Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society: Pollution, Performance, and Social Hierarchy

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Ab-bak [honorific uncle], who are those scuffy outsiders?
Not so loud! Don’t speak to them and don’t go near them. They are [voice in a whisper] ng jong lo. They always come with the coffin. Such men are bad luck and their touch is very filthy.—Elder of the Man lineage to J. L. W. during a funeral in the village of San Tin, 1969.

Such was my introduction to the subject of funeral specialists in Cantonese rural society. From the moment these men entered the village it was obvious that something extraordinary was happening. Doors and windows were clapped shut as they walked through the narrow lanes, mothers scrambled to remove children from their paths, no one spoke with them, and—most noticeably—heads were turned to avoid their glance. Although I had lived in the community for several months, I had as yet seen nothing even approaching this kind of behavior. “Those who come with the coffin” were treated like lepers—or worse. Later, when I began to probe more deeply into Cantonese mortuary ritual, it became apparent why these men were social pariahs: They earn their living by handling corpses, digging graves, and carrying coffins. Villagers believe that such people are permanently contaminated by constant exposure to the corrupting influences of death. Accordingly, any form of social exchange with them (physical, verbal, or visual) is to be avoided lest the pollution of death be transmitted to the unwary.

This chapter is divided into two major parts. The first, and longest, is primarily ethnographic in that it explores the social backgrounds and ritual roles of funeral specialists who were observed at work in two Cantonese villages. The second part attempts to draw some general conclusions about the nature of funerary ritual and its relation to notions of social order in Chinese society.

The ethnographic evidence suggests that, among the Cantonese, there is a hierarchy of specialists ranked according to relative exposure to the pollution of death. This hierarchy also reflects the standards of skill, training, and literacy required to carry out ritual tasks. Geomancers, whose work demands a high level of skill and literacy (combined with a total avoidance of
polluting activities), rank highest. Next are the priests who learn their trade through years of apprenticeship; they must also be minimally literate to perform various mortuary rites. Ranking below the priests are a number of (usually illiterate) specialists whose ritual tasks do not require a great deal of skill or training: pipers, musicians, nuns, and general helpers. These middle-ranking personnel regularly perform at funerals and, hence, are deemed to be polluted by their activities, but they are careful to avoid physical contact with the corpse. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the corpse handlers described in the opening passages. Their tasks involve washing, dressing, and arranging the corpse; they are also expected to carry the coffin, dig the grave, and dispose of items most directly associated with death (bedding, clothing, bandages, etc.). This work is considered to be so polluting it sets the corpse handlers apart from all other ritual specialists. They are, quite literally, beyond the pale of normal human interchange.

Readers familiar with the Indianist literature will notice some interesting parallels between the Hindu and the Chinese conceptions of pollution and social hierarchy. Both societies have devised elaborate systems of funerary ritual that require the services of paid professionals; both have highly developed notions of death pollution and its effects on human beings. There are, of course, important differences between Chinese and Hindu ideas regarding the transmission of pollution and the social reproduction of stigma. These differences will be explored in the second part of the chapter. At this point, however, it is important to note that China is by no means unique in the creation of a complex occupational hierarchy based on notions of pollution.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Setting and Background

This study draws primarily on field research carried out in Yuen Long district, Hong Kong New Territories. The author lived in two Cantonese villages, San Tin and Ha Tsuen, where he witnessed sixteen funerals and many other rites associated with death during twenty-nine months of fieldwork (1969–1970, 1977–1978). These villages are single-lineage settlements inhabited by the Man and Teng lineages respectively; San Tin has been controlled by the Man for approximately four hundred years, and the Teng have dominated Ha Tsuen for over six hundred years. Residents of both villages speak a subdialect of Pao-an Cantonese, known locally as wei-t'ou-hua, and share the same basic cultural system. There are but minor differences between the conduct of funeral rituals in the two villages. Since the 1920s San Tin and Ha Tsuen have been part of the “marketing community” focused on the market town of Yuen Long. Many of the funeral specialists discussed in this chapter reside in Yuen Long and service approximately fifty Cantonese villages in the surrounding hinterland. This concentration of specialists contributes to the homogeneity of ritual in the area under study.

Cantonese villagers draw an unambiguous distinction between professional and nonprofessional ritual specialists. Anyone who receives payment, in cash or in kind, for information or services associated with funerary ritual is deemed to be a professional and is treated accordingly. In the villages I have studied there are many people (mostly widows) who are well versed in the intricacies of mortuary rites. They are regularly consulted by villagers but do not accept payment; were they to do so, their status would change and they could no longer function as ordinary members of the community. The designation of professional does not imply full-time employment. In fact, some categories of specialists (e.g., funeral pipers) are hard pressed to make a living by ritual activities and supplement their income in other ways. It is not, therefore, the amount of time invested or the percentage of income earned that matters when determining who is and who is not a professional funeral specialist—from the villagers’ point of view it is the fact of payment alone that matters. Nonprofessionals are not ranked in the hierarchy of specialists, and being ordinary villagers, they are not thought to be permanently affected by death pollution.

The division between paid (professional) and unpaid (nonprofessional) funeral specialists is reflected in the everyday discourse of villagers. In the jargon of social anthropology this can be called an emic distinction; etic distinctions, by contrast, are devised by outside observers and are not part of the conscious conceptual apparatus of the people involved. For instance, I find it useful to draw an etic distinction between specialists who provide goods, services, and information (e.g., geomancers, coffin makers, producers of ritual paraphernalia, exhumers) and those who perform ritual services at the actual funeral (e.g., priests, nuns, musicians, corpse handlers). This division is implicit in my informants’ conversations, but it is not concretized in marked linguistic pairing. As we shall see, however, important features of the Chinese ritual system are revealed by distinguishing between performers of rituals and providers of goods and services.


Rites associated with death and mourning are subsumed under the general emic category of "white affairs" (pai-shih), and all who earn income, directly or indirectly, from mortuary rites are associated with that ritual domain. This is contrasted with another emic category referred to as "red affairs" (hung-shih), relating primarily to the rites of marriage. In the local symbolic repertoire, white is the color of death and mourning; red is the color associated with life and luck. Villagers make much of this contrast in everyday conversations: "Never mix red and white affairs." Although the two ritual domains are conceptualized as a matched pair, and receive more or less equal emphasis in monetary outlay, only white affairs are presided over by paid professionals. As is outlined below, Cantonese funerals cannot even proceed without the services of a trained priest and other specialists. The rites associated with red affairs, on the other hand, are usually conducted without the intervention of a paid ritual specialist. It is also significant that, among rural Cantonese, performers of ritual services are not interchangeable: funeral priests have nothing whatsoever to do with marriage rites, nor do nuns or funeral pipers (a different piper must be found for weddings). The only exception to this implicit rule prohibiting specialists from engaging in red and white activities is the resident geomancer who often doubles as a fortuneteller for marriages and a locator of auspicious tombs. But, as we shall see, the geomancer's role is unique. It is difficult to categorize him as red or white, given that he is not involved in the actual performance of either set of rites and remains aloof from all other ritual specialists.

