

**Malaysian Chinese Funeral Rituals:
A Study of Special Rituals for Unnatural Death**

马来西亚华人葬礼仪式：非自然死亡的特殊仪式

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「...問孝...生、事之以禮; 死、葬之以禮、祭之以禮。」

“...What is the meaning of filial piety?

...(When your parents are) alive, serve them with propriety;

(when they) die, bury them with propriety, worship them with propriety.”

(Analects 2:5)

Abstract

Despite being located in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is home to the second-largest community of Overseas Chinese in the world. Unlike its neighbors, Malaysian Chinese can retain their cultures, identities, and languages, and also escape assimilation. Owing to various historical reasons, different Chinese subgroups can be found in the country and this diversifies the Chinese culture in Malaysia. In Chinese culture, rites associated with the life cycle are important and that includes the funeral ritual. With different Chinese subgroups present in Malaysia, the funeral rituals are never the same due to the various subgroups' cultures. This paper will study the funeral rituals of various Chinese subgroups in Malaysia with a focus on the different special rituals that aim to set souls free from the sufferings of Hell. Through this, the funeral rituals of different Chinese subgroups in Malaysia can be recorded in English and used for future research.

Keywords: Breaking the Hell, Chinese folk religion, City of Unjust Death, funeral, khan-chhng, Malaysian Chinese, Soul Calling, Taoism

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Interviewee Profile

Kai Yang Shi 释开杨

Master Shi is a Mahayana (since 1988) and Theravada (since 1991) Buddhist monk based in Kulim, Kedah, Malaysia. I interviewed him on 02/01/2023 to ask him about Malaysian Chinese funerals and Buddhist funerals.

Eng Kew Lee 李永球

Mr. Lee is an author, columnist, historian, and folklorist based in Taiping, Perak, Malaysia. He is the author of *《Hun Qi Gui Tian 魂气归天》*. I interviewed him on 02/02/2023 to ask about Malaysian Chinese funeral rituals and these rituals differ between subgroups.

Jin Tee 郑开仁

Mr. Tee is the third-generation owner of a local funeral home based in Kulim, Kedah, Malaysia. I interviewed him on 02/18/2023 to ask him about Malaysian Chinese beliefs and funeral rituals.

Xin Yi Chin 陈焮怡

Ms. Chin is a resident living in Kulim, Kedah, Malaysia whose mother passed away in February 2023. I interviewed her on 02/20/2023 to ask about the current Malaysian Chinese funeral ritual and the contact of the priest she hired for the funeral. The priest was Master Choy.

Meng Hoey Choy 蔡明辉

Master Choy is a Way of Orthodox Unity Taoist priest based in Penang, Malaysia. I interviewed him on 02/22/2023 to ask him about Malaysian Chinese funerals and Taoist rituals.

Introduction

It was a dark night with a cold wind blowing gently through the village. Typically, there would be cars driving through the streets, but that night, all streets were blocked and everyone was staying in their houses with the doors and windows shut. Papier-mâché houses and figures¹ appeared in the middle of the street, which was still empty a day ago. The adults and children gathered and formed a big circle around the items, moving slowly in a clockwise direction, just like in the playground singing game, “Ring Around the Rosie”. When the circle of people started moving, the items in the center were lit with fire by the priest and started to burn. The eldest son would pour *baijiu* 白酒² around the burnt paper offerings to form a big circle to act as a protective barrier against wandering ghosts³ so that the offerings would arrive safely in the afterworld to be received by the deceased.

This is the grand finale that is performed on the last night of a contemporary Malaysian Chinese funeral ritual (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian*).⁴ Malaysian Chinese funeral culture is a potential research topic for sinologists, anthropologists, and theologians because the combination of rituals, Fengshui, filial piety, and the afterlife creates a complex funeral system. This paper will focus on parts of the funeral rituals across different Chinese subgroups in Malaysia that are performed to set free the souls that died of unnatural deaths from the sufferings of Hell⁵ and obtain a better rebirth.

¹ The houses and figures are papier-mâché items that are burnt together with joss paper in religious events.

² Also known as *shaojiu* 烧酒, this is a Chinese colorless distilled liquor.

³ Wandering ghosts (*guhunyegui* 孤魂野鬼) refers to ghosts with nowhere to go after death. The ghosts have nowhere to go because they have no descendants who perform rituals to guide them to the afterlife and give them offerings.

⁴ The ritual here refers to the activities performed on the night before the burial or cremation process. The whole funeral ritual can be longer depending on how it is defined.

⁵ See Section 2.2

Section 1: Malaysian Chinese

With more than 6.8 million ethnically Chinese citizens,⁶ Malaysia presents promising conditions for the study of Chinese funeral rituals. Unlike China's disruption of cultural practices during the Cultural Revolution, Malaysian Chinese have been free to practice their religion and culture without many disruptions. As a result of the freedom granted to the Malaysian Chinese, researchers can gain more insight into the cultural and religious practices of the Malaysian Chinese community and learn more about how these practices have evolved. The study of these rituals can help shed light on the history, beliefs, and values of the Malaysian Chinese community, as well as how they have adapted to a multicultural, multireligious, multi-subgroup society.

Although the funeral industry in China is changing and starting to include more elements from tradition before the Revolution, some practices were once stopped or modified due to the Revolution. Citizens of Taiwan, Macao, and Hong Kong are allowed to practice their culture and religion without disruptions, but their practices are mostly focused on those from a specific subgroup. For example, the population of Hong Kong and Macao are mainly Cantonese, and the population of Taiwan is mainly Minnan and Hakka (Tan, *Chinese Religion in Malaysia*). Since there is a mix of various subgroup populations in Malaysia such as the Minnan (Hokkien), Hakka, Cantonese, and Teochew, the Chinese funeral culture can be explored more fully in Malaysia.

