Chinese Funeral Customs

Since cremation is traditionally uncommon, the burial of the dead is a matter taken very seriously in Chinese society. Improper funeral arrangements can wreak ill fortune and disaster on the family of the deceased.

To a certain degree, Chinese funeral rites and burial customs are determined by the age of the deceased, cause of death, status and position in society, and marital status.

According to Chinese custom, an elder should never show respect to someone younger. So, if the deceased is a young bachelor, for example, his body cannot be brought home and must remain at the funeral parlor. His parents cannot offer prayers to their son, either: Since he was unmarried, he did not have any children to whom he could perform these same rites. (This is why the body cannot come into the family home.) If an infant or child dies, no funeral rites are performed either since respect cannot be shown to a younger person. The child is thus buried in silence.

Funeral rites for an elder must follow a prescribed form: Rites befitting a person's status, age, etc., must be performed even if this means the family of the deceased will go into debt.

Preparation for a funeral often begins before a death has occurred. When a person is on his/her deathbed, a coffin will often have already been ordered by the family. A traditional Chinese coffin is rectangular with three 'humps', although it more common in modern times for a western style coffin to be used. The coffin is provided by an undertaker who oversees all funeral rites.

When a death occurs in a family all statues of deities in the house are covered up with red paper (not to be exposed to the body or coffin) and all mirrors are removed (it is believed that one who sees the reflection of a coffin in a mirror will shortly have a death in his/her family). A white cloth is hung over the doorway to the house and a gong is placed to the left of the entrance if the deceased is a male, and to the right if female.

Before being placed in the coffin, the corpse is cleaned with a damp towel dusted with talcum powder, and dressed in his/her best clothes (all other clothing of the deceased is burned) before being placed on a mat (or hay in rural areas). The body is completely dressed, including the footwear, and cosmetics (if female), although the corpse is never dressed in red clothing (this will turn the corpse into a ghost). White, black, brown or blue are the usual colors. Before being placed in the coffin the corpse's face is covered with a yellow cloth and the body with a light blue one.

The Wake

The coffin is placed on its own stand either in the house (if the person died at home) or in the courtyard (if the person died away from home). The coffin is placed with the head of the deceased facing the inside of the house, resting at about one foot from the ground on two stools; wreaths, gifts and a portrait or photograph of the deceased are placed at the head of the coffin. The coffin is not sealed during the wake. Food is placed in front of the coffin as an offering to the deceased. The deceased's comb is broken into two -- one part is placed in the coffin and the other is kept by the family.

During the wake, the family does not wear jewelry or red clothing (red is the color of happiness). Traditionally, children and grandchildren of the deceased did not cut their hair for 49 days after the death, but this custom is now usually only observed by older generations. It is customary for blood relatives and daughters-in-law to wail and cry during mourning as a sign of respect and loyalty to the deceased. The cries are particularly loud if the deceased has left a large fortune.

At the wake, the family members of the deceased gather around the coffin positioned according to their rank in the family and special clothing is worn: Children and daughters-in-law wear black (signifying that they grieve the most); grandchildren, blue; and great grandchildren, light blue. Sons-in-law wear brighter colors, such as white, since they are considered outsiders. The children and daughters-in-law also wear a hood of sackcloth over their heads. The eldest son sits at the left shoulder of his parent and the deceased's spouse on the right. Relatives arriving later must crawl on their knees towards the coffin.

An altar where burning incense and a lit white candle are placed is positioned at the foot of the coffin. Joss paper and prayer money (to provide the deceased with sufficient income in the afterlife) are burned continuously throughout the wake. Funeral guests are required to light incense for the deceased and bow as a sign of respect to the family. There will also be a donation box since money is always offered as a sign of respect to the family of the deceased. This money will also help the family defray the costs of the funeral.

During the wake there is usually a group of people gambling in the front courtyard of the deceased's house because the corpse must be "guarded," and gambling helps the guards stay awake during their vigil. This custom also helps to lessen the grief of the participants.

The length of the wake depends on the financial resources of the family, although it should be at least one day long to allow for the offering of prayers. While the coffin is in the house (or compound) a monk will chant verses from Buddhist or Taoist scriptures at night. It is believed that the souls of the dead face many obstacles and even torment and torture for the sins they have committed in life before they enter the afterlife: Prayers, chanting and rituals offered by the monks help ease the passage of the deceased's soul into heaven. These prayers are accompanied by music played on the gong, flute and trumpet.