Death Pollution

Most Cantonese villagers have a morbid fear of anything associated with death, and accordingly they do not relish the prospects of attending funerals—even those of friends or close kin. As one elder put it to me: "No one likes to be seen at funerals. It is bad luck and can bring illness." Nonetheless, as is outlined below, certain members of the community (mostly women) are obligated to attend, and these people play an important role in the ritual. The fear of funerals is related to notions of death pollution, described by my informants as "killing airs" (sha-ch'i, or saat hei in Cantonese). This subject has already been explored in an earlier essay; space does not permit a full discussion here. Briefly summarized, "killing airs" are thought to be released at the moment of death, like "an invisible cloud," to quote one villager. The airs emanating from the corpse contaminate everything and everybody in the immediate vicinity. This pollution is transmitted to humans by physical proximity, secondary contact, and—most dangerously—by touching the corpse. In the present study and in earlier writings I have chosen to translate saat hei as "death pollution," although the English term does not capture the full range and subtlety of the Cantonese concept.

Village men are extremely careful to avoid touching the corpse because physical contact is thought to affect adversely their yang, or male, essence. As a local priest explained to me: "After a man touches seven corpses, he can no longer be made clean again." This is why professional corpse handlers are treated with such disdain. It is assumed that they have touched so many corpses that their yang essence has long since dissipated. When this happens, according to the priest, killing airs can no longer be resisted, and the living body will be consumed with leprosy, syphilis, and other corrupting diseases. At each funeral only one male villager, the chief mourner, is required to touch the corpse. More will be said about this ritual role in the following section. Suffice it to note here that Cantonese males only take on this dangerous role to fulfill their material obligation, as inheritors, to the deceased. Women are not affected in the same way, given that they are—in villagers' eyes—primarily of yin (female) essence. Accordingly, women can handle corpses and attend funerals without the constant anxiety that such actions will permanently corrupt the vital element of their being. This does not mean that women are less afraid of death than their male counterparts, but it does help explain why women, rather than men, are more likely to attend funerals as representatives of their families.

Death pollution, it is important to note, emanates from the decaying flesh of humans, not from the bones. The object of Cantonese mortuary rites is to progress smoothly and efficiently to the stage when it is possible to exhume the bones and cleanse them of the last, corrupting remnants of flesh. The secondary burial system of south China and the manipulation of flesh-free bones is well documented in the ethnographic literature. Of relevance here is the Cantonese equation between rotting flesh and the corrupting influences of death pollution. In the local view, flesh is inherited from the mother and is thereby of the yin essence. Bones, on the other hand, are passed in the patriline and, when manipulated properly, are primarily yang.

4. Matchmakers and fortunetellers, of course, are usually paid, but they are not involved in the performance of marriage rites. Furthermore, unpaid amateurs can take their place; specialists do not play a role in the formal structure of marriage rites.


The preservation of bones and the disappearance of flesh reflects the Cantonese conception of the patrilineage as a corporate group of males that exists through time, irrespective of death. The realm of the ancestors is thus exclusively male, or yang, in the total absence of women, or the female essence. The androcentric ideology of the ancestral cult is such that Cantonese men seek to create in thought what they cannot attain in life, namely a pure state of maleness—without sex, affinity, or the messy, corrupting necessities of biological reproduction.

Killing airs are in part conceived of as the vital biological forces that are released, untamed and dangerous, at death, as is discussed elsewhere. In order for the spirit of the deceased to be properly settled, these vital forces must be absorbed back into the flesh of living people. All who attend funerals perform a series of acts whereby they voluntarily take upon themselves a portion of death pollution, in varying degrees depending upon relationship to the deceased. In marked contrast to other Cantonese rituals, there are no idle bystanders at funerals. Everyone present is expected to be an active participant who performs an important service for the dead.

Thus, in the local view, the living must assist the deceased to overcome the effects of his or her own death. The chief mourner and female members of the immediate family take upon themselves the major burden of pollution; neighbors and others who are obligated to attend absorb a minor portion carefully prescribed in ritual (see note 9). However, kin and neighbors—alone—cannot absorb all of the killing airs released at death. The full dissipation of death pollution requires that someone actually accept money for taking on this burden. My informants could not, or would not, be more explicit, but it is clear that an exchange of cash is essential for the final transfer of pollution from one body to another. Payment, of course, is only made to professionals who earn their living from white affairs.

In the eyes of the villagers, therefore, the money paid to funeral specialists is of a different order than the currency used in everyday transactions. Money reserved for funeral expenses is often drawn from a bank (in new notes) on the day of burial; the chief mourner always carries it in a separate pocket, where it will not be confused with other notes. Cantonese villagers thus manage to transform a generalized medium of exchange into a highly charged symbol of their own preoccupation with death pollution. The funeral specialists, for their part, treat this money with exaggerated nonchalance, ostentatiously counting the notes in full view of all who care to watch (an inversion of normal behavior in Cantonese society). In so doing the specialists signal that they do not accept the villagers’ interpretation of the exchange as a payment for taking on the corrupting influences of death. To villagers the money is a powerful embodiment of pollution; to the specialists it represents payment for services rendered.

The acceptance of contaminated cash is one reason why funeral specialists are perceived as a dangerous category of people. Contrary to the normal order of things, specialists make their living from white affairs, and at least in the eyes of villagers, they thrive on the sorrow and misfortune of others. The fact that funeral specialists use tainted money to buy the rice that sustains them was brought up several times by my informants. In constructing a mental equation that begins with death pollution and ends with eating, villagers are making a powerful statement: Those who live from death must eat from death.

Community Participation: The Role of Nonprofessionals

Although paid professionals are essential for the performance of Cantonese funerals, neighbors and kin also play an important role in the ritual. Members of the deceased’s immediate family perform a series of acts and wear special mourning garb that set them apart from other villagers. The oldest surviving son or designated male heir assumes the role of chief mourner (ch’eng-chi, “heir” or “inheritor”). It is this man who is responsible for paying the specialists and for ensuring that the rites are performed to the satisfaction of the community. Important as he may be, however, the chief mourner cannot carry out his many ritual tasks without a continuous stream of orders from the priest (“Turn left, bow three times, stand up.” “No, no! You are going the wrong way. Start again”). Male villagers, as a general rule, know very little about the conduct of funerary ritual; and even if they learn by experience, it is not possible to proceed without professional assistance. The structure of Cantonese funeral rites is such that the chief mourner performs only those acts dictated by the presiding priest. It is always the priest who directs the flow of events, not the chief mourner.

