CHAPTER 11

Xianghua foshi 香花佛事 *(incense and flower Buddhist rites): a local Buddhist funeral ritual tradition in southeastern China*

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> There has yet to be a detailed study of death-related discourse and practices across Buddhist cultures. Such a project would shed light, for example, on the transformations of Buddhism in different Asian settings and on patterns in its interactions with local religion. It could also be expected to reveal just how integral death-related matters have been – doctrinally, ritually, institutionally and socially – to Buddhist traditions.
>
> Jacqueline L. Stone (2005: 56)

INTRODUCTION

Xianghua foshi is the kind of death-related Buddhist rite to which Jacqueline Stone refers in the quotation above, involving the adaptation of Buddhist ideas and practices to a particular Asian setting (southeast China) through interaction with local religion. This local Buddhist funeral ritual tradition is popular in the vicinity of Meizhou City 梅州 located in the northeastern part of Guangdong province in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The region lies at the intersection of Guangdong, Fujian and Jiangxi provinces, and is commonly known as the motherland of the Hakka people, with Meizhou City commonly referred to as the Hakka Capital.[1] *Xianghua foshi* is solely a Hakka rite and is performed in the Hakka dialect. But not all Hakka depend on this funeral rite to allay their anxieties about death. For those who live in areas where the *Xianghua foshi* prevails, however, the rite is believed to generate vast amounts of religious merit, benefiting not only the deceased, but also the living members of the host family, as well as

[1] Hakka is commonly used to refer to a specific group of Chinese people who claim themselves to be part of the dominant Han ethnic group, though their historical and cultural origins remain obscure and controversial.

wandering souls in the neighbourhood, who can all share in the merits of performing these rites. It is believed that this meritorious rite has three main functions: first, it can expedite the deceased soul's passage through the inevitable legal procedures in the Ten Halls in hell; second, the deceased can achieve a higher level of reincarnation in the next life in *Samsara*; and third, if the merit is sufficient, the deceased may even be able to transcend this world and reach the Pure Land of the Buddha.

The rite has a history of approximately 400 years. Nowadays, three versions of this rite are common, varying in length. The most common version is known as *Quanzhai* 全齋 (Complete Set of Vegetarian Version, hereafter referred to as the Complete Set).[2] The other two versions are known as *Banyeguang* 半夜光 (Light at Midnight) and *Banzhai* 半齋 (Half Set of Vegetarian Version). The performers of this rite are *xianghua heshang* 香花和尚 (incense and flower monks, hereafter referred to as clerics) and *zhaigu* 齋姑 (vegetarian women).[3] Both groups identify themselves as Buddhist religious personnel, but their religious identities are unconventional and subject to disputes. However, among the common people of the region, both the rite of *Xianghua foshi* and the status of the clerics who administer it are accepted as authentically Buddhist.

I shall discuss the rite's religious identity in the conclusion. But first, I provide a detailed description of the most common version of the ritual, the Complete Set, preceded by a brief discussion of the clerics who officiate it. I leave the identity of the vegetarian women and related issues for another occasion.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Local oral accounts and documentary evidence agree that the *Xianghua foshi* and the peculiar tradition of local clerics originated with an influential local Chan monk named Muyuan Heshang 牧原和尚.[4] I have argued elsewhere

[2] *Zhai* literally means 'vegetarian meals' in Chinese Buddhist terminology. It derives from the Chinese Buddhist tradition that hosts and sponsors of Buddhist meritorious rituals would provide participating saṅgha members with vegetarian meals. Consequently, *zhai* has become a substitute name for Buddhist meritorious rituals among the common people.

[3] *Xianghua heshang* is a term now commonly used by scholars of folk Chinese Buddhist and ritual studies. The clerics do not call themselves *Xianghua heshang*. For the local people, they merely address them as *heshang* (monks).

[4] All the clerics I interviewed hold that Muyuan was the inventor of the *Xianghua foshi*. A type of modern local history known as Wenshi 文史 (literature and history) has been published quarterly every year by the official government at the county level since the 1980s. The Wenshi of Meixian, Xingning and other neighbouring counties affirm the account given by the clerics. The clerics also trace their unconventional lifestyle back to Muyuan. The Wenshi is silent on this issue.

that it is probable that Muyuan was a major editor of an existing funeral ritual tradition in the early and mid-seventeenth century (see Yik Fai Tam 2007: 122–6). Local clerics insist on the ancestral status of Muyuan when responding to challenges against what some consider to be scepticism of their unorthodox practices which primarily consist of the funeral ritual services they perform for the local people.

A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF *XIANGHUA FOSHI*

By the early seventeenth century, a folk Buddhist funeral rite existed in the Meixian 梅縣 region and was documented in *Chongzhen xingning xianzhi* 崇禎興寧縣志 (1637).[5] This folk Buddhist ritual was performed by a group of unordained clerics referred to by the compiler and editors of the local history as *Xianghua seng* 鄉花僧 (village and flower monks). The compiler and editors, on the one hand, provided a detailed yet disparaging description of the ritual performed by these *xianghua seng*; on the other hand, they neutrally mention the existence of another group of Buddhist monks and their funeral ritual. They called this other group of monks *su seng* 素僧 (vegetarian/plain monks). More importantly, the pronunciations of the words 'village' and 'incense' in both Mandarin (the official and national language) and the local Hakka dialect are the same. The 'village and flower monks' were hence very likely the direct ancestors of what are now referred to as 'incense and flower monks'. Judging from this historical account, it is safe to assume that in the early decades of the seventeenth century a popular folk Buddhist funeral rite, unaccepted by the Confucian elite, co-existed with a more conventional Buddhist funeral rite in the northeast part of Guangdong province. Given the fact that the funeral is the most important rite of passage for the Chinese, and that ritual traditions normally take a long time to become commonly accepted as the norm in a given locality, it is also safe to assume that the *Xianghua foshi* was already a well-established rite in the Meixian region by that time. Although later local gazetteers from the neighbouring areas did not specifically mention this rite, indirect and scattered information from those documents and the current prevalence of the *Xianghua foshi* and the clerics who perform it in the region, suggest

