform funeral and divergent burial practices is tied to differences in the training and textual base of the priests presiding at the funeral, on the one hand, and the geomantic specialists who supervised grave selection and burial, on the other. The ritual specialists transmitted not only precise ritual formats but also notions about salvation and the efficacy of geomantic manipulation. Underlying conceptions about the dead help shape the ritual structure.

The symbolic language of food prestations at different stages of the mortuary sequence is analyzed by Stuart Thompson. He shows how food offerings, and especially the offerings of rice and pork, play key roles in the

transformation of a corpse into an ancestor. This is done by providing exchanges between the living and the dead whereby death can be converted into fertility and regeneration. The presentation of pork, in Thompson's view, can be seen as a way to enable the deceased to replenish the corrupting flesh and cloak the bones with new substance. The nature of the offerings, which contrast and combine (male) rice with (female) pork, expresses Chinese conceptions of duality in the cosmic as well as the social universe.

The rituals associated with settling the soul reflect in some way the ambivalent feelings of mourners as well as the dread arising from fear of the corpse. James Watson's essay, "Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society: Pollution, Performance, and Social Hierarchy," examines this problem among people who live in dominant lineages along the Canton delta. Cantonese villagers respond to the overpowering dread of death by ostracizing funeral specialists and ensuring, through payment, that these professionals bear a large part of the "killing airs" released by the corpse. In doing so, they minimize the pollution that they themselves must accept. There is a hierarchy of professional ritual specialists ranging from corpse handlers at the very bottom to geomancers at the top. It is interesting that corpse handlers and coffin bearers are also found at the bottom of the social order in other localities, including Hui-chou.¹ Watson concludes that the actions of professionals are a formal part of the structure of funerary rites; their *performance*, in other words, is a critical feature of what makes Chinese funerals "Chinese."

Two chapters deal specifically with gender issues. Elizabeth Johnson's "Grieving for the Dead, Grieving for the Living," demonstrates the use to which Hakka women put funeral laments. The wake becomes one of the few times when women can publicly voice their grievances and aggressively enunciate their own stance in the tangled relations among relatives. Death, which frequently elicits rituals of solidarity among the survivors, here gives rise to a potentially divisive form of expression. The laments deal with personal relations within the family. They show a belief in equality and fair treatment in the family realm. Individual in form, they contrast sharply with the male-oriented grave rites analyzed by Rubie Watson. The wake is, in essence, a ritual of social inversion. Johnson's essay is one of the few studies of Chinese mortuary rites that focus on the role of women. It also deals with a domain of ritual, laments and wailing, that is extremely difficult to investigate and yet is found throughout China.

Emily Martin's "Gender and Ideological Differences in Representations of Life and Death" is an ambitious attempt to map out a woman's perspec-

1. Hsien-en Yeh 叶显恩, *Ming Ch'ing Hui-chou nung-ts'un she-hui yü tien-p'u chih* 明清徽州农村社会与佃仆制 [The agricultural society of Hui-chou in the Ming and Ch'ing and the system of servile tenancy] (Anhui: People's Press, 1983).

tive of life and death in Chinese society. Martin argues that this view contrasts sharply with the dominant male perception. Marriage, seen by men as a celebration of new life, is expressed by young brides in marriage laments as a death—a cutting of the affectionate natal bond that ties a daughter to her parents and siblings. The marriage dress, by this logic, can also be seen as the shroud of the corpse. The reversal of male symbols is also found in death: for women the rituals linked with death express fertility, the completion of a cycle that will bring birth out of death. Martin argues that women see life and death in terms of the unity of opposites, whereas men try to separate opposites and resist cyclical change by striving to attain permanence in status, even in the afterlife.

Myron Cohen's essay raises the interesting question of why Chinese popular religion did not place more emphasis on salvation. Cohen points out that although the notion of rebirth in a Western Heaven was hinted at in funerary ritual, it was not stressed as a major ideological force. If salvation had been highlighted, it would have contradicted fundamental tenets bolstering ancestral worship and other major elements in popular religion, namely, belief in multiple souls, reincarnation, and the close interaction of the living with the dead. Cohen notes that the interpenetration of elite and popular religious orthodoxy, characteristic of late imperial China, could not have been achieved through state fiat alone; it rested instead on a consensus that emphasized social rather than individual identity. Salvation creeds thus failed to take deep root in the society and instead attracted people who were by Chinese definitions "socially incomplete."