9. The acts of accepting death pollution include receiving coins and/or bits of white yarn that have been exposed to the coffin, and the offering of incense and wine to the spirit of the deceased. See ibid., pp. 162–163.
10. This notion of pollution transmission is similar to the Hindu system described by Jonathan Parry, “Ghosts, Greed and Sin: The Occupational Identity of the Benares Funeral Priestess,” Man n.s. 15 (1980): 88–111.
11. A clarification is necessary here: As was mentioned above (see note 9), one method of distributing pollution is to hand out coins at the funeral. These coins are spent or given away as soon as possible; they are conceived of more as a burden than a payment. In contrast, professionals accept large amounts of cash for their services.

that they should know more than village men about funerary ritual. Every hamlet has one or two women—usually widows—who are particularly knowledgeable of white affairs. These women are consulted about proper household procedure (mourning garb, precautions, social conduct, etc.) whenever a death occurs in their hamlet. They also serve as unofficial guardians of the community’s well-being, watching carefully to make certain the rites are performed according to established custom. When men return from the grave, for instance, these guardians always station themselves outside the gates of their hamlet to ensure that everyone washes before entering (women do not accompany the coffin to the grave—another element in the sexual division of ritual labor). During the funeral itself the hamlet guardians are always present, serving a dual role as household representatives and observers of the ritual. Although the priests perceive them as nuisances, ordinary villagers rely on these older women for advice during the period immediately following a death. Many of the ritual actions that occur inside the home of the deceased must be performed without delay, and it often takes the priest an hour or more to appear on the scene. Indebted as they may be to these knowledgeable women, villagers are careful not to draw attention to their ritual skills. To do so would be to blur the distinction between specialist and ordinary villager.

Funeral Priests: Institutionalized Marginality

Funeral priests are referred to in colloquial Cantonese as nàhm mòuh lo, an untranslatable term of uncertain origins. Nàhm mòuh lo has a slight pejorative connotation, given that the Cantonese suffix lo (usually translated as “fellow”) is also used for corpse handlers (ng jông lo) and other unsavory occupations.

18. Women do not join the procession to the grave, for two (emic) reasons, according to male informants: (1) They might be so distraught that they would do serious harm to themselves, and (2) crying and wailing at the grave would upset the spirit prior to burial, a critical juncture in the ritual sequence when the spirit must be soothed and settled.

19. It proved difficult to interview these women about funeral ritual, and after some months it dawned on me that I was probably doing them a disservice by drawing attention to their special skills. They did not, in other words, openly discuss this aspect of their lives with anyone. This raises the interesting question of how these hamlet guardians pass on their knowledge to younger women. Funeral laments and ritual duties were taught in “maidens’ houses” (C neub jai nguk) where many girls lived prior to marriage, but the knowledge required of hamlet guardians goes beyond this basic level of instruction. In the absence of informant testimony, I am left to speculate that these women are self-taught and that they picked up their skills during years of observation and participation.

20. Villagers often argue that nàhm mòuh lo has onomatopoetic origins, deriving from the priests’ low, monotonous chants (which sound, to most observers, like meaningless droning: “nàhm mòuh, nàhm mòuh, . . .”). However, there is also indirect evidence that this colloquial term has textual origins, deriving perhaps from the Buddhist incantation nam wu that appears in many ritual contexts. If there is a textual connection, it no longer has any meaning to ordinary Cantonese villagers.
characters (e.g., C ngok lo, “tough guy”; C gwai lo, “foreigner” [lit. “ghost fellow”]). It is significant in this context that geomancers are called feng-shui hsien-sheng ("mister geomancer"), a title reflecting their high status in the community. Understandably, priests are not always comfortable with the colloquial term naeh mouh lo, and many try to invent other, more flattering titles for themselves (such as C naeh mouh sin-sang [hsien-sheng]). Villagers uniformly ignore these innovations and continue using the traditional form, both as a referent and as a term of address. This linguistic confrontation highlights the ambiguous position of the priest in society: Villagers depend upon him during times of crisis, but during happier times his very presence is an unfortunate reminder of death.

The social position of the funeral priest is somewhat akin to that of undertaker in American small towns. They may reside in the community but they are not really of the community. Like the American mortician, Cantonese funeral priests are set apart by the nature of their work, and their neighbors—essentially a captive clientele—are never completely comfortable in their presence. Most of the priests I encountered during my research were married and had raised families in the communities they served. The priests themselves often affect an aloof demeanor, but their wives are careful to maintain good relations with neighbors and fellow villagers. The wives of priests also assume the primary responsibility of fulfilling their households’ ritual and social obligations.

Priests are acutely aware that their ambiguous position in society stems, in part, from their constant exposure to death pollution. Accordingly, they make every effort to avoid direct contact with the corpse or with the coffin—and they do so in a public manner for all to see. Even indirect contact is avoided if at all possible. For instance, the priest does not accept coins or bits of white cord distributed to household representatives and mourners (such objects are thought to carry pollution; see note 9). Furthermore, unlike other members of the community, the priest does not wear white during the ritual. Instead, his funeral wardrobe consists of red and yellow silk robes decorated with auspicious trigrams; these colors and symbols have, in the local view, prophylactic powers that protect the wearer from the ill effects of death. At two points in the ritual the priest is required to strike the coffin with a pair of scissors, announcing its imminent departure from the village. These ritual acts are the only instances when the priest comes into physical contact with the coffin, and significantly, he is always careful to protect himself by wrapping the scissors in red yarn. In addition, the priest never accompanies the coffin to the grave, even though all other male participants normally join the procession (sung-pin). Given that his services are not needed at the grave, there is no reason for the priest to expose himself to further influences of pollution during the burial.

Cantonese funeral priests learn their trade primarily through long years of apprenticeship, and few have had more than five years of formal education, usually in village primary schools. They are, in other words, only slightly better educated than the average village male, which means that they can prepare ritual forms (paper tablets, memorials to be burned at funerals, etc.), but they have difficulty reading books and esoteric texts. Texts are sometimes used as part of the ritual repertoire (see next section), even though none of the priests, of my acquaintance at least, could actually decipher or interpret more than a few lines per page. Public “readings” from the texts consisted primarily of long chants memorized during apprenticeship.

San Tin’s priest was trained by a master (shih-fu) who operated in the nearby market town of Sham Chun [Shen-chun]. In several years of apprenticeship he learned chanting (see below), ritual dancing, mime, and paper crafts. As a member of the Man lineage, he had a virtual monopoly over funerals in San Tin until his death in the mid-1970s. The resident priest in Ha Tsuen, by contrast, was not a member of the Teng lineage; he belonged to a minor line of villagers who bear a different surname and live on the fringe of the community. By their own accounts, the Wang (a pseudonym) settled in Ha Tsuen eight or nine generations ago. They


22. Not all naeh mouh lo are residents of the villages they serve; some are organized into companies and operate out of the major market towns. When Ha Tsuen celebrated its decennial chiao (rite of purification and expiation) in 1974, the management committee hired six naeh mouh lo from another part of the New Territories to conduct the five-day ritual. Ha Tsuen’s resident priest played no role in the organization or direction of this ritual, although, as a member of the community, he was involved as an ordinary participant.