[5] See *Chongzhen Xingning Xianzhi*, Book 1 'Dizhi 地誌 (geography), Section of 'Fengsu' 風俗 (customs) (1973: 314–15).

the continuous dominance of this funeral rite among the local population dates from the first half of the seventeenth century.[6]

XIANGHUA FOSHI AND *XIANGHUA HESHANG* (THE CLERICS)

To understand the *Xianghua foshi*, a closer examination of the phenomenon of the 'incense and flower clerics' is key. Most of the clerics who are active in the Meizhou region have little formation in Buddhist philosophy and doctrines. They seldom follow the monastic discipline that is normal for the Chinese saṅgha. Many of them are married and have families who live in nearby areas. While many of these clerics are affiliated with temples, not all of them actually live there. Their appearance does not differ significantly from that of other conventional Buddhist monks. The most distinctive external difference between these clerics and regular monks is that the *xianghua heshang* do not have disciplinary marks on their foreheads from the burning of *moxa* at ordination. This distinctive difference signifies that they do not observe the traditional Buddhist precepts and disciplinary codes. The *xianghua heshang* do, however, wear Buddhist robes and shave their heads. Another distinctive aspect of these unordained clerics is that they eat meat. They justify this act by two reasons: first, eating meat is said to have been allowed by Muyuan Heshang who insisted on non-attachment to Buddhist precepts. Second, they hold that the performance of *Xianghua foshi* requires a large amount of physical strength which, they say, makes a strict vegetarian diet impracticable.

The primary religious function of these clerics is to perform the rite of *Xianghua foshi* for the local communities and the participation and performance of this rite is the main source of their income. Most of the temples in the region are small, and have a small number of resident clerics. Many, if not all, of the clerics are actively involved in other kinds of secular activities, such as investments and speculations in the stock market or other financial endeavours.

While the current clerics may be thought of as secularised Buddhist monks to a certain extent, their primary religious function of providing meritorious funeral rites to the community has always been an important role for the ordained Buddhist monk. In China, this kind of ritual specialisation was affirmed and enhanced through governmental reform during the

[6] For other historical accounts about *Xianghua foshi*, see *Chengxiang Xianzhi* 程鄉縣誌, volume 1 (1993: 17); and *Qianlong Jianyin Zhouzhi* 乾隆嘉應州誌, volume 1 (1991: 46). Another detailed account of local funeral rites can be found in *Guangxu Jiayinzhou Zhi* 光緒嘉應州誌, volume 8 (2003, 34–5).

Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The founder of the Ming dynasty, Emperor Taizu 太祖, was himself once a monk before he joined a rebel army driven in part by strong folk Buddhist beliefs. Taizu initiated a series of administrative and policy changes in order to achieve the purposes of exalting, rectifying and controlling the Buddhist saṅgha. One change that proved to have long-reaching effects was the administrative classification of the Buddhist saṅgha communities into three categories, namely Chan 禪 (meditation), Jiang 講 (lecturing) and Jiao 教 (literally 'teaching' but here meaning ritual) with the Jiao sector including the majority of the monks and nuns.[7] The classification signified a division of labour, designated by the imperial government, within the saṅgha community. Chan monks and nuns were required to reside in Chan monasteries. According to this system, their primary religious function was to practise Chan meditation and other forms of cultivation and to seek personal enlightenment. Monks and nuns of the Jiang category were those who belonged to Buddhist schools, such as Tian-tai 天臺 and Jingtu 淨土 (pure land). They were to focus on studying and lecturing on the doctrines of their respective schools. The majority of monks and nuns were relegated to the Jiao category. The Jiao used in the Ming Buddhist classification system did not refer to doctrines or sects generally, but specifically referred to liturgical teachings (*yujia jiao* 瑜伽教).[8] Monks and nuns in this category were to dedicate themselves to providing ritual services for the people. They were the Buddhist ritual experts in Ming society, and this gradually became a part of their self-identity and how others perceived them.[9] The classification was to be a strict one. Monks and nuns of the three types were, in theory, not allowed to intermingle and were forbidden from interacting with the rest of the society without official permission. Although the effectiveness of this administrative classification is doubtful, and may not have exerted much long-term impact on the saṅgha community, it showed, at least, the importance of esoteric tradition and ritual

[7] Ren Yimin (2009: 6). See also Chun-fang Yu (1998: 893–952).

[8] In Chinese Buddhism, *Yujia jiao* was the name given to the esoteric tradition that emphasised the transformative and thaumaturgical functions of Buddhist rites and *mantras*. Although esoteric Buddhism did not exist as a separate school in China after the beginning of the ninth century, its beliefs and practices continued to exist in Chinese Buddhism. The widespread influences of esoteric Buddhist tradition in Chinese Buddhism is especially evident in Buddhist rites. For more details about the *Yujia jiao* and the other two types of classification, see Chun-fang Yu (1998: 906–11).

[9] An insulting term, *yingfu seng* (monks who respond to call) has become popular in Chinese Buddhist circles. It is used mainly by those who practise conventional forms of Buddhist religious cultivation to describe monks and clerics whose primary religious function is performing ritual services for the common people in exchange for material and monetary rewards.

service in Chinese Buddhism. It further shaped how the people's religious needs were met and how they understood ritual Buddhism.