With Rubie Watson's essay we shift our focus to grave ritual, which was also very widely practiced in many regions of China over long periods of time. Although burial and funeral rites intended to settle the spirit after death are universal, not all graves become sites for collective worship. In the Canton delta, for example, only the affluent could afford to establish graves for their deceased kin; it was an elaborate and costly procedure. In contrast to funerary ritual, where the spirit of the deceased is potent and unpredictable, the ancestor in the grave is no longer individualized. At this point the deceased becomes a pawn to be manipulated for the benefit of descendants. Grave rites may unite agnates, but they can also be used to separate and distinguish competing branches, assert the claims of some branches over others, and help redefine political alignments within the lineage. In short, worship at ancestral graves can be a creative and sometimes a vigorously political act.

Evelyn Rawski's "The Imperial Way of Death" focuses on court ritual in the Ming and Ch'ing periods and on the ways in which the Ch'ing dynasty's modification of Chinese laws of succession influenced new emperors to use the observance of mourning as a means of claiming legitimation. A comparison of the rituals outlined for emperors and empresses with commoner

ritual in north China, as presented in Naquin's essay, shows that the ritual sequence from death to grave worship remained essentially the same. But because imperial ancestral worship overlapped with state ritual, it was also separate and distinct from the general Chinese pattern. Burial transformed a dead emperor into an ancestor who became part of the state religion.

Imperial death was a state event that never led to the formation of popular cults or pilgrimage centers for the masses. Instead, the power of the imperial ancestors was the special monopoly of the ruling house. Frederic Wakeman, Jr., looks at state ritual in the People's Republic of China and in Taiwan, by comparing the mortuary observances of Mao Tse-tung and Chiang Kai-shek. Despite the opposed political ideologies in these two contexts, there are remarkable similarities in the modern rites surrounding the deaths of China's latter-day "emperors." These hark back to Sun Yat-sen's funeral in 1925 and, even more fundamentally, to the twentieth-century attempt to use dead leaders to legitimize a regime and to strengthen its popular base (e.g., as with Lenin in the Soviet Union). The glorification of Mao's thought, an alternative to worship of his embalmed corpse, also created political problems. Mao's current successors finally decided to put Mao into history.² In contrast to the dynastic era, the new Chinese governments have sponsored the formation of cults around the dead leader and encouraged pilgrimages to his tomb-shrine. The corpse has become public property—indeed, a national asset. As Wakeman notes, the rituals surrounding these new shrines are not yet fully formed and are still being negotiated between the party and the people.

The discontinuity between traditional Chinese mortuary ritual and the rituals promoted by the state in the People's Republic of China is the subject of Martin K. Whyte's "Death in the People's Republic of China." State and party efforts to simplify funerals, reduce expenditures, and substitute cremation for burial have been most successful in the cities. Intellectual and socioeconomic changes that began in China's urban centers in the 1920s and 1930s also encouraged funerary reform. In the countryside, Communist efforts to alter traditional practice were less successful. Whyte argues that peasants continue to adhere to traditional norms of mortuary ritual, in spite of repeated "anti-superstition" campaigns. Prerevolutionary burial practices, in particular, have made a very strong recovery in recent years—an unplanned consequence, perhaps, of Teng's policies in the countryside. The result is a growing gap between rural and urban mortuary customs. Whyte concludes his essay with a provocative discussion of the issue of belief versus practice. He argues that despite a radical break in ritual forms, China's

2. For an analysis of the implications of the two alternatives, see Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), chap. 1, and his discussion of "ceremonies of innocence" and "rituals of struggle."

urban dwellers continue to adhere to important elements of the traditional ideology regarding death and the world beyond. Orthodoxy is more important than orthopraxy in China today.

In this volume we have tried to sketch out some of the key issues associated with mortuary rites in Chinese society. The essays have explicitly studied both ritual practice and belief structures as they relate to death rites—the performance of required acts, variations in form, and attitudes underpinning practice. As was noted above, it is no coincidence that we have chosen to concentrate on the rituals of death; in our view they provide one of the clearest windows on Chinese society. We could equally well have focused on wedding rites and the shared set of beliefs surrounding marriage. But that is a theme for another project at another time. The point we wish to make, however, is that the materials and techniques employed in this volume for the “unpacking” of death rites and beliefs may prove to be of value in an examination of other domains of Chinese culture.

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PART I

Introductory Perspectives