25. In Rawski’s terms, the local priests were “semi-literates” who were far from the “threshold of elite education”; see Evelyn Rawski, Education and Popular Literacy in Ch’ing China (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), pp. 2–4.


27. One of the esoteric skills priests must master is “dancing” (liao-woo), a series of precise steps tracing out trigrams (“to settle the spirit of the dead,” according to San Tin’s priest). Priests also learn to mime the supernatural beings encountered by the spirit during its journey through the underworld. Ha Tsuen’s priest was particularly adept at miming the Monkey God (which he performed during a special sacrifice to settle the spirit of a suicide victim in 1978). Most village priests also construct the elaborate paper objects (houses, servants, autos, airplanes, etc.) burned during the funeral sequence.
attached themselves to the Teng lineage as subordinate clients, providing
ritual services that local people were hesitant to undertake. Every generation
since their arrival in Ha Tsuen, one or more Wang males have served as Ha
Tsuen’s nahm mouth lo. In addition, Wang daughters have monopolized the
role of community shaman, (C) mahm maib poh (lit. “ask rice woman”)—
mediums who specialize in interviewing the spirits of the dead.28 Ha
Tsuen’s current priest learned his skills directly from his grandfather; his
immediate predecessor was a paternal uncle (it is not clear at this writing
whether a new generation of priests and shamans is being trained among the
five households of Wang who live in Ha Tsuen). The Teng believe that the
Wang are endowed with occult powers, including the ability to extract, (C)
ing, small sums of money from the pockets of unsuspecting villagers who
may be miles away. Such stories reinforce the marginality of the Wang and
draw attention to the fact that they earn their living from the misfortune of
others.

The Priest as Choreographer and Cantor

In funeral matters there should be regular progress, no retrogressive
movement.—From the Li chi.

In response to my question regarding the most important aspect of his
calling, Ha Tsuen’s resident priest responded with something very close to
the ancient maxim from the Li chi:

During a funeral it is my job to make sure everything keeps going forward and
that nothing stops. Everyone has to be told what to do, quickly, or there will
be trouble. The worst thing that can happen is for a funeral to start but not be
finished properly.

This, in a nutshell, is the priest’s own vision of his role. He must instruct
his clients on proper procedure and direct the action in such a manner that
the ritual is not interrupted. At nearly every funeral I attended villagers
expressed deep concern that the rites be performed efficiently and that the
burial be accomplished before sundown.29 Put in our own cultural terms,
the priest resembles a choreographer. He is responsible for directing a com-
plicated series of movements and countermovements, all of which must be
performed in a regularized sequence. It is by no means an easy task to con-
trast the flow of events when many of the key participants are complete
novices (i.e., male mourners and teenagers who have little or no experience
of funerals).

In reading the anthropological literature on China, it is easy to gain
the impression that ritual performances always proceed with stereotypic
efficiency and that the people involved know exactly what to do. The illu-
ion of perfection is created by abstracting a generalized series of move-
ments from a number of actual performances. This method of analysis is
essential if one’s aim is to comprehend the structure of rituals, but it also
imparts the false impression that participants behave more like automatons
than like people.

The reality of a Cantonese funeral is quite different—some might say
shockingly different—from the standard ethnographic accounts: The over-
riding impression is one of confusion, indecision, and subdued panic. The
mourners are often transfixed with fear, incapable in some cases of rational
thought or coordinated movement. Fear of the corpse, rather than grief, is
the dominant emotion displayed at Cantonese funerals.30 In order to main-
tain control over what can easily deteriorate into a chaotic situation, the
priest must be very assertive; he may shout at the participants and push
them if they lag behind (on one occasion the priest slapped a dazed mourner
who was slow to follow his instructions). Women are generally less prob-
lematic, given that they often appear as household representatives and know
more or less what is expected of them. Men and children, on the other hand,
must be nudged, pushed, and cajoled into performing the intricate mane-
vers that constitute an essential feature of funerary ritual. To further compi-
icate matters for the priest, one or two older women (the hamlet guardians
mentioned earlier) usually stand on the sidelines shouting advice and dis-
sent. Not surprisingly, when the funeral is over the priest is often so thor-
oughly exhausted that he returns home to sleep for a few hours.

Besides choreography, priests must also learn the esoteric art of chanting.
San Tin’s priest spent (according to his own testimony) many years memo-
izing various chants based on long passages from Taoist texts. When
asked to identify their religious affiliation, all of the priests I encountered
during my research responded that they were Taoist (tao-chiao). However,
other than declaring a link to Taoism—in opposition to Buddhism and Confucianism—they refused to elaborate, saying only that it is their duty to deal with deities (shen) and ghosts (kuei). All attempts to relate these local priests to a regional, provincial, or national-level hierarchy of religious organizations (monastic orders, schools, priestly lines) failed; furthermore, none of the priests I spoke with could name the texts that they had studied during apprenticeship.

Chanting, like proper choreography, is an integral part of the funeral ritual, and it can only be performed by a nahm mouth lo. The chants are delivered in a low monotone that villagers refer to as yin (“humming” or “chanting”). The priests have their own specialized vocabulary and distinguish between ch'ang (“singing”) and chi-wen (“sacrificial litanies”). “Singing” is aimed at placating or soothing the spirit of the deceased. “Sacrificial litanies,” on the other hand, are special chants deriving from sacred texts (mentioned above) and performed without direct reference to the deceased. One priest observed that chi-wen “frighten away ghosts and awaken the gods,” but he could not, or would not, be more specific. Villagers confessed to me on numerous occasions that they could not comprehend a single word of the chanting. The priests, for their part, have a ready explanation: Only the dead are capable of understanding the language of the funeral chants.

Chanting is one of the esoteric skills by which priests maintain a monopoly over funeral ritual, and understandably, they do not openly share the secrets of their trade with clients or inquisitive outsiders. Most villagers accept funeral chanting as a necessary if incomprehensible part of the ritual and do not inquire into its meaning or significance. Not everyone, however, is impressed by the mystique of chanting. One local wit observed during a funeral in the late 1970s: “For all we know, the old crook could be calling out the names of the village dogs, but we would still have to pay him.” More will be said about belief, skepticism, and the power of ritual, in the conclusion. Suffice it to note here that even our village cynic, who suspects the local priest of being a fraud, did not hesitate to perform under the direction of that same priest when the occasion called for it.

Music and Musicians: Keeping Spirit and Corpse Together

Piping, like chanting and proper choreography, is part of the formal structure of Cantonese funerary ritual. Mourners, in other words, have no option but to pay for the services of at least one piper—although it is common to see other musicians performing at funerals as well. The pipe is called a di da in colloquial Cantonese, or la-pa in Mandarin;31 made of brass, it has a wide bell and a reed mouthpiece. The di da produces a high-pitched, lyrical sound closely akin to that of the oboe or shawm. The message conveyed by a funeral pipe is unmistakable, and all who hear it are alerted that the dangers of death pollution are nearby. Nothing clears the village paths quicker than the sound of an approaching di da.