Given this background, it is safe to assume that the predominance of the ritual role of the monk in China today is owed in part to the Ming classification of the saṅgha. Historically, then, the local funeral rite of *Xianghua foshi* probably developed gradually by the monks and nuns charged with liturgical duties during the Ming period, and might have been significantly revised by the monk Muyuan at the end of the Ming dynasty.

The active role of clerics (as well as of the *zhaigus*) in revising the rite can still be witnessed today. Comparison of different copies of the ritual manuscripts used for the *Xianghua foshi* reveals that monks and clerics continuously made adjustments to the structure and contents of the rite. It is actually in this sense that the *Xianghua foshi* rite and the clerics who perform them are two sides of the same coin: the power of folk and local Buddhism in China. Indeed, neither of these phenomena can be fully explored and understood without a parallel probe of the other.

XIANGHUA FOSHI TODAY

Xianghua foshi is the only Buddhist death rite for the Hakka people in Meizhou and its vicinity. This does not suggest that it is popular in all counties and districts in the region. Meizhou is a prefecture-level city and administers one urban district (Meijiang 梅江 district Meizhou city proper), one county-level city (Xingning 興寧) and six counties (Meixian 梅縣, Dabu 大埔, Jiaoling 蕉嶺, Pingyuan 平遠, Wuhua 五華 and Fengshun 豐順). But the rite is the standard death rite mainly in Meizhou City, Meixian, Dabu, Pingyuan and Jiaoling counties. The death rite at Xingning City, Wuhua and Fengshun is predominantly Daoist and civic.

Under the umbrella of the three most common versions of the *Xianghua foshi*, there are several variations. First, it is not uncommon for individual clerics to make minor improvisations according to their own understanding of the ritual, and then to pass on these improvised performance details to their own disciples. Second, many young clerics acquired their ritual knowledge and skills from different masters. Third, there are geographical differences among various localities in the region. The most obvious variation is what has been documented by the scholar of folk ritual musicology and drama Wang Kui 王馗. According to Wang, Bingcun 丙村 – an important town located 25 km from Meizhou City – is the geographical dividing point for the practice of the ritual (Wang Kui 2001: 141). The *Xianghua foshi* conducted in Meizhou

City, and in towns and villages along the upper streams of the Mei River above Bingcun, is different from that conducted in towns and villages along the river below the town. Though Wang does not mention any designation for the different formats, it is clear that he is referring to two different formats for the ritual: the *shangshui pai* 上水派 (the upper-stream branch) and *xiashui pai* 下水派 (the lower-stream branch).

The same version of the *Xianghua foshi* rite, such as the Complete Set, is performed in different vocal and musical tones in these two branches. There are some minor differences in the flow of the rite as well. Finally, the structure of the rite itself is flexible and allows the clerics and the host family to add additional ritual sections in order to satisfy their unique needs. The flexibility of the rite is described well by a slang expression that the cleric informants use repeatedly. They describe the bewildering phenomenon of the rite as '*xianghua, xianghua, feili fala* 香花香花 啡哩啡啦', a Hakka dialectic expression with no equivalent in Chinese written characters, meaning 'bewilderingly chaotic'.

According to my informants, there are 200–300 ritual specialists who can perform the *Xianghua foshi* in Meizhou City and its vicinity. Among them, there are slightly more vegetarian women than clerics, so the number of clerics is around 100 to 130. The number of clerics needed for a given rite depends on the version of the rite required by the host family. Generally speaking, the 'Light at Midnight' and the 'Half-set Vegetarian Version' need five performing members in the troupe. For the 'Complete Set' at least seven are required. The troupe is not necessarily all male or female; it is quite common to have a rite performed by a troupe comprised of both male clerics and vegetarian women. It is normal for them to develop a kind of network or informal team to enhance their communication within and without the rite.

Informants reported that most clerics perform the *Xianghua foshi* service ten to twelve times every month. They also mentioned that there are two peak seasons for the funeral rites: the fifth and twelfth months of the lunar calendar. The demand for *Xianghua foshi* ritual specialists (male clerics and the vegetarian women) can be acute. The usual amount of money needed to hold a 'Complete Set' is around 6,000 *renminbi* 人民幣 (about US$800).

THE RITE OF *XIANGHUA FOSHI*

I shall focus the following description of the *Xianghua foshi* rite on the 'Complete Set' version, since it is the most common and can also provide an

overview of the rite as a whole, as indicated by its title. The 'Complete Set' is also known among the clerics by the title 'One Day and Two Nights'. In fact, it actually covers three calendar days.

It is technically challenging in a short essay to present and discuss a rite which lasts for one day and two evenings. It is also a daunting challenge to encompass the basic structure of this complex rite without becoming lost in details. In general, the various parts of the ritual can be classified into three main categories: structural sections, sections for the deceased and sections for the living. For a more complete overview of the rite, I provide a table of the ritual processes (Table 11.1.) Finally, I present and discuss the nature of individual ritual sections in order to illustrate the function of the ritual as a whole.

The classification of ritual sections

The first category of ritual segments I term the *Structural Sections*. These segments constitute the basic format of the rite, marking it as a Buddhist ritual and, most significantly, making the event meaningful for the local participants. These ritual segments establish the sacred site for the rite, welcome and greet the presiding deities and send them off after the rite is complete. Details of these sections reflect the basic understanding of the participants of how a proper rite should be conducted.

The second type of ritual segment is the *sections for the deceased*. The primary object of the *Xianghua foshi* is to generate religious merit for the dead. The underlying foundation of the rite is the belief that, as Stone suggests, death can be controlled through Buddhist beliefs and corresponding practices (Stone 2005: 57, 60–3). It is believed that, through a proper Buddhist funeral rite, the deceased will benefit either by attending the Longhua hui 龍華會 (dragon-flower assembly), or by achieving a swift and better rebirth.[10] The ritual sections that belong to this type focus on the expression of the belief in merit and the actual procedure of generating it and transferring it to the deceased.