⁶ There are three main ethnic groups in Malaysia: Malays, Chinese, and Indians (*Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal*). In this paper, the term Chinese refers to Malaysians of the Chinese ethnic group that practice the Han Chinese culture (see Section 1.2).

1.1 The Origin of Malaysian Chinese

Chinese civilization has had connections with various kingdoms in the Malay Archipelago since ancient times. Although there were records of movements of Chinese people from China into present-day Malaysia as early as the thirteenth century, mass migration of the Chinese people did not happen until the British colonial era. Owing to the rubber estate reform in the Borneo states and the tin mining industry in the Malay Peninsula, Chinese from the Great Qing⁷ started migrating to Malaya for a better life (Hirschman; Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 3). Most of these people are descendants of Southern Chinese immigrants who arrived in Malaysia between the early 19th century and the mid-20th century. With the migration of the Chinese people, they brought along their cultures and languages, which influenced the later Chinese community in Malaysia.

1.2 The Chinese Subgroups in Malaysia

Among Malaysian Chinese, there exist multiple ethnic subgroups such as the Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, and Teochew (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 3–5; Tan, *Chinese Religion in Malaysia* 8–9). According to Tan, the majority of Chinese in Malaysia are Hokkien (*fujian* 福建), followed by the Hakka (*kejia* 客家), Cantonese (*guangdong* 广东), Teochew (*chaozhou* 潮州), Hokchiu (*fuzhou* 福州), and Kwongsai (*guangxi* 广西). In this paper, my focus will be on the Hokkien, Hakka, and Cantonese subgroups as they form the largest subgroups, and their rituals are usually practiced in Malaysia. Although the Hakka homeland in China is in Guangdong and western Fujian, Malaysian Hakka are mostly descendants of migrants from Guangdong. Cantonese refers to the Yue speakers from Guangdong and they are also called *kwangfu yahn* 广府人 in certain

⁷ At the end of the 18th century and early 19th century, China was experiencing much social unrest with the Sino-Japanese War, the Boxer Rebellion, and the Eight-Nation Alliance. Corruption within the Qing government also caused many Southern Chinese to migrate to Southeast Asia.

parts of Malaysia. Hokkiens are Minnan 閩南 people, so Malaysian Hokkiens are what Taiwanese and mainland Chinese refer to as Minnan people or southern Fujian people (Tan, *Chinese Religion in Malaysia* 9).

Different Chinese subgroups in Malaysia have different funeral rituals despite being all part of the Chinese ethnicity. According to Lee, the Hakkas have simpler funeral rituals compared to the Hokkiens, while the Chinese of the same subgroup living in northern Malaysia have a different funeral ritual compared to those living in the South (*Hun Qi Gui Tian* 3–5). Renowned anthropologist, James L. Watson once claimed that “To be Chinese is to understand, and accept the view, that there is a correct way to perform rites associated with the life-cycle, the most important being weddings and funerals” (Watson and Rawski 3). Although the funeral rituals vary across subgroups, one shared similarity is the presence of filial piety (*xiao* 孝) within all rituals. Thus, I agree that there is a correct way of performing such rites, which is those rites, no matter how they vary across subgroups, must be able to showcase the value of filial piety.

1.3 The Malaysian Chinese Folk Religion

To understand why there are no standardized funerary rituals for the Malaysian Chinese, it is important to know the religious affiliation among them. Unlike Christians, Muslims, and followers of other institutional religions, most Malaysian Chinese do not have a name for their beliefs and practices because the Chinese folk religion is polytheistic. Malaysian Chinese may describe their religious identity as either *bai shen* 拜神 or *bai fo* 拜佛 or both. *Bai shen* refers to the act of worshiping deities while *bai fo* refers to the act of worshiping Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. In Malaysia, it is very common to see Chinese praying to Buddhist deities, Taoist

deities, Confucius,⁸ natural objects such as anthills and rocks, ancestors, and other localized deities such as *Na Tuk Gong* 拿督公.⁹ To easily understand the Chinese religion, one can see it as resembling the ancient Greek and Roman religions but also incorporating elements of animism and ancestor worship. The polytheistic nature of Chinese religion is due to the influence of *Rushidao* 儒释道, a combination of teachings from Confucianism 儒, Buddhism¹⁰ 释, and Taoism 道¹¹ (Tan, “Chinese Religion in Malaysia” 221).

The influence of Confucianism is evident in the practice of filial piety among Malaysian Chinese. For example, when I was a student at a Chinese vernacular school in Malaysia from 2007-2012, all students were required to recite the texts from “*Standards for the Good Pupil*” (*Dizigui* 弟子规) and “*Three-Character-Classic*” (*Sanzijing* 三字经) every morning before the class started. These two books are entry-level texts used in primary schools to teach children about Confucian thought. Another text that was used in class was “*The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars*” (*Ershisixiao* 二十四孝), which contains stories of how filial children treat their parents. Through these books, children are taught to respect elders as this will make them filial sons and daughters. Although Buddhism and Taoism are not officially taught in Chinese vernacular schools, some teachers will mention related concepts in class. For example, words like Hell (*Diyu* 地狱), Heavens (*Laotian* 老天), karma (*yinguo* 因果), and reincarnation (*lunhui* 轮回) will be used in classes that talk about Chinese cultures or moral education. In that same Chinese vernacular school that I attended, Buddhist monks were invited to pray for students who are taking the national examination at the end of their sixth year in primary school. In

⁸ In Malaysia, Confucius is worshipped as a minor deity in a lot of temples. Nonetheless, there are some institutions that were established to promote Confucianism and Confucius is worshipped as a major deity.