According to San Tin’s priest, the piping attracts the spirit of the deceased, making certain that it does not wander away or get lost in the confusion following death. At several points during the sequence of rites the corpse must be moved from one ritual arena to another (e.g., from the house to a public plaza and, later, from the village to the grave). Piping is especially critical during these transitional states because, as the priest explained, the spirit is easily disoriented by physical movement and may lose contact with the corpse. If this should happen, it would be necessary to delay the funeral (a very inauspicious development) until the spirit is retrieved. The sounds of the di da usher the deceased—spirit and corpse together—through the entire sequence of rites, from the moment of death (if possible) to the burial.

The pipers themselves are usually outsiders (wai-lai-jen, i.e., not members of the local lineage) who live alone in isolated shacks on the fringe of the larger villages. Those I encountered during my research were elderly opium addicts; other than piping, they supported themselves by running errands for the local priest and by scavenging. Pipers are so closely associated with death that villagers ostracize them and exclude them from community activities. They are hired on an ad hoc basis by priests who also provide the instrument and the reeds. As might be expected, playing a funeral pipe does not require a great deal of skill; it is the sound of the instrument that matters, not the virtuosity of the performance. The appropriate range of notes can be learned in one or two afternoons of practice.

Piping is not the only form of music (or sound?) one hears at Cantonese funerals. The priest accompanies himself with small percussion instruments (cymbals, gongs, drums) during his chanting sessions. Percussion, in fact, is used by the priest to announce the most critical transitions in the ritual sequence (e.g., striking the coffin with scissors or beating a gong to summon household representatives). These acts are all part of the formal structure of rites.32

A recent innovation in funeral music, introduced in the 1930s, according to my informants, is the Western-style brass band. Every major coffin shop in the New Territories now has its own marching band for hire, at reduced prices for clients who buy coffins. Band members (all male) dress in white uniforms and wear white, military-style caps; they play tubas, trumpets,

31. I am grateful to Bell Yung and J. Lawrence Witzleben, of the University of Pittsburgh's Music Department, for help in identifying this instrument. The classical term for the Cantonese funeral pipe, according to Yung, is (Mandarin) so-no.

trombones, clarinet, saxophones, cymbals, and bass drums. The band I am most familiar with appeared at several San Tin funerals (1969–1970) and always played the same two tunes ("Onward Christian Soldiers" and "Rock of Ages"). The band escorts the chief mourner on his funeral rounds and performs during transitions in the ritual, always at the priest's direction. The piper and the band members often play at the same time, thereby creating a cacophony of clashing tunes. However, the piping always takes precedence because, at certain critical points in the ritual, the piper plays alone. The brass band is not an essential feature of the funerary ritual.

_Note: The text continues on the next page._

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**Corpse Handlers: The Lowest of the Low**

Villagers hire corpse handlers (ng jong lo) to perform the most polluting activities at Cantonese funerals, as was outlined earlier. Their duties begin when they deliver the coffin and place it, lid open, on sawhorses in a public plaza nearest the home of the deceased (the village lanes are too narrow to accommodate a funeral). They are then led to the grave site by a member of the village defense corps. After digging the grave, the handlers return to the village and follow the sound of piping to the home of the deceased (no one needs to direct them), where they begin work without speaking to anyone in the household. One of their most important duties is to wash the corpse with water the chief mourner has "purchased" (ma-shui) from the spirit of a stream. The corpse is then dressed in special clothing prepared specifically for this purpose. When preparations are completed and it is time for removal to the coffin, the handlers carry the corpse—with deliberate speed—through the narrow lanes to the plaza where the public phase of the funeral begins. The handlers then arrange the corpse in the coffin, wedging it tight with stacks of funeral paper to ensure that it cannot move. The transfer of the corpse is accompanied by the sounds of the di da, with the piper playing as loudly as possible. Villagers avert their eyes during the movement of the corpse and the packing of the coffin; similarly, only the chief mourner watches when the handlers hoist the coffin to remove it from the village.

33. The Christian origin of these tunes has no significance to villagers. Among older residents, the emic category for brass-band tunes is "Western music," which subsumes everything from Bach to the Beatles.

34. Every powerful lineage has its own "self-defense corps" (tsu wei tu); corpsmen are responsible for patrolling and protecting the territory claimed by their lineage. Their duties include watching for the intrusion of unauthorized graves on lineage land and verifying the burial sites of lineage members.

35. The water-buying rite is a central element in Cantonese funerary ritual. The spirit, my informants explained, must be cleansed of death pollution before it can begin its journey through the underworld. For a discussion of this rite, see J. Watson, "Of Flesh and Bones," pp. 161–162, 170.

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fact, most people never see the ng jong lo perform their most important tasks—thereby adding to the aura of malevolence and danger that surrounds them.

The local priest is the only resident who dares to speak to the corpse handlers, and he communicates with a series of abrupt commands. "I must be very careful around the ng jong lo," Ha Tsuen's priest said, "because they are like living ghosts." No one, including the priest, ever handles anything directly to the corpse handlers. Items that villagers must provide for dressing or arranging the corpse are placed on the floor or ground near the ng jong lo. Cups and bowls used by the handlers are broken and later buried outside the village. There are also restrictions on commensality with corpse handlers. As one resident of San Tin put it: "We would not want to eat at the same table with the ng jong lo because they are so filthy. If we go to Yuen Long [the nearby market town] to have tea and we recognize them in the tea house, we would not sit near them." Older informants were convinced that they could pick out a corpse handler in a crowd by the heavy smell of garlic on their breath. Villagers claimed that ng jong lo keep cloves of garlic in their mouths to disguise the smell of death that clings to them at all times.

The very utterance of ng jong lo is thought to be inauspicious, and many villagers avoid it altogether ("those who come with the coffin" is the preferred alternative). Nahm mouh lo and ng jong lo are both deeply imbedded in colloquial Cantonese, hence the characters used to represent these terms are rather arbitrary. Nonetheless, my efforts to collect the "correct" characters for ng jong lo produced some interesting insights into the villagers' perceptions of corpse handlers. All of the men I asked (women over forty were almost uniformly illiterate) agreed on the last two characters (jong lo "burial fellows"), but there was considerable debate regarding the. The majority opted for a character that means "obstinate" or "perversive," whereas the most educated informant insisted that the correct character was another ng, a classical euphemism for death (used in a compound to represent "coroner"). The fact that most of my literate informants chose the character for "obstinate/perversive" is no doubt a reflection of the villagers' commonly held view that corpse handlers take perverse pleasure in their work. The ng jong lo do comport themselves in a manner that suggests (to me) extreme callousness and nonchalance. At several funerals, for instance, the corpse handlers completely ignored the proceedings and crouched on the sidelines, gambling among themselves. They are always quick to respond to the priest's orders (their livelihood depends on his continued patronage), but the ng jong lo never exhibit any interest in the mourners or in the circumstances surrounding the death.