The last type of ritual segment I term *sections for the living*. As many anthropological studies have demonstrated, funeral rites serve the needs of both the dead and the living. *Xianghua foshi* also shows the dual functions of

[10] The belief concerning the dragon-flower assembly is closely related to the Buddhist belief of the future Buddha, Maitreya. It is believed that Maitreya will descend, after the Dharma of Sakyamuni Buddha ends, and teach a pure form of Buddhist teaching, of three assemblies of beings under a dragon flower tree. It is believed that all beings can attain perfect enlightenment in these assemblies.

Table 11.1 *Ritual processes of the* Quanzhai

Day	Time	Section sequence	Structural sections	Sections for the deceased	Sections for the living
1	2:30 pm	1	*Zhaohun* (summoning the soul)		
		2	*Qitan* (setting up the altars)		
		3	*Faguan* (issuing the official document)		
		4		*Muyu* (bathing the soul)	
		5	*Da naobo hua* (striking the cymbals)		
	Dinner				
		6		*Chushen jiuku* (first appeal for relief from suffering)	
		7		*Ershen jiuku* (second appeal for relief from suffering)	
		8		*Sanshen jiuku* (third appeal for relief from suffering)	
	10:00 pm	9	*Angeng* (settling down for the night)		
2	6:00 am	10	*Kaiqi* (starting the rite)		
		11		*Anfan* (positioning the spirit streamer)	
		12	*Jiefo* (welcoming the Buddha)		
		13	*Shanggong* (respectful offerings)		
		14	*Chaocan* (morning greeting)		
		15			*Bai qixing chan* (seven stars rite of repentance
		16		*Shiwang guokan* (inspection by the Ten Enlightened Kings)	
	Lunch				
		17		*Wanchan* (completion of repentance)	

Table 11.1 (*cont.*)

Day	Time	Section sequence	Structural sections	Sections for the deceased	Sections for the living
		18		*Bai Yaoshi* (paying respects to the Medicine Buddha)	
		19			*Zou Yaoshi* (sending off the Medicine Buddha)
	Dinner				
	8:00 pm	20			*Kaiguang* (opening the vision)
		21			*Xingxiang* (walking with incense sticks)
	10:30 pm	22		*Dugu* (rescuing lonely souls)	
		23			*Jiyu chuanhua* (carp crossing with patterns)
		24		*Lienchi* (lotus pond)	
3		25			*Xuepen* (blood basin)
		26			*Mai xuejiu* (selling bloody wine)
		27	*Jiaoqian* (paying money)		
		28	*Shaoqian* (burning money)		
		29		*Guandeng* (extinguishing the lamp)	
		30			*Bai hongfu* (seeking great blessings)
		31	*Songsheng* (sending off the deities)		
		32	*Dunbing* (settling the divine soldiers)		
		33	*Jizi* (Buddhist hymns)		
	4:00 am			End of rite	

serving both target groups. Death, as an existential crisis, does not merely signify the loss of loved ones; it further poses an ultimate challenge to the meaning of human existence, and the meanings derived from its existence. These sections for the living, on the one hand, provide religious and social comfort to the family members of the deceased and, on the other, take advantage of the ritual occasion to lecture about the basic teachings of Buddhism.

It is important to point out that this tri-part classification does not necessarily reflect the understanding of the ritual performers, i.e. the clerics and the vegetarian women. The function and meaning of some sections of the ritual are meaningful for all parties (including deities) involved in the rite. For example, instruction in Buddhist teachings, usually in the form of lyrics and folk songs, in both the sections for the deceased and sections for the living, serve the function of educating all participants of the event, including, but not limited to, both the deceased and the living. Another example is the 'striking cymbals' section. It is designed as a treat and entertainment for the invited deities; however, the entertaining effect is also shared by the living members of the family. In fact, many bystanders from the neighbourhood come to watch and enjoy this section.

Ritual sections (1): structural sections

The *structural sections* are crucial in defining the rite as Buddhist, as a death ritual and as a source of merit. They include the sections 'summoning the soul' 招魂, 'setting up the altars' 起壇, 'issuing the official document' 發關, 'striking the cymbals' 打鐃鈸花, 'settling down for the night' 安更, 'starting the rite' 開啟, 'positioning the spirit streamer' 安幡, 'welcoming the Buddha' 接佛, 'respectful offerings' 上供, 'morning greeting' 朝參, 'sending off the deities' 送神, 'settling the divine soldiers' 頓兵 and 'Buddhist hymns' 偈子.

The backbone of the whole rite, these sections are essential for virtually any Chinese Buddhist funeral rite, with the exception of the section 'summoning the soul'. This section is normally optional, but is crucial when the deceased did not die at home. In such cases, it is necessary for the clerics to call the soul back home where the rite is usually performed. It is believed that the soul can only benefit from the rite when it is present. After the ritual process of summoning, whether the soul has returned or not is determined by divination in a later section termed 'bathing' 沐浴. This section is usually performed at a fork in the road in front of the house.