⁹ Also called Datuk Gong or Dato Gong. Na Tuk Gongs are local guardian spirits, usually, Malay Muslims worshiped by Malaysian Chinese.

¹⁰ In Malaysia, it is usually Chinese Mahayana Buddhism.

¹¹ Refers to the Taoism religion and not the Taoism philosophy. In Malaysia, it is usually the Way of Orthodox Unity Taoism (*Zhengyi Dao* 正一道). The Lingbao Taoism commonly practiced in Taiwan is also part of the Way of Orthodox Unity Taoism (“灵宝派 [Lingbao Pai]”).

conclusion, the influence of Confucianism in the Malaysian Chinese community is huge and can be seen practiced together with Buddhism and Taoism in various aspects of their lives.

Section 2: Funeral Ritual

To understand contemporary Malaysian Chinese funeral rituals, it is important to study Confucianism's early discourses such as "The Book of Rites" (*Liji* 礼记) and "The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial" (*Yili* 仪礼), as Malaysian Chinese funeral ritual is based on Confucianism etiquettes and customs (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 3). Although the practices are recorded in the early discourses, they are not unique to Confucianism as they were already being practiced at that time, and it was simply the Confucian scholars who put the practices into writings (Ebrey 14–16). According to tradition, the most important thing to do when someone dies was to perform soul calling (*zhaohun* 招魂) (Ebrey 20; Brown 11; Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 84–86). This is because ancient Chinese believed that sometimes the deceased is not truly dead, but was just the soul leaving the body momentarily. Therefore, there was usually a waiting period of three days before the encoffining process begins. In that period, the mourners, especially the chief mourner (typically the eldest son or grandson), should appear to be experiencing intense sorrow, wailing, and preparing for the encoffining process (Brown 11–15; Ebrey 19–24). After the encoffining, the next activities would be paying condolences, procession, burial, and additional mourning for the next three years (Brown 16–17; Ebrey 18–24).

The Confucian values, especially filial piety, can be seen practiced throughout the funeral ritual. For example, during the waiting period, the sons would be exempt from their responsibility as the funeral officiate. The sons would survive on the porridge provided by the neighbors so that they have enough time to feel the loss and sorrow of losing their loved ones

(Brown 12; Meng and Jiang). Only by performing these actions can the sons prove themselves to be filial. The three-day waiting periods also permitted the family members from afar to come back to pay their respects to the deceased and allow the family to plan for the funeral budget. These rituals provide a way for the living to show their love and respect for the deceased, ensure the deceased's smooth transition to the afterlife, as well as ensuring harmony within the immediate and extended family. Even though these rituals are more than two thousand years old, they are still being practiced by the Malaysian Chinese. Most funerals nowadays still follow the aforementioned rituals, but the order of rituals might not be similar to those practiced in the past. In this chapter, we will look at the Malaysian Chinese funeral rituals, the Malaysian Chinese view of the afterlife, and the religious ritual that is held to generate merit for the deceased.

2.1 Categorizing the Funeral Rituals

According to Liu, the funeral ritual can be separated into three stages: pre-burial, burial, and post-burial (Liu 82–118).¹² The pre-burial category involves steps such as preparation for the dying, the cleaning of the deceased, the encoffining, and the religious ceremony. The burial category involves steps such as choosing a good burial site according to Fengshui, bringing the coffin to the burial site, and carving the gravestones. The post-burial category involves steps such as a three-year mourning period, various seventh-day rites, the burning of paper houses, and various special religious rituals for those who suffered unnatural deaths. Some other authors, such as Lee and Yang, further separate the funeral ritual into five and six categories respectively (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian*; Yang). Although the number of categories for a funeral ritual is not constant, the steps for the funeral ritual are almost identical across all traditions, suggesting an

¹² As a lot of people are choosing cremation due to various reasons such as expensive land lots and environmental issues, the idea of burial can be expanded to include both burial and cremation.

agreement with Watson's claim that there is a standardized way of performing rites related to the life cycle.

The reason why I chose Liu's method of separating the funeral ritual into three categories is that his method can clearly show how contemporary Malaysian Chinese funeral ritual has changed over time. For example, in the introduction, I mentioned that the burning of paper houses happened on the last night before the burial or cremation process. Nonetheless, that act was traditionally performed during the post-burial stage (Liu 82–118; Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 79–120; Yang 64–101; Choy). Some of the reasons for these changes include simplifying the whole process, commercialization by funeral home companies, and reducing the cost of the overall funeral ritual (Tee; Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 81–83; Choy).

Due to the change from the post-burial stage to the burial stage, some people might get confused about the purpose of some rituals. For example, Malaysian Chinese believe that it takes the soul of the deceased around seven days to arrive at Hell and be judged. However, most special rituals¹³ nowadays are performed during the last night of the funeral, which is either the second night or the fourth night. Thus, the question arises, how can we deliver a soul from Hell if the soul is not yet in Hell? Due to the confusion, some people believe that a simple ceremony is sufficient to generate merit for the deceased while others request a simple ceremony for the sake of tradition. Nonetheless, Master Choy mentioned that it is better to hold a major ceremony as it can generate more merit for the deceased.

In my interviews, I learned that priests or monks have no say in the types of rituals to be performed since most of the rituals in Malaysia are handled by funeral home companies. When someone passes away, the family members of the deceased will contact funeral home companies and representatives will be sent to the deceased's house to perform various rituals. Most of the

¹³ See Section 3 for examples of special rituals.

time, the funeral companies will be in charge of all the rituals in the pre-burial category, burial category, and the first seven-day rite of the post-burial category (Tee). Based on the budget and the requirements of the family members, funeral home companies will arrange a funeral ritual that fits their needs. Thus, affluent families will usually ask for a major ceremony while others will usually ask for a minor ceremony (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 3–5; Choy; Tee). Each death will be judged on a case-by-case basis, but those that involve the shedding of blood are usually categorized as unnatural death and require special rituals while those dying of sickness and old age are in the natural death category (Choy).