Who are these stigmatized men? My information on the social origins
and life-styles of ng jong lo is, of necessity, rather limited. Their services are provided by coffin shops as part of the cost of purchasing a coffin. Two handlers accompany the coffin without extra cost, but additional helpers may be employed by wealthy households, particularly if an expensive (i.e., heavy) coffin has been purchased. Corpse handlers are paid by the day and are not under formal contract or binding obligation to the owners of coffin shops. Many are opium addicts who have no other means of support; others are aged drifters with no families or kin in the surrounding region. They live and eat together in the back rooms of coffin shops. There can be no doubt that, in the eyes of villagers and townspeople, these men represent the ultimate form of human degradation.

**Auxiliary Performers: Nuns, Acrobats, and Actors**

The priest, piper, and corpse handlers together constitute what might be called the minimal ritual set because without their paid services a Cantonese funeral cannot be performed. More will be said about the implications of this in the conclusion. It is important to note, however, that there are many other kinds of specialists operating in the villages under study. These might be called auxiliary performers in the sense that their services are not deemed to be essential for the proper conduct of the rites, but they do add to the general atmosphere of activity and concern. Villagers gauge the wealth and status of a bereaved family by the number of specialists performing at the funerals of their senior members.

The auxiliaries most commonly seen at funerals are Buddhist nuns (shih-ku) who live in small convents scattered throughout the New Territories. Their primary role is to chant Buddhist sutras (fo-ching) that are said to have a calming effect on the spirit of the deceased. Nuns are particularly useful when circumstances require that a funeral be postponed until the following day. In such cases, the corpse must be kept overnight in the home, and there is great concern that the spirit might become frightened or disoriented. The nuns chant to the spirit through the night and continue the following day, right up to the moment when the coffin is covered with earth. Like all other funeral specialists, nuns work under the direction of the local priest; they usually perform in sets of two, with as many as eight appearing at the rites of wealthy people.

Nuns only visit San Tin or Ha Tsuen during funerals, hence they are closely identified with death. Villagers do not like to interact with them, although they are spoken to on occasion and given direct orders. Buddhist nuns are powerful symbols of role inversion: They represent the antithesis of respectable Cantonese womanhood. Nuns live in the company of other women, which puts them beyond the everyday control of men; they have renounced marriage and are no longer considered members of their natal families. Their bald heads are presumed (by villagers) to reflect a condition of sterility, given that long, healthy hair is associated with fertility and women’s sexuality in Cantonese society. At funerals, for instance, one of the most striking aspects of the ritual is the sight of young women (daughters-in-law of the deceased) rubbing their unbound hair on the coffin — thereby absorbing some of the vital life-forces which are released at death and considered essential for biological reproduction. The fact that nuns expose themselves to death pollution but do not transform it into new life is the ultimate inversion, and perversion, of the feminine role.

At funerals, nuns are clearly distinguished from village women. Women wail (ban) and sing funeral laments; nuns chant sutras. Women avert their eyes during critical transitions in the ritual; nuns do not. Women take whatever precautions they can to protect themselves against the debilitating effects of death pollution; nuns do not. And finally, women do not accompany the coffin to the grave; nuns do. Villagers often commented to me that nuns were “not real women.” They are classed, along with monks (bo-shang), as a separate gender—a special category of neutralized outcasts who live on the margins of society.

Nuns are not the only auxiliaries to specialize in evening performances. Older villagers nostalgically recalled the antics of acrobats and actors (always male) who entertained the community during wakes held for wealthy people. This aspect of funerary ritual ceased during the 1950s and early 1960s, a period corresponding to the introduction of cinemas in the New Territories. According to my informants, the actors were usually apprentice namh mouh lo from nearby market towns. The acrobats were itinerants

36. I could not, of course, speak directly to the corpse handlers without alienating my village hosts, and it was too risky to attempt interviews in the Yuen Long coffin shops (news of this would have gotten back to the village). The following information was provided by priests and coffin-shop owners. It will be obvious, therefore, that there is a glaring gap in my analysis of funeral specialists, namely the corpse handlers’ own role in funeral ritual.

37. For example, when a visitor dies in the afternoon it is generally too late to complete the rites before sundown (see note 29). Similarly, some days are designated by the Chinese lunar almanac as “bad funeral days,” which means that the rites must be postponed.
who also performed at temple fairs and periodic markets. The repertoire of
wake entertainment consisted of slapstick comedies, coarse jokes, juggling,
pantomime, and acrobatic skits depicting the spirit’s hazardous journey
through the underworld (where it encounters devils and monsters portrayed
by members of the troupe). Not surprisingly, these performances drew
much larger audiences than the actual funerals. According to San Tin’s
priest, the primary purpose of the wake was to amuse the spirit and hold its
attention, lest it disappear into the night. Ordinary villagers interpreted the
wake as a form of entertainment to give the mourners temporary respite
from their grief.

Providers of Goods and Services
There are, in addition to those discussed above, many other types of specialists
who earn a living from white affairs in Cantonese rural society. As was
noted earlier, it is useful to draw a distinction between performers, who take
an active part in the funeral rites, and providers of goods or services, who
are not present during the ritual. Perhaps the best known of the latter cate-
gory is the geomancer (feng-shui hsien-sheng). The ethnographic literature
on China is replete with discussions of the geomancer’s trade; there is little
need to belabor the topic here. The essential aspect of the geomancer’s role
in white affairs is that he never attends a funeral in his capacity as a geomanc-
er (he may attend funerals of kin, but even this is rare). Furthermore,
geomancers—among the rural Cantonese at least—never deal directly with
the grave as such. Rather, they concern themselves primarily with the siting
of tombs during the final stage of the three-tiered mortuary sequence (see
below), long after the polluting flesh has disappeared from the bones.
Geomancers may also earn money by choosing auspicious dates for funerals
and lucky hours for important transitions in the ritual (e.g., “buying water,”
encoffinment, burial), but these services are not deemed to be polluting or
tainted in any way.

Providers or makers of funeral goods—such as coffins, paper objects,
mourning garb, incense and joss—are in a somewhat more ambiguous posi-
tion, given that they are associated with the earlier, polluting stage of the
mortuary sequence. The most important specialist in this category is the
coffin-shop owner. Located in the larger market towns, coffin shops are
the focus of many funeral activities. The owner not only supplies coffins, he
also acts as contractor for those who need to hire priests, nuns, musicians,
exhumers, and others.

Closely associated with coffin shops are purveyors of paper products used
during funerals and end-of-mourning rites. The list of items sold in “paper
shops” (chih-p’u) would fill several pages of this essay; everything from
disposable mourning garb to “Hell Bank Notes” (printed in English) can be
purchased there. Villagers avoid keeping such paper items in their homes
overnight. It is considered bad luck to do so, which means that each funeral
necessitates the purchase of a new package of worship materials (consisting
of incense sticks, joss sticks, and stacks of gold paper that can be fashioned
into tael-sized ingots). Enterprising hawkers sometimes make the rounds of
villages on funeral days, selling these items to people who have not had time
to visit paper shops. The paper itself is not considered to be contaminating
until it has been exposed to death pollution (after which it is burned im-
mediately). Nonetheless, villagers are wary of spending too much time in
paper shops. Major transactions involving the purchase of mourning garb
and funeral paraphernalia are often handled by intermediaries, notably older
women who know which items to buy and where to find the best prices.