'Setting up the altars' signifies the beginning of the rite. The religious functions of this section are not confined to the physical establishment of altars, though setting up altars is the most conspicuous activity in this part of the rite. There are three levels of meaning in this section. First, it establishes the main altars for the rite. Officially, there should be seven altars inside and outside of the house; three of these are essential. The most important altar is for the Three Jewels of Buddhism, and figurative representations of the Three Jewels are set up on this altar. The second altar is for the deceased, where paper houses and other offerings are presented. The third is the *guhun tan* 孤魂壇 (Altar of Wandering Souls) outside the house.[11] Offerings are made to satisfy the needs of these spirits. The second level of meaning for this rite is to establish the ritual site 道場 (*daochang*) as a sacred space in which the rite will be performed. Deities, such as the Buddha and Avalokitesvara, are there to oversee the rite, while wandering malevolent spirits are, through this procedure, excluded from the ritual site. The third level of meaning is to officially welcome the Buddha upon his arrival and to invite him to oversee the rite.[12] Once the Buddha is present, the *Xianghua foshi* becomes a legitimate Buddhist rite, and therefore guarantees the generation of religious merit. It is believed that the presence of the Buddha also signifies the arrival of other major and secondary deities. Divine soldiers are deployed to protect the territory so that no trespassing is possible.

'Issuing the official document' is to issue and deliver an official document ordering the deceased's soul to return from the underworld back to his or her home in order to receive the benefits of the ritual. It is commonly believed that part of the soul is taken away by the divine messengers from hell at the moment of death. Moreover, the way between hell and home is guarded by different territorial deities. It is, therefore, crucial for the returning soul to have an official document issued by a legitimate ritual master to pass through the blockades.

The section of 'striking the cymbals' is usually performed after the section of 'bathing', or in the intervals among the three sections of 'appealing for relief from sufferings'. It does not carry an explicit religious meaning if we

[11] The spiritual beings are classified into different types. Gods and ancestors are benevolent, but wandering souls and ghosts are dangerous and vengeful. Therefore, ways and attitudes of providing offerings to different types of spirits should be conducted accordingly. See Wolf (1974).

[12] Although the Buddha statue used in this section is a Sakyamuni Buddha, it actually represents all kinds of buddhas and bodhisattvas in the Mahāyāna tradition. Details of other ritual sections show that many other buddhas are assumed to be present. So, the term Buddha in the *Xianghua foshi* ritual sections should not be taken narrowly as only referring to the historical Buddha.

approach it literally. However, given that in Chinese religious culture one is normally expected to present deities with tea, incense, other offerings and dramatic entertainment performances during ritual events, it is reasonable to assume that this section of 'striking the cymbals' serves the ritual purpose of entertaining the buddhas, bodhisattvas and other deities. This section is so spectacular and attractive that 'striking the cymbals' is a popular alternative name for the *Xianghua foshi*. Indeed, many local people do not realise what *Xianghua foshi* is, but are able to identify the popular Buddhist funeral rite by the name '*da naobo hua*' 打鐃鈸花 (the striking of the cymbals). This is also the best-attended section in the whole ritual process of *Xianghua foshi*. It is a thrilling display of skills in which the clerics must deftly manipulate a pair of large cymbals.

Other than merely providing entertainment to the divine and mundane guests of the rite, this performance relieves to some extent the grief of the living. The section is performed in an open courtyard where the host family, relatives and neighbours gather. While the neighbours express their admiration by applause and vocal praise, the family members express their satisfaction by tossing money to the performing cleric. In whichever way, the satisfaction and relief of the neighbours and the family members can be witnessed on their smiling faces. In this regard, this section can also be classified as a section for the living.

After the 'striking the cymbals' section, the structural framework of the rite is basically established and the focus switches to the soul of the deceased and those ritual sections designated for it. The last structural section of day 1 is 'settling down for the night'. When the ritual sections for the deceased end after the 'third inquiry to save [the deceased's soul] from suffering', the process of *Xianghua foshi* comes to a tentative end. The 'settling down for the night' section serves as a ceremonial way to ask all the buddhas, bodhisattvas and deities to stay for the night and be ready for the rite the next day.

The rite continues in the morning of day 2 at around six o'clock with a series of structural sections. Similar to the 'setting up of the altars' on day 1, 'starting the rite' signifies the beginning of the second day of the ritual process. It starts with another invitation to the Buddha, bodhisattvas and other deities to return to the site.

After all the deities have been invited once again, a section for the deceased commences. However, the deceased is not the primary beneficiary of the rite. Rather, in this section, 'positioning the spirit streamer', the prime targets and beneficiaries are the nearby wandering souls. Three clerics invite those souls to come and share in the merit of the rite, but they are

confined to the Altar of Wandering Souls, and are not invited (or allowed) to enter the house. The whole section is marked by placing a spirit streamer at the Altar of Wandering Souls.

The sections of 'welcoming the Buddha', 'respectful offerings' and 'morning greeting', convey a sense of respect and decorum. The first section, as the title suggests, is to welcome and give thanks to all the buddhas and other deities for their presence in the rite again after the night. The second section is to make offerings to the deities to express gratitude. The third section is for leading the soul of the deceased to greet all the buddhas and other deities in the early morning, and also signifies the readiness of the soul to receive the benefits of the rite.

The sections for the deceased and sections for the living follow, and become the dominant part of the ritual process on day 2. The structural sections reenter the ritual process at the end of the whole rite. There are two sections of 'paying money' and 'burning money' for the deceased. Textual sources from the thirteenth century show that the belief in the Ten Kings was associated with a belief in an individual monetary account in hell. According to this notion, each person has a monetary account in hell from which he or she withdraws funds before birth and during his or her lifetime. But the amount used is merely credit which the individual is required to repay after death (for details, see Teiser 1993: 128). The section 'paying money' is the formal process of repayment; and the section of 'burning money' is the symbolic action of repayment.

Early in the morning of day 3 (approximately 4 o'clock), clerics will accompany the departure of all deities to a fork in the road in front of the house by chanting mantras in the section of 'sending off the deities'. There are different accounts of what kinds of deities are sent off. Some informants report that the clerics send off all the buddhas, bodhisattvas and other deities who attended the rite. Other sources mention that they are sending off all the wandering souls. Participation in this section is restricted. None other than the clerics are allowed to proceed to the fork in the road and observe the rite. Judging from this restricted nature, it is safe to assume that this section is designed to lead away all those wandering souls who gather around the ritual site for benefits, and who may have developed an attachment to the site and the people around. Therefore, the section of 'sending off the deities' serves the purpose of sending off these souls in a polite but determined manner.