2.2 Chinese Afterlife

In Confucianism, the ideal afterlife is one in which an individual reaches sagehood and is worshiped by their descendants and families. It is common for the deceased's name to be added to the ancestral tablet (*zuxian paiwei* 祖先牌位) and be venerated alongside the rest of the ancestors at a home shrine (Murrell).¹⁴ This is because ancient Chinese believed that the souls will never perish, will be reunited with their ancestors, and have the power to protect their living descendants (Lee, *Personal Interview*; Dang). In fact, according to the *Analects*, Confucius said “When you do not yet understand life, how could you understand death?” (Eno), suggesting that Confucianism is more about how to become a sage or a moral person while alive. With the influence of Buddhism and Taoism, ancient Chinese started to include and expand on the concept of Hell (Dang 137). As a result, the Hell belief in the Chinese folk religion is a mix of different ideas loosely based on the concept of Buddhist Naraka and traditional Chinese belief in the afterlife.

¹⁴ Ancestral tablets can also be kept in ancestral temples or columbariums. The tablets can be separated into the inner tablet and the outer tablet. The inner tablet contains the ancestors' (both male and female) names and their date of death. The outer tablet contains information of the clan.

The Chinese believe that the time one spends in Hell may be incredibly long but finite, unlike the Abrahamic religions which think that Hell is a place of eternal damnation. After death, every soul will go to Hell¹⁵ and be judged by the Ten Kings before they can be reborn again. There are ten courts in Hell, each overseen by a king called Yama (*Yanwang* 阎王).¹⁶ Although the time spent in Hell is finite, all souls will have to go through each court and be judged before arriving at the tenth court for reincarnation (Choy). The idea of Hell was first brought into ancient China with the introduction of Indian Buddhism during the Han Dynasty. The idea of Hell was further expanded with the influence of Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese folk religion. The concept of Hell that is believed by the majority of Malaysian Chinese was influenced by the *Jade Record* (*Yuli* 玉曆), a text created around the Northern Song period which was influenced by an apocrypha Buddhist text called *Sutra of the Ten Kings* (*Foshuo Shiwangjing* 佛说十王经) (Hu 11–12; Chen).¹⁷

The *Jade Record* provided detailed information on the responsibilities of the Ten Kings and included explanations of new hell realms such as the Terrace of Viewing Hometown (*Wangxiangtai* 望乡台), the Blood Pool Hell (*Xuechi diyu* 血池地狱), and the City of Unjust Death (*Wangsiheng* 枉死城) (Chen). The Jade Record has since affected the Chinese religion and has become the mainstream belief on the afterlife world. In this belief, people who died from unnatural death will be cast into the City of Unjust Death or the Pool Hell,¹⁸ and special rituals are required to deliver them from Hell.

¹⁵ Another translation for the Hell is “earth prison”, as used by Lagerwey (Lagerwey 20–21). This is because Taoist hells function like the courts of our judicial system where the *Yanwangs* are the judges. Nonetheless, since sinful souls will be punished after being judged, I am using the term Hell for simplicity and consistency's sake.

¹⁶ Yama or *Yanwang* in Chinese is a lord or king who is in charge of judging and determining the punishments for souls who committed sins.

¹⁷ The idea of Hell was first brought into ancient China with the introduction of Indian Buddhism during the Han Dynasty.

¹⁸ Section 3.3.1 contains more information on the three different Pool Hells discussed in this paper.

2.3 Merit-Generating Ceremony

The idea of Hell and rebirth made a lot of people seek help from monks and priests to perform rituals and pray for the deceased to generate good merit for them which will allow them to have a better rebirth. Different subgroups refer to this religious ritual by different names. For example, Hakka calls this ritual *zuozhai* 做斋, *zuodaochang* 做法场, *zuogongde* 做功德 while Hokkien calls this ritual *zuogongguo* 做功德. Other names that are frequently used include *zuofashi* 做法事, *chaodu* 超度, and *badu* 拔度 (Liu 91–92; Yang 65; Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 81–83). Regardless of what this ritual is called, the main purpose of this ritual is to generate merit for the deceased so that they either be saved from Hell or do not suffer in the afterlife.

Different subgroups have different types of rituals in the merit-generating ceremony; some are more complex and some are simpler (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 5). In my interview with Master Choy, he told me that the rituals used for Cantonese in Malaysia are almost identical to those used in Hong Kong and Singapore while the Hokkien rituals vary from village to village.¹⁹ Both Cantonese and Hokkien priests use the same Taoist texts, but the dialects and customs used during the rituals are different. On the other hand, Master Choy said that the Hakka rituals may contain a mix of Taoist and Buddhist elements, which is why in some rituals, Buddhist texts were recited and Buddhas and Bodhisattvas²⁰ images were used instead of the Three Pure Ones (*Sanqing* 三清)²¹.

¹⁹ He used the phrase “One village, one ritual” 一个乡村, 一个礼 to describe Hokkien rituals

²⁰ It is common to display the images of the Three Sages of the West, which are Buddha Amitabha, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta since Pure Land Buddhism has the greatest influence among Chinese (Tan, “Chinese Religion in Malaysia”).

²¹ *Sanqing* is a Taoist term that refers to the three highest gods in the Taoist pantheon, *Yuanshi Tianzun* 元始天尊, *Lingbao Tianzun* 靈寶天尊, and *Daode Tianzun* 道德天尊.