There are three other specializations that need to be mentioned, all of
which deal with the mechanics of burial, exhumation, and entombment.
When the coffin is lowered into the grave, a professional “settler” (my term,
not the villagers’) is consulted to make certain that the coffin is level and
aligned with the directional flow of geomantic influences (feng-shui) from
the hills nearby. The settler is not, in any sense, a recognized geomancer,
but it is his duty to make the spirit feel “comfortable” in the grave. Since the
grave is a temporary resting place until the flesh disappears, the settler is
thought to be a carrier of pollution and is not granted a high degree of
status. He is careful, however, not to actually touch the coffin; the ng jong
lo move the heavy case while the settler manipulates an elaborate frame
work of plumb lines (it often takes an hour or more to settle a coffin in its
grave). This service is provided by the coffin shop as part of the purchase
price, but there are varying grades of settlers just as there are grades of
coffins. The shopowner himself sometimes fills this role for wealthy clients.
He sends an assistant (who often doubles as truck driver) to settle the coffin
for ordinary funerals. It is essential to note that settlers are treated with a
certain amount of respect and that they are never confused with ng jong
lo.

Seven to ten years after burial, the coffin may be exhumed and the bones
removed to a ceramic pot (chin-t’a), which is sometimes—but not always—
reburied in a horseshoe-shaped tomb. A number of specialists are involved
in this process. Professional exhumers open the grave, clean the bones, and
arrange them in the chin-t’a, which is then moved to a new, pollution-free
location. Although villagers often witness the exhumation, they rarely do
any of the digging or cleansing of bones themselves. The exhumers are, by
the nature of their work, considered to be polluted, but they are not ostra-
cized as thoroughly as the ng jong lo.

The last stage in the mortuary sequence is the entombment of the bone
pot. The final disposition of the bones is thought to affect future generations
of descendants; accordingly, skilled masons are usually hired to construct

42. See Stephan Feuchtwang, An Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy (Vie-
tiane, Laos: Vithagna, 1974), and Maurice Freedman, Chinese Lineage and Society, pp. 118–
154.
the tomb. These craftsmen, like the geomancers who direct their work, are not affected by death pollution. Contracts for tomb construction are very lucrative, and those who engage in this specialized occupation are considered to be among the elite of rural workers.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Pollution and the Reproduction of Stigma in Chinese Society

Social anthropologists are captive of a particular methodology: We see the world through the eyes of our most articulate, and willing, informants. They, in turn, have a limited perspective on their own society and wear the blinders of class, locality, gender, and personality. By now it should be obvious that the perspective presented in this chapter is largely conditioned by my discussions with ordinary villagers. For them, funerals are to be avoided if it is at all possible, and specialists who deal with death are either despised or feared. This essay, in other words, is not in any sense comparable to earlier studies that focus on the exegetical virtuosity of China’s more sophisticated religious specialists.

Among rural Cantonese, the immediate period after death is perceived as a liminal state during which the deceased is transformed from a dangerous corpse into a settled ancestor. It is inevitable, therefore, that those who earn their living from death should be relegated to the margins of society. They, have been drawn so thoroughly into the world of the dead that they exist in what amounts to a permanent state of liminality. From the perspective of ordinary villagers, the stigma associated with accepting payment for funeral services can never be erased.

But is this stigma transmitted to the next generation? Is there, in other words, a permanent category or caste of funeral specialists in Chinese society? The essential feature of Cantonese funeral specialists is that they do not reproduce themselves—biologically—to fill a specific set of occupational niches. Those who perform at funerals are all (save the priest) unmarried or inherently unmarriageable. The categories of performers I have outlined here are reproduced through purely social, rather than biological, means. One becomes a nun, a piper, or a corpse handler through self-selection or by dint of destitution. The low level of skills and literacy required makes it possible for virtually anyone to perform as a funeral specialist, given the need. The priests represent an interesting variation, given that the occupation of nahm mouh lo is sometimes passed in the patriline. But priests do not constitute a category of people who reproduce themselves (and thereby monopolize the priestly trade) through the practice of endogamy. Cantonese priests, like geomancers and coffin-shop owners, marry within their class—not their occupation.

In contrast to the Hindu system of occupational subcastes, therefore, a permanent hierarchy of ritual specialists did not emerge in China. Although the Chinese and the Hindu notions of death pollution are similar in some respects, there are important differences. In China, the stigma of death pollution is ephemeral, and it is not passed to subsequent generations through a transfer of body substance, as is thought to be the case in parts of India. In other words, among Chinese the corruption of death affects only those who deal with it directly, not their offspring (should they produce any). The sons and grandsons of Cantonese funeral priests, for instance, may choose to enter other occupations, and if they do so, they are treated like ordinary villagers. Those who elect to follow their fathers and become priests (a common practice, as was outlined earlier) are motivated primarily by financial considerations; there is nothing inevitable or preordained about their choice. Thus, whereas China and India both have hierarchies of specialists based on relative exposure to the corrupting influences of death, the crucial difference is that the Chinese hierarchy is reconstituted every generation with new recruits drawn from the lower strata of the general population. The reproduction of stigma in the Chinese ritual context is not linked to systems of marriage and inheritance; it is accomplished by informal, self-selective means.

45. This is not to say, however, that China was devoid of caste-like categories of people, tied to low status and demeaning occupations. In the Canton delta, for instance, there were (and still are to a limited extent) occupational niches that resemble lower subcastes in the local hierarchies of India. These occupations include tanning, oyster tending, lime smelting, reed gathering, and offshore fishing. Those who engage in such work are thought to be indelibly stigmatized, and the nearby farmers are careful to keep them at arm’s length. From a compara-

46. Sociologically speaking, the most interesting aspect of these stigmatized occupational categories is that the people involved tend to be endogamous, and in some regions of the delta they have reproduced themselves as clearly defined groups for at least three centuries (and perhaps longer).