The section of 'settling the divine soldiers' cannot be understood literally. It gives thanks to local deities for putting up with the disturbances caused by the rite. When deities who are guests and who have come from other realms

have left, it is time to thank and pay respect to the Longshen 龍神 (dragon spirits), who are the local deities. The Meixian Hakka believe that the most important dragon spirits are the Wufang Longshen 五方龍神 (the Dragon Spirits of Five Directions), stationed at a special place in traditional Hakka buildings. The host family is required to offer rice, chicken, pork, coins and paper-made items to inform these Longshen of the completion of the rite. The entire rite usually ends before 5 o'clock in the morning of day 3.

Ritual sections (2): sections for the deceased

The sections for the deceased are formally started with the section of 'bathing the soul'. However, the section of 'summoning the soul' which is performed (if needed) before the structural sections also belongs to this category. Among the sections for the deceased, the first three sections – 'summoning the soul', 'bathing the soul' and 'offering wine' 把酒 – can be understood as part of the structural sections. While the structural sections are about setting up the macro-environment for the rite (e.g. setting up the ritual site and inviting as well as sending off the divine guests), the first three sections of the sections for the deceased are micro and personal, focusing on preparing the soul to receive the religious merit and the consequent rescue from hell.

In the section of 'bathing the soul', the clerics use divination to determine if the soul has returned. The process of divination will continue until it demonstrates that the soul has returned. Once the soul returns, the clerics chant several verses about the Buddhist views on death and emptiness. It aims to convince the soul of the fact of death, and prepares to receive the divine rescue generated from the following rite. In the section of 'offering wine', the clerics treat the soul with wine and tea for its return. At the same time, the living members of the family will mourn the death of the deceased in its presence.

This is followed by three sections of 'first appeal for relief from suffering' 初伸救苦, 'second appeal for relief from suffering' 二伸救苦 and 'third appeal for relief from suffering' 三伸救苦, and these form part of the major ritual sections in the rite. The structure of these sections is roughly the same, the only difference lies in the major Buddhist deities that the cleric will address to witness the merits of the rite. These three Buddhist deities are Sakyamuni Buddha (in the 'first appeal'), Avalokitesvara (in the 'second appeal') and Ksitigarbha (in the 'third appeal'). The clerics send out an invitation to invite the Kings to descend. Once the Kings are presumed to have arrived, the clerics offer them three rounds of wine and burn paper

Table 11.2 *Titles of Ten Enlightened Kings*

Hall	Title of Enlightened King
1st Hall	King of Qinguang 秦廣王
2nd Hall	King of Chujiang (River Chu) 楚江王
3rd Hall	King of Song 宋帝王
4th Hall	King of Five Officials 五官王
5th Hall	King Yama 閻羅王
6th Hall	King of Bian City 卞城王
7th Hall	King of Mount Tai 泰山王
8th Hall	King of Urban Areas 都市王
9th Hall	King of Equality 平等王
10th Hall	King of Wheel Turning 轉輪王

money to express gratitude for their co-operation.[13] Then, the soul is introduced to the Enlightened Kings of the Ten Halls as the main beneficiary of the rite.[14] After the recitation of a series of polite expressions, the main cleric chants three slightly different prose passages entitled 'Lament for the soul of the deceased' 嘆亡魂 in each section. The didactic theme of the prose is the same, that is to exhort the soul that life is impermanent, and that the soul should therefore relinquish any attachments in this world so that it can subsequently 'rise up to Heaven from death after this evening, and become a permanent participant of the Plenary Assembly of All Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Saints'.[15]

At the end of each of these sections, the main cleric asks the respective presiding buddha/bodhisattva to witness that an official dispatch has been issued so that the soul can travel freely to, and in, the Buddha's paradise.[16]

Depending on external factors, such as weather, time constraints, and the preparation of food, a segment from the structural sections will usually be performed either after the 'offering wine' section or during the interval periods of the sections of 'appeal'. This is the section of 'striking the cymbals' discussed under the structural sections.

[13] It is a disciplinary restriction in Buddhist rites to use wine as part of the offerings to the Buddhist deities. The rite of *Xianghua foshi*, in contrast to this widely accepted disciplinary restriction, does use wine to treat the Ten Kings upon their arrival in the ritual sections of 'appealing for relief from suffering'. Given this, wine is used only for two well-defined targets, the soul of the deceased and the Ten Kings in specific ritual sections. It is not used in those sections, such as 'welcoming the Buddha', when the major Buddhist deities are the main target of offerings.

[14] For more information on the name of the title of the Ten Enlightened Kings, please see Table 11.2.

[15] *Chushen jiuku*, Xianghua Quantao 香花全套, Qixing Si manuscript, p. 17.

[16] *Chushen jiuku*, Xianghua Quantao 香花全套, Qixing Si manuscript, pp. 17, 19, 20–2.

With the completion of the 'third appeal', the ritual process reaches its final stage for day 1. It is followed by the structural section of 'settling down for the night' described above.

In day 2, after the structural sections of 'starting the rite', 'welcoming the Buddha', 'respectful offerings' and 'morning greeting', the ritual process continues with the section of 'performing the seven stars rite of repentance' 拜七星懺 – a section for the living. The subjects of the section are the children of the deceased, discussed in more detail below.