Lagerwey²² provided detailed elaboration on a medium-length ceremony that was performed by Master Ch'en Jung-sheng in Tainan in 1980.²³ He separated that ceremony into twenty different steps that lasted for almost two days (169–94). In my interview with Tee, he told me that the Hokkien has the most complex merit-generating ceremony in Malaysia, and this is consistent with the observations recorded in Lee's book (*Hun Qi Gui Tian* 5). I will include a summary of the twenty different steps described in Lagerwey's book in this subsection as they are consistent with the Taoist rituals in Malaysia (Choy). I checked the rituals listed in Lagerwey's book with Master Choy and he agreed that those rituals were performed during funerals in Malaysia. Nonetheless, depending on the number of days of the funeral, the grandeur of the ceremony, the subgroup, and the funeral budget, some rituals will be removed or added. The steps for the ceremony are as follows:

1. Announcement (*fabiao* 发表): The high priest summons various marshals²⁴ to carry the invitation documents to the various deities.
2. Invocation (*qibai* 启白): The priests take turns inviting various deities.
3. Scripture Recitation (*nianjing* 念经): The priests recite the first part of *The Scripture of Salvation* (*Durenjing* 度人经)
4. Opening a Road in the Darkness (*kaitong minglu* 开通冥路): A priest recites scripts to open and light up the road to the underworld.

²² John Lagerwey is currently a Research Professor of Chinese Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has published extensively on Taoist rituals and is the author of "Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History"

²³ Although not specified, the text suggests that this ritual is performed in the post-burial stage.

²⁴ Spiritual beings who are usually the deities' assistants.

5. Recitation of Litanies (*baichan* 拜忏): The priests recite the first three chapters of *The Precious Litany of the Shade-Kings Who Save from Sin* (*Mingwang bazui baochan* 冥王拔罪宝忏).
6. Dispatching the Writ of Pardon (*fangshema* 放赦马): The priests send a writ to Heaven and ask Heaven to forgive the sins of the deceased.
7. The Attack on City (*dacheng* 打城)²⁵: The priests whose attributes are military summon soldiers of the Five Battalions (*Wuying* 五营)²⁶ and attack the “fortress of hell” to release the soul of the deceased.
8. Division of the Lamps (*fendeng* 分灯): The priests perform three rituals that are done right after the other. These rituals will represent the entry of the “light of grace” into our world of darkness and sin.
9. Land of the Way (*daochang* 道场)²⁷: The ritual of all Taoist rituals. The high priest performs various rituals such as purifying the altar, paying homage to the Masters, reading memorials and confessions, and expressing wishes.
10. Recitation of Litanies (*baichan* 拜忏): The priests recite Chapters 4-7 and 8-10 of *The Precious Litany of the Shade-Kings Who Save from Sin*.
11. Noon Offering (*wugong* 午供): The priests sing, dance, and recite passages while the offerings are passed to the kneeling mourners one by one so each of them has a chance to present them.
12. Scripture Recitation (*nianjing* 念经): The priests recite and sing *The Precious Scroll of the Savior from Distress* (*Jiukubaojuan* 救苦宝卷).

²⁵ This is considered a special ritual. See Section 3.2.2 (b) for more information.

²⁶ The Five Battalions are important guardian gods of the temple or the village.

²⁷ This ritual is performed the next morning.

13. Exorcism (*quxie* 驱邪): The priests perform this ritual to expel evil spirits. The statuettes of the deceased will be given tea to drink, the teapot will be smashed, and the green Medicine King will be burnt.
14. Uniting the Symbols (*hefu* 合符): This ritual consists of a series of invitations to the divinities and each invitation ends with a prayer that the soul of the deceased can leave the underworld to be reborn in heaven.
15. Bath (*muyu* 沐浴): The priests purify the water so that the soul can clean itself using the water.
16. Paying Homage to the Three Treasures (*baisanbao* 拜三宝): The soul that has cleaned itself can pay homage to the Three Pure Ones and receive a “passport to heaven”. The priests help the soul with a “contract for the purchase of land” for a new home in the other world.
17. Untying the Knots (*jiejie* 解结): The soul will be liberated, forgiven, cleaned, and detached from this mundane world.
18. Recitation of Litanies (*baichan* 拜忏): The priests recite three chapters of *The Precious Litany of Compassion* (*Cibeibaochan* 慈悲宝忏).
19. Filling the Treasury (*tianku* 天库): Family members of the deceased hold hands while the paper money will be burnt to pay off any potential debts. The papier-mâché house is burnt in this ritual.
20. Crossing the Bridge (*guoqiao* 过桥): The priest waves the flag across the paper bridge and the mourners will cross the bridge carrying the soul banner (*Yinhunfan* 引魂幡) (see Fig. 1) and the statuettes.

Among the twenty different steps listed above, some can be expanded. For example, in Lee's interview with Malaysian Taoist priest Sooi Feng Lee, the ritual for setting up the "contract for the purchase of land" is called Buying a House (*Maiwuuhuo* 买屋入伙). Another difference between the listed steps and the ones practiced nowadays by Malaysian Chinese is the burning of paper money and house (see Fig. 2) is usually the last step of a funeral ritual. One thing to be noted is that not all funeral rituals need to follow the steps listed above. From my interviews, I learned that most people in Malaysia perform a shorter version of this ceremony, one that is completed within four to six hours. The steps included in the merit-generating ceremony might be sufficient to liberate souls which died naturally. Nonetheless, for those who met with unnatural deaths, additional special rituals need to be performed on top of the aforementioned rituals to deliver them from the City of Unjust Death or the Pool Hell.