There are, in other words, some interesting parallels between the Hindu system of subcastes and the hierarchy of fringe occupations in the Canton delta. The critical difference, however, is that a ritualized notion of pollution/purity is not the primary ideological component in Cantonese conceptions of stigma. Rather, it is the distinction between proper and improper production that matters most for the Cantonese. This distinction is not tied to any overriding religious or ritual system. A “proper” producer grows crops on land; other forms of production are considered to be marginal and potentially disruptive. This is obviously a different kind of disorder than that associated with death pollution. The chaotic influences released at death are cosmological and ephemeral; they are not rooted in the everyday concerns of work and production.
Specialists and the Structure of Rites

The list of funeral specialists surveyed above is by no means exhaustive. Limitations of space do not permit a full discussion of all the occupational categories associated with white affairs in Cantonese rural society.\(^{46}\) If one wished to extend the analysis to other parts of China, particularly major urban centers, the list would grow even longer. De Groot, in his study of Foochow, mentions professional washers of corpses, "hrelings" who dispose of clothing and death bedding, "footworkers" who specialize in carrying coffins, and coroners who earn a living by inspecting the corpses of those who die under unusual circumstances.\(^{47}\) Twitchett and McDermott note that wealthy lineages sometimes maintained households of hereditary bondservants who served as tomb guardians.\(^{48}\) Although work in this field is only beginning, it seems likely that a hierarchy of funeral specialists also operated within the confines of the imperial court, and that members of the emperor’s household were involved—like all Chinese—in the management of death pollution (see e.g., Evelyn Rawski’s discussion in chapter 10 of the conflict between the emperor’s mourning obligations and his ritual duties).

Given the vast diversity of Chinese culture—with its class, ethnic, and regional differences—what can one say about the representativeness of the ethnographic data analyzed in this chapter? Does the description represent Chinese society? Cantonese subculture? Canton delta landed peasantry? Hsin-an county? Yuen Long marketing district? Or are we restricted to generalizations about the ritual life of two villages in the New Territories? Fieldworking anthropologists can seldom answer such questions to the satisfaction of historians, sociologists, and others who work at what they perceive to be the macro level of Chinese culture.

Studying the ritual structure of Chinese society is like peeling an onion. Viewed from a distance, there are certain aspects of funeral ritual that appear to be universal: The ritual bathing of the corpse may be one, and the preoccupation with controlling the spirit of the deceased is probably another. However, as one cuts more deeply into the onion—descending the hierarchy of local systems, class structures, and subethnic divisions (Hakka vs. Cantonese vs. Hokkien vs. Ch’ao-chou, etc.)—it becomes difficult to determine which elements of ritual are variations on a universal theme and which constitute local, or subcultural, departures not reflected in other parts of the whole. Until we can agree that there is a uniform structure of Chinese funerary rites, questions of representativeness are essentially meaningless. (The same is no doubt true for discussions of Chinese marriage and marriage rites.)

I, for one, am convinced that there is an overarching ritual structure that distinguishes Chinese from non-Chinese rites. For instance, a close analysis of the sequence of Cantonese funeral rites reveals a remarkable similarity to the sequential structure described for other parts of China (see chapter 1). Naquin’s survey of funeral rites in north China (chapter 3) strongly reinforces this impression of ritual uniformity.

Another feature of Chinese mortuary ritual that appears to be uniform, over time and space, is the reliance on specialists. Paid professionals always play a key role in the performance of Chinese funerary ritual; they are, in other words, part of the formal structure of rites. Based on a reading of ethnographic and historical sources, I would contend that it is not possible for people who conceive of themselves as Chinese to hold what amounts to a do-it-yourself funeral, with untrained and unpaid personnel performing the rites. Among the rural Cantonese a minimal ritual set of four specialists is essential for the proper conduct of a funeral. This set includes a priest, a piper, and two corpse handlers. Anyone, it was explained to me, who attempts to bury a family member without the services of these four specialists would be risking serious consequences, namely, the possibility of creating a dangerous ghost and disrupting the entire community. It is the proper performance of the rites which matters most to ordinary villagers (more on this below), and no one without the requisite training would dare to assume the role of priest.

Wealthy villagers, as was noted earlier, may hire up to a dozen specialists for the burial of parents or grandparents; funeral processes in nearby market towns sometimes include over a hundred paid attendants. It is not, however, the funerals of the wealthy that tell us much about the elemental structure of mortuary rites. We learn much more by observing the funerals of paupers, for it is here that the basic form is displayed, devoid of elaboration. I witnessed two funerals for destitute people who died without heirs during my research. In each case the central ancestral hall paid for the coffin, the ritual paraphernalia, and the services of a priest and a piper (the two corpse handlers are provided by the coffin shop). No one acted as chief mourner at these funerals, but the rites had to be conducted in proper (albeit truncated) form, lest the community be haunted by the angry spirits of the

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46. In addition to the specialists discussed above, in the area under study there are professional "watchers," men who are paid to witness end-of-mourning rites (the spirit is said to be upset if no one outside the immediate family witnesses this part of the ritual). Other specialists include weath makers, fortune-tellers, scribes, condolence messengers (who deliver oral as well as written messages), and marchers (who carry flags or banners in funeral processions).


deceased. The goal of all funerals, including those for paupers, is a "peaceful burial" (an-tsang), which implies that the rites have been performed according to custom by paid professionals.

The ethnographic data presented in this chapter, combined with evidence drawn from other anthropological and historical sources, lead me to conclude that performance is the most critical aspect of Chinese funerary ritual. Among rural Cantonese, for instance, it is the proper conduct of the rites—in the prescribed sequence of movements and actions—that matters above all else. As was noted in chapter 1, the perceptions, beliefs, and emotions of the participants are largely irrelevant. In the emic view, shared by priests and villagers alike, the ritual is performed to control and transform the spirit of the deceased. Accordingly, Cantonese funeral rites are deemed to have an efficacy dissociated from the internal state or perceptions of those who perform the required acts. 49

In this context, the role of qualified specialists is absolutely crucial. They must take charge of the performance and thereby create the desired state of ritual order which is thought to have a calming effect on the frightened and potentially dangerous spirit. The actions of the priest are particularly revealing: His performance at funerals is always balanced on the razor's edge of credibility, somewhere between mystery and farce. He knows there are many skeptics among his clients, and yet he strives to maintain a dignified atmosphere, appropriate for the task at hand. Mystification is important, but it is not absolutely essential; nor is it a key element in the structure of funeral rites. It matters not what participants believe so long as they execute the prescribed set of acts in the approved sequence.

Chinese Characters for:


an tsang 安葬
(c) bok 搏
ch’ang 唱
ch’eng-chi 承繼
chi-wen 祭文
chih-p’u 紙舖
chin-t’a 金塔
(c) di da [口+的] [口+打]
feng shui 風水
feng-shui hsien-sheng 風水先生
fo-ching 佛經
(c) gwai lo 鬼佬
han 喊
ho-shang 和尚
hung-shih 紅事
kuei 鬼
la-pa 喇叭
lao-ren hui 佬人會
Li chi 禮記

(c) lo 佬

(c) mahn maih poh 文米婆

mai-shui 買水

(c) nahn mouh lo 喃嘆佬

(c) nahm mouh sin-sang 喃嘆先生

(c) ng (obstinate/perverse) 悊

(c) ng (classical euphemism for coroner) 仵

(c) ng jong lo 仵(仵)葬佬

(c) ngok lo [亞+心]佬

(c) ning 擪

pai-shih 白事

(c) saat hei 殺(煞)氣

sha-ch’i 殺氣

shen 神

shih-fu 師傅

shih-ku 師姑

sung-pin 送殯

tao-chiao 道教

yang 陽

yin 陰

yin (chanting/humming) 吟