By this stage of the rite, the soul has been ritually purified by the rite of 'bathing' and the clerics have, in day 1, made necessary appeals to relieve the soul from suffering. The soul, with the assistance of the family members, is ready to repay the debt the deceased withdrew from his or her account before birth.[17] The section of 'inspection by the Ten Enlightened Kings' 十王過勘 is the formal ritual process that effects the repayment of the soul's debt. The process is solemn and bureaucratic, centring on a legal document with two identical copies on which the sacrificial items used are listed. Each king is said to approve the content of the document, with the presiding cleric stamping the document with an official seal every time that the names of the Ten Kings are announced.

In the afternoon of day 2, the rite starts with the section of 'completion of repentance' 完懺. It is also classified as a section for the living, and will be discussed later. Unlike the structural sections, which are essential for any performance of the *Xianghua foshi*, many segments of the sections for the deceased are optional, depending on specific circumstances. These include 'paying respect to the Medicine Buddha' 拜藥師, 'lotus pond' 蓮池, 'blood basin' 血盆, 'selling blood wine' 賣血酒 and 'extinguishing the lamp' 關燈. There are two basic criteria employed to determine if these sections should be performed. The first is whether the deceased died of a long-term illness, in which case it is essential to perform the section of 'paying respect to the Medicine Buddha'. If this is not the case, the section can be skipped. The second criterion is the gender of the deceased. 'Extinguishing the lamp' is for men. If the deceased is a woman, the sections of 'lotus pond', 'blood basin' and 'selling bloody wine' are expected.

[17] By the thirteenth century, Chinese people commonly accepted the idea of a purgatory which was divided into ten halls, presided over by ten Enlightened Kings respectively. Stephen Teiser has forcefully demonstrated that the belief of the Ten Kings was the result of successful assimilation of Indian Buddhist beliefs with Chinese ideas. According to Teiser, a tenth-century scriptural source proves that the belief reached a mature form and was probably quite widespread. And, according to sources from the thirteenth century, the belief in the Ten Kings was by that time associated with the belief in individual monetary accounts in hell, from which individuals could withdraw funds during their lifetime, to be repaid after death. See Teiser (1993).

'Paying respects to the Medicine Buddha' is a section to express thanks to the Medicine Buddha. It is believed that long-term treatment of sickness, and the consequential prolonging of the life of the deceased, were owing to the compassion and the blessings of the Medicine Buddha.[18] It is appropriate to express gratitude for the intervention of this buddha. After this, another section follows, 'sending off the Medicine Buddha' 走藥師; this is for the benefit of the living and will be discussed later.

The section of 'rescuing lonely souls' 渡孤 is a dangerous one. Wandering souls are traditionally believed to be malevolent and harmful because they are deprived of proper sacrifices from their families. This is the reason that although these souls can partake of the abundant religious merit derived from the *Xianghua foshi*, they have to be kept out of the house at the Altar of Wandering Souls. These wandering souls, having previously gathered outside of the ritual site, are now allowed to receive religious merit, which will assist them in the journey of rebirth.

'Lotus pond' is a significant section in *Xianghua foshi*. As mentioned earlier, it is an indispensable section for the female deceased. The Buddhist saga of Maudgalyayana rescuing his mother is enacted in the form of ritual dancing. I was told that through the reenactment of the Maudgalyayana story, the soul can be released from the sufferings of hells. However, the logic of the rite suggests that the soul should have been guaranteed salvation in the previous sections. Therefore, it is my suspicion that the emphasis on the story of Maudgalyayana serves the didactic purpose of reinforcing the traditional Confucian virtue of filial piety.[19]

In the case of a male deceased, the section of 'extinguishing the lamp' is essential.[20] However, this section is much less elaborate than the section of the 'lotus pond'. While the 'lotus pond' section is dramatic and full of action, the section of 'extinguishing the lamp' is less energetic and basically consists of the chanting of verses.

[18] Healing has been a central theme in Buddhism since its early stage. There are many scriptural sources of medical healing and spiritual healings in early Buddhist texts. The motif is further elaborated and developed in the Mahāyāna tradition in which the bodhisattvas of healing become a significant part of Buddhist faith and skilful means for the spread of the Dharma. See Birnbaum (1989) for the scriptural foundations of this belief.

[19] The incorporation of Confucian cardinal virtues, such as filial piety, into a Buddhist rite reveals the way Buddhism, as a foreign religion, assimilated into Chinese culture and successfully became an important religious source for Chinese culture.

[20] It is a cultural custom in the lineages of southern China that when a male descendant is born, the family head will light a lamp in their ancestral halls. Although the flame of the lamp will not be kept for the whole life-span of the man, it is a corresponding ceremonial action to extinguish the lamp in his funeral to signify his death.

Ritual sections (3): sections for the living

Although *Xianghua foshi* is a death ritual, and its prime objective is to generate religious merit for the deceased, it also serves the needs of the living members of the deceased's family. These needs are basically two, namely, religious and emotional. The underlying message of these rites is that through the ritual the Buddhist clerics can wield the religious resources and strategies to manage the event of death and guarantee a better rebirth or potentially even ultimate liberation from *samsara*. While the *Xianghua foshi* and other Buddhist funeral ritual traditions form part of those resources and strategies for the deceased, those rites can generate religious merit for the living as well. The ways of generating religious merit for the living in funeral rites include, first, encouraging the living to live a moral life which in karmic terms can guarantee them worldly rewards and Buddhist assistance in all forms; and second, individual participants of the rite can share the religious merit generated by the rite, and will benefit at their death. However, Buddhist funeral rites also provide emotional comfort to the living at a time in which they are experiencing the loss of a loved one. The sections for the living in the *Xianghua foshi* provide the services and functions to meet these needs of the surviving members of the family. They persuade the living to cultivate virtue and morality, promise them various types of Buddhist rewards and salvation, help them to overcome the emotional crises of the death of a loved one and alter their fortunes from the bad luck and pollution associated with death to an auspicious event. These sections, like those for the deceased, provide opportunities for the clerics to promote the worldview and beliefs of Buddhism in the community.