Fig. 1. Image of the *Yinhunfan*: “魂幡 [Hunfan].” 魂幡 - 大堂人本服務有限公司, <https://www.lobby0800.com.tw/product-detail-2555648.html>. Accessed 9 Dec. 2022.



Fig. 2. Image of the papier-mâché house to be burnt: (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian*)

Section 3: Special Rituals

The steps included in the merit-generating ceremony might be sufficient to liberate souls which died naturally of old age (*shouzhong zhengqin* 寿终正寝)²⁸ or sickness. Nonetheless, for those who met the fate of unnatural death, their souls will be sent to the City of Unjust Death or the Pool Hell,²⁹ and special rituals will need to be performed to deliver them (Chen; *Is There a City of Unjust Death in Buddhism?*). Chinese believes that every human has their designated lifespan (*yangshou* 阳寿) and those who died unnaturally do not live out their designated lifespan (*yangshou weijin* 阳寿未尽). As the Ten Kings are unable to judge the souls which have yet to live out their designated lifespan, they will be locked up in the City of Unjust Death until their designated lifespan end. For example, if someone is supposed to live until 80 years old, but died when he is 40 years old, he will spend at least 40 years in the City of Unjust Death.³⁰ One can think of the City of Unjust Death as modern-day jail. Even though there is no punishment since the souls are not yet judged, the souls have to endure bad conditions, violence, and abuse.

Some people think that it is important to hold special rituals for those who died unnaturally because one should always try their best to save their loved ones from suffering (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 98). Others believe that those who died unnaturally did not live out their designated lifespans and will turn into resentful souls because they have regrets (Lagerwey 171). Therefore, special rituals are added to the merit-generating ceremony for cases that involve unnatural deaths to save them from the City of Unjust Death or the Pool Hell and to provide them with merit for a better rebirth. This chapter includes details on the three different special rituals performed for unnatural death: Soul Calling, Breaking the Hell, and Leading Spiral.

²⁸ People who die of old age or sickness knew that their lifespan was coming to an end, so they are more prepared for death compared to those of unnatural death.

²⁹ Refer to Section 3.3.1 for more information on the three different Pool Hells.

³⁰ The time in the human realm is not the same as in Hell. People believe that the time in Hell is longer, which means that a day in the human realm can be a week in Hell.

3.1 Soul Calling (*zhaohun* 招魂)

In the early tradition, when one had died, the family members would call back the soul of the deceased by climbing atop buildings, facing north, holding out the clothes of the deceased, calling out his or her name thrice, and throwing the clothes to be picked up to cover the body of the deceased (Brown 11; Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 84–86). Before the influence of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, soul calling did not need to be performed by monks or priests, as it could be performed by any commoners. Buddhist monks and Taoist priests later adopted the Soul Calling ritual and added religious elements to it, a tradition that continues to be used today in Malaysia (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 84–86).

According to Lee, Soul Calling will be performed by monks or priests after one passed away so that the deceased's *Sanhun Qipo* 三魂七魄³¹ can rest within the spirit tablet or statuette (*hunshen* 魂身) while awaiting the merit-generating ceremony to happen. Liu and Yang also included the Soul Calling ritual during the merit-generating ceremony, suggesting that it is also performed in Taiwan and China (Yang 73–74; Liu 92–93). Even though this ritual is performed in almost every merit-generating ceremony, it is an optional ritual.

In my interview with Master Choy, he mentioned that it is only compulsory to perform Soul Calling if the deceased died due to an accident such as a car accident or suicide (see Fig. 3). For natural death, Choy mentioned that the Opening a Road in the Darkness ritual performed in front of the deceased's body is sufficient to guide the soul to the underworld. On the other hand, when one died in an accident, a priest or a monk will need to go to the place of the accident and

³¹ There are multiple ways to translate 三魂七魄 such as the spiritual souls and the animal souls, the heavenly souls and the earthly souls, or the spiritual faculties and the animal spirits. I choose to keep it as *Sanhun Qipo* because I am using it as a proper noun. *Hun* accounts for the human's personality and *Po* accounts for the body's growth and physiological functions. Taoists believed that every human being is made up of three *Hun* and seven *Po* that dissociates at death. Since the concept of *Hun* and *Po* is too complex and out of the scope of this paper, I will refer to them as soul for simplicity.

perform an in situ Soul Calling ritual (see Fig. 3). According to Choy, an in situ Soul Calling ritual can collect the deceased's *Sanhun Qipo* for the merit-generating ceremony. If one of the *Hun* or *Po* were missing, the deceased would be born with disabilities in the next life.



Fig. 3. A Taoist priest performing soul calling at the place of the car crash accident: “Soul calling for the Chinese youth who died at the scene of a car crash accident. (*huaqing chehuowang xianchang zhaohun* 华青车祸亡现场招魂)”. *China Press*, 18 March 2020, <https://eastcoast.chinapress.com.my/?p=57311>. Accessed 18 April 2023.

According to Lee, Soul Calling is also practiced by Buddhist monks (*Hun Qi Gui Tian* 84–86). These monks are from the Incense and Flower (*Xianghua* 香花)³² tradition that has roots in the motherland of Hakka people, Meizhou City (Tam; Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 118–20; Tan, *Chinese Religion in Malaysia* 113). In Malaysia, the Incense and Flower tradition is adopted by the Teochew, Hakka, and Kwongsai subgroups (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 118–20). In my interview with Master Kai Yang Shi, he mentioned that Buddhist texts do not contain instructions for soul

³² The Incense and Flower tradition is called *Shijiao* 释教 in Taiwan. It is regarded by a lot of mainstream Buddhists as heresy because the monks are not vegetarians, can get married and have children, but wear Buddhist robes and chant Buddhist texts.

calling and people usually perform it according to local customs. Nonetheless, he stressed that for one to be considered a Buddhist funeral ritual, it should be vegetarian, no animal sacrificed, and no burning of paper figures or money.