Form of the Funeral Ceremony

There are two main traditions observed:

1. The funeral ceremony traditionally lasts over 49 days -- the first seven being the most important. Prayers are said every seven days for 49 days if the family can afford it. Otherwise, the period can be shortened by three to seven days. Usually, it is the responsibility of the daughters to bear the funeral expenses. The head of the family should be present for at least the first and possibly the second prayer ceremony. The number of ceremonies conducted depends on the financial situation of the family. The head of the family should also be present for the burial or cremation.

2. In the second tradition, the prayer ceremony is held every 10 days: The initial ceremony and three succeeding periods of 10 days until the final burial or cremation.

After 100 days a final prayer ceremony is conducted, but this is optional and not as important as the initial ceremonies.

In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, to which most Chinese Buddhists belong, it is believed that between death and rebirth there is an intermediate period called "Antarabhava" in Sanskrit or "Bardo" in Tibetan. It is an important period that influences the form that the rebirth will take. If the family ensures that proper assistance in the form of prayer and remembrance ceremonies are duly performed, the departed will be more equipped for a favorable rebirth.

Funeral Ceremony and Procession

When the prayer ceremonies are over, the wailing of the mourners reaches a crescendo and the coffin is nailed shut (this process represents the separation of the dead from the living). Then yellow and white "holy" paper is pasted on the coffin to protect the body from malignant spirits. During the sealing of the coffin all present must turn away since watching a coffin being sealed is considered very unlucky. The coffin is then carried away from the house using a piece of wood tied over the coffin, with the head of the deceased facing forward. It is believed that blessings from the deceased are bestowed upon the pallbearer, so there are usually many volunteers.

The coffin is not carried directly to the cemetery but is first placed on the side of the road outside the house where more prayers are offered and paper is scattered. The coffin is then placed into a hearse that moves very slowly for one mile (more rarely, it is carried for a mile), with the eldest son and family members following behind with their heads touching the hearse. If there are many relatives, a white piece of cloth is used to link the hearse to family members behind. The order of the funeral procession follows the status of the family members. A white piece of cloth is tied to vehicles accompanying the hearse, or a white piece of paper can be pasted on their windshields. The eldest son usually sits next to the coffin. A long, lit joss stick is held throughout the journey, symbolizing the soul of the deceased; it is relit immediately if it goes out. Occasionally, paper models of such objects as cars, statues, ships, etc., are carried during the procession to symbolize the wealth of the deceased's family. If the procession must cross a body of water, the deceased must be informed of this since it is believed that an uninformed soul will not be able to cross water.

The Burial

Chinese cemeteries are generally located on hillsides since this is thought to improve Fengshui (geomantic omen). The higher a grave is located, the better. At the graveside, when the coffin is taken down from the hearse and lowered into the ground, all present must turn away. Family members and other relatives throw a handful of earth into the grave before it is filled. After the funeral, all of clothes worn by the mourners are burned to avoid bad luck associated with death. After the coffin is buried, the keeper of the cemetery will also offer prayers to the deceased. Family members and relatives are presented with a red packet (a sign of gratitude from the deceased's family, and the money in it must be spent). A white towel is also a sign of gratitude although it is also used by funeral guests to wipe away perspiration.

The eldest son of the deceased will retrieve some earth from the grave to put into an incense holder, and the deceased will be worshipped by the family at home using an ancestral tablet.

Mourning

Although the funeral rites are over, the period of mourning by the family continues for another 100 days. A piece of colored cloth is worn on the sleeve of each of the family members for 100 days to signify mourning: Black is worn by the deceased's children, blue by the grandchildren and green by the great grandchildren. More traditional families will wear the pieces if cloth for up to three years. A period of mourning is not required if the deceased is a child or a wife.

The Return of the Dead

The Chinese believe that seven days after the death of a family member the soul of the departed will return to his/her home. A red plaque with a suitable inscription may be placed outside the house at this time to ensure that the soul does not get lost.

On the day of the return of the soul, family members are expected to remain in their rooms. Flour or talcum powder may be dusted on the floor of the entrance hall of the home to detect the visit.