After the section of 'paying respect to the Medicine Buddha' in the afternoon of day 2, it is important to perform the section of 'sending off the Medicine Buddha'. The people believe that, although the Medicine Buddha is gracious and has provided tremendous assistance to the deceased, it is inauspicious for the Medicine Buddha to remain in the household. A prolonged stay of the Medicine Buddha may bring sicknesses to the living. This section is optional if the death is not caused by long-term disease and sickness, however, if that was the cause, then this section is essential. The main purpose of sending off the Medicine Buddha is for the benefit of the living family members.

In the evening of day 2, the section of 'opening the vision 開光 begins after dinner. The purpose of this section is to change the fortunes of the host family: to end the bad luck accompanying the death of a family member, and to bring auspicious energy and good fortune to them. More

importantly, this section marks the beginning of the auspicious part of the *Xianghua foshi*. The clerics ignite two pairs of rolled coarse paper (soaked with bean oil) and juggle them in various patterns. They then take the rolled paper to every corner of the house to symbolise the auspicious energy that fills the entire house. An assistant then tears down all paper couplets on the pillars, and cleans up any vestiges of the funeral rite. The atmosphere of the rite turns from mourning and sadness to joy and relief.

Sections of 'walking with incense sticks' 行香 and 'carp crossing with patterns' 鯽魚穿花 are similar in nature, but significantly different in the way they are performed. A section for the deceased, 'rescuing lonely souls' is situated between these sections. The section of 'walking with incense sticks' actually is not related to incense and walking. It is a small-scale version of the 'striking the cymbals' section but the performance is shorter and less exciting. The section of 'carp crossing with patterns' is aimed at creating joyful feelings and a relaxed atmosphere. The family members, by forming a line behind the clerics, need to follow the pace and pattern of their walking (and at times even running). The clerics assume various paces in their performance and intentionally bump into the family members. It is all great fun and usually generates a general good feeling among the living.

The sections of 'blood basin' and 'selling bloody wine' are conditional and optional. Like the section of 'lotus pond', these two sections are performed if the deceased is female. Among the two sections, the 'blood basin' can be repeated in different parts of the ritual process. As a normal practice, the clerics perform the section of 'blood basin' by reciting the *Blood Basin Scripture* twice within the section of 'seven stars rite of repentance', and an additional section of 'blood basin' after the section of 'lotus pond'. In all these occasions, the living, mainly the children, their spouses and their children, lament the sufferings of the deceased as a mother, and express regrets for not being able to repay the gracious sacrifices made by their mother. The section of 'selling bloody wine' is an optional extension of the section of the 'blood basin'. Both sections are a ritual, but concrete, expression of their filial virtues and mourning.

The last section for the living is 'seeking great blessings' 拜鴻福. This section did not originally belong to the funeral rite, but it is still a separate rite for seeking blessings in the Meizhou region. It is now incorporated into the *Xianghua foshi* as a concluding section for the benefit of the living. It enhances the function of the rite in generating religious merit.

After the section of 'seeking great blessings', the structural sections of 'sending off the deities' and 'settling the divine soldiers' follow and conclude the entire ritual. With a short chanting of 'Buddhist hymns' 偈子, the

Complete Set of Vegetarian Version of the *Xianghua foshi* comes to a conclusion at approximately 4 o'clock in the early morning of day 3.

CONCLUSION

Owing to its inextricable relationship with the clerics who do not follow the monastic precepts, its syncretic features (i.e. inviting low-ranking Daoist deities and local deities), and accommodation of local customs and beliefs (i.e. accepting the *fengshui* god – the Dragon Gods), critics hold that *Xianghua foshi* is not an orthodox Buddhist funeral rite. Indeed, the question of how to access normative Buddhist funeral rites remains unanswered in the study of Chinese Buddhism up to the present. Even though a more widespread form of the Chinese Buddhist funeral rite does exist, the issue of what is normative and conventional still needs to be closely examined within local contexts. Scholars of Chinese culture and religions do not fail to realise that local customs vary widely even among neighbouring villages and towns. In this case, *Xianghua foshi* can not be called *the* Hakka funeral rite. It prevails only in certain areas of the Meizhou City vicinity and not for the whole Hakka region. Indeed, Hakka in Xingning City generally do not practise Buddhist funeral rites, and Hakka in the neighbouring Jiangxi and Fujian provinces have local forms of Buddhist funeral rites. A full assessment of the question of normative Chinese Buddhist funeral rites may only be possible after detailed studies of local ritual traditions like *Xianghua foshi* have been carried out. Yet even if such studies are done, I doubt any definitive answer on what constitutes a normative Buddhist death ritual can be given with any precision. In the end, defining a 'standard' Chinese Buddhist ritual is not a particularly useful project. It is much more interesting and revealing to examine how Buddhist elements are employed in death rituals for a particular community.

On a more local level, we may ask the question of whether or not the *Xianghua foshi* is a Buddhist rite at all. Given the material presented here, I think we can safely say that it is. All major presiding deities of the rite are Buddhist. The rite employs the recitation of significant Buddhist scriptures and mantras and, more importantly, repeatedly proclaims basic Buddhist ideas such as emptiness and impermanence. From my perspective, the accommodation of non-Buddhist deities and local customs in the *Xianghua foshi* does not change the basic religious identity of the rite. Yet, the incorporation of non-Buddhist elements and non-conventional traditional Chinese funeral practices (i.e. ritual dancing and singing) reveal the flexibility and skilfulness of Buddhism in its interactions with local cultures.

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