3.2 Breaking the Hell (*dacheng* 打城 / *podiyu* 破地狱 / *posha* 破沙)

Monks and priests perform the Breaking the Hell³³ ritual to save souls from the City of Unjust Death. Unlike the Soul Calling ritual, this ritual is not originally from the Confucian tradition. Although the idea of the City of Unjust Death came into existence from the *Jade Record* during the Northern Song dynasty, the idea of “unjust death” (*wangsi* 枉死) has been around since the Han dynasty. Initially, “unjust death” was used to describe those who died in vain due to tyranny or warfare, unjust trials, or unethical doctors (Chen). Nevertheless, with the development of the concept of hell and the afterlife due to Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, and various classical texts on the idea of “unjust death”, the City of Unjust Death was developed as a temporary solution for the souls who died unnaturally (Chen). As the Breaking the Hell ritual varies across Taoism and Folk Buddhism, and also between different Chinese subgroups, this section will explore this ritual from the perspective of religion and subgroups.

3.2.1 Religion

a. Taoism

In Taoism, the main deity that is involved in this ritual is Lord of Salvation Taiyi (*Taiyi Jiuku Tianzun* 太乙救苦天尊)³⁴ (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 96–98; Lagerwey 216–37). Lord of Salvation Taiyi has three nature: One who guides the souls to the Eastern Heavenly Pureland

³³ There are multiple ways to name this ritual (see Section 3.2.2). I name it Breaking the Hell because the ritual requires the priests to symbolically break into the Hell to save the souls.

³⁴ The Chinese character for Taiyi can be written as 太乙 or 太一 (Xiao 59).

(*Dongfang Changle Jingtū* 东方长乐净土), one who rescues humans from sufferings, and one who delivers the souls from Hell (Xiao 7–9; Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 96–98). Owing to the aforementioned divine natures, Taoist priests will summon Lord of Salvation Taiyi’s help to attack Hell so that the souls that are trapped in the City of Unjust Death can be delivered.

Taoist priests would prepare something that resembles a city, for example, a papier-mâché city, and break it afterward. The symbolism of the “city” is to represent the City of Unjust Death. According to Taoist tradition, the souls that are stuck in the City of Unjust Death are suffering and desperately asking to be released from Hell. Owing to the compassion of Lord of Salvation Taiyi, he went to negotiate with the jailers that are guarding the City of Unjust Death so that he can get the souls out of Hell. Nonetheless, the jailers refused to do so, and the prisoners wailed and cried. In his righteous indignation, Lord of Salvation Taiyi broke through the gate of the City of Unjust Death and saved the souls (Su; Xiao 61). According to Master Choy, this Taoist ritual is commonly practiced within the Malaysian Cantonese and Hokkien communities.³⁵

b. Folk Buddhism

In Folk Buddhism, the Breaking the Hell ritual is based on the story of “Mulian Rescues His Mother” 《*Mulian jiumu* 目连救母》.³⁶ According to the Buddhist tradition, after Mulian obtained supranormal power, he was able to use his supranormal powers to visit his mother in the realm of ghosts. However, the food that he offered her immediately turned into flames. The Buddha told him to make offerings to the sangha in a bowl and the power of their meditative practices can save one’s ancestor and loved ones from rebirths in the unfortunate realm (Buswell and Lopez 499). Nonetheless, when this story was adapted into the Chinese folk religion, instead

³⁵ See Section 3.2.2 for more information about how this ritual is performed by Cantonese and Hokkien.

³⁶ Mulian 目連 or Mujianlian 目犍連 is the Chinese transliteration of Maudgalyayana, Gautama Buddha’s ten principal disciples.

of saving his mother by making offerings to the sangha, Mulian himself went to the City of Unjust Death with a khakkhara,³⁷ broke its gates and saved his mother.

In my interview with Master Shi, he told me that not every monk is capable of performing this ritual as not all Buddhist traditions or Buddhist masters teach their students this ritual. An example of a Malaysian Mahayana Buddhist monk who was able to perform the Breaking the Hell ritual was the Malaysian Buddhist Institute's first Treasurer, the late Master Qing Liang Shi (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 96–98; Chin and Ching). The late Master Sheng Yen of Taiwan mentioned that there is no City of Unjust Death in Buddhism, but he recommended people hold a merit-generating ceremony for those who suffered an unnatural death. This is to ensure that the souls can listen to the dharma, accept the fact that they died and let go of their regrets to escape from the sufferings caused by the unnatural death (*Is There a City of Unjust Death in Buddhism?*). In Malaysia, this ritual is commonly practiced within the Malaysian Hakka community (Choy).

3.2.2 Subgroups

For this subsection, we will be looking at the Breaking the Hell ritual practiced by Cantonese, Hokkien,³⁸ and Hakka. The Cantonese ritual is called Breaking the Hell (*Podiyu* 破地獄), the Hokkien ritual is called Attacking the City (*Dacheng* 打城), and the Hakka ritual is called Breaking the Sand (*Posha* 破沙). Cantonese and Hokkien's Breaking the Hell rituals are usually Taoist rituals, and Hakka's Breaking the Hell rituals are usually Incense and Flower Buddhist rituals.

³⁷ Khakkhara is a "mendicant's staff" that monks carried during their wanderings to scare away wild animals and to ward off any small animals in their path. It could also serve as a means of letting his presence be known to the laity when begging for alms (Buswell and Lopez 432).

³⁸ Due to a lack of resources, I am following the Tainan Lingbao ritual (footnote 11) for the Hokkien ritual since Malaysia Hokkien culture overlaps with Taiwanese culture.

a. Cantonese

Before the start of the Cantonese Breaking the Hell ritual, the priests set up the “gates” for the City of Unjust Death (see Fig. 4). To do so, the priests require five items: a pot of burning oil, tiles, eggs, candles, and joss sticks. The burning oil represents the burning of the City, the tiles surrounding the pot represent the gates, and the eggs represent the City’s guards. During the ritual, the priest uses his sword to break the tiles to symbolize breaking the gates of the City. He then sprays water from his mouth into the burning oil while jumping across the fire with a spirit tablet in his hand. When the water makes contact with the boiling oil, it produces a larger flame. When the priest successfully jumps across the fire, it means that the soul is liberated from the City of Unjust Death (Choy; “破地狱 [Breaking the Hell] Ritual”).

b. Hokkien

For the Hokkien ritual, the City of Unjust Death is represented by the papier-mâché castle (see Fig. 5). Depending on local customs, the spirit tablet can be placed inside or outside of the castle. Similar to the Cantonese ritual, Hokkien priests will use their swords to break all directions of the castle to symbolize breaking the gates of the City. The deceased’s family members will shake the castle during the ritual and ask the soul of the deceased to escape the City. Then, the family members will drop the moon blocks (*jiaobei* 筊杯)³⁹ and ask if the soul has managed to escape. When the moon block is in the *shengjiao* 聖筊 position (see Fig. 6) three times continuously, the family members and the priests will know that the soul has successfully escaped the City of Unjust Death (Jiang).

³⁹ Moon blocks are wooden divination tools (see Fig. 6) that are used in pairs and thrown to ask questions and receive answers in the form of a yes or no. When the answer is a yes, the moon blocks will be in the *shengjiao* position (think of it as being a tail and a head). Moon blocks can be used to seek guidance from deities, ancestors, or spirits.



Fig. 4. Image of the priest performing the Cantonese Breaking the Hell ritual: (“破地獄 [Breaking the Hell] Ritual”)



Fig. 5. Image of the papier-mâché castle used in the Hokkien ritual of “Attack on City”:
Guanhuashengmingliyiguanhuaishiye 冠樺生命禮儀關懷事業. Attack on the City of Unjust
Death (*dawangsiheng* 打枉死城). Facebook, 22 Jan. 2020, 8:10 a.m.,
www.facebook.com/cellphone0966729733/posts/2526510797627751. Accessed 4 April 2023.



Fig. 6. Image of the moon block in the *shengjiao* 聖筊 position: Hula. “Sunday Souvenirs: Moon Blocks Taiwan.” Sept. 2020,

<https://ihearthula.com/2020/09/27/sunday-souvenirs-moon-blocks-taiwan/>.

c. Hakka

For the Hakka ritual, before the ceremony, the priest will make two sand dragons on the floor (see Fig. 7). In the past, a sand snake and a sand turtle were made instead of sand dragons (see Fig. 8). Then, four piles of sand should be placed in front and behind the animal carvings to represent the four corners of Hell. At each corner of Hell, there is a city gate with an egg. Facial features are drawn onto the eggs to symbolize the keeper of the gates. Each gate is decorated with flags of four colors: green, red, white, and blue. The yellow flag is placed on the body of the dragon. The five colors are used to represent the five directions of heaven and earth. On top of the two dragons, an egg is put on each of their noses with the words "tortoise" and "snake" respectively to represent the two generals of hell: Tortoise and Snake (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 96–98).

The priest will lead the family members to run around the dragons to invoke the deities. Then, the priest receives and reads the Book of Pardon (*shezuishu* 赦罪書) to forgive the

deceased for their sins. However, major sins such as murder and arson are treated separately. The priest leaps over the pot of burning oil and tries to make it into a larger flame, just like the Cantonese culture. Following that, the priest uses his cane to break the gates on the sand pile and the two eggs on the dragon's head. This symbolizes the breaking of the City's gates and driving off the two generals.



Fig. 7. Image of the two sand dragons used in the Hakka ritual: Wongll, Elaine. Two Sand

Dragons. *Facebook*, 7 May. 2020, 12:08 p.m.,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10163485768610254&set=p.10163485768610254&type=3>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2023.



Fig. 8. Image of the Tortoise and the Snake used in the Hakka ritual to represent the two Hell generals: Choong, Rynn. Tortoise and Turtle General. *Facebook*, 21 July. 2020, 02:37 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3252911228105287&set=p.3252911228105287&type=3>. Accessed 4 Apr. 2023.

3.3 Leading Spiral (*khan-chñg*) 牵藏

3.3.1 Types of Pool Hell and *Chñg* 藏

In Malaysia, Leading Spiral (*Qianzang* 牵藏) is a Hokkien ritual performed during funerals or the Pudu ceremony. In Hokkien, this ritual is called *khan-chñg*, where *khan* means to lead and *chñg* means rotation (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 91–95). Here, the *chñg* 藏 also refers to the long cylindrical item used in this ritual (see Fig. 9). To perform this ritual, the deceased must suffer from blood-related death (such as bleeding, childbirth, pregnancy, or accidents), fire-related death, or drowning-related death. According to local customs, those who died from blood-related death, fire-related death, or drowning will be trapped in the Blood Pool Hell

(*Xuechi Diyu* 血池地狱), Fire Pool Hell (*Huochi Diyu* 火池地狱), or Water Pool Hell (*Shuichi Diyu* 水池地狱) respectively. Therefore, Blood-*chñg*, Fire-*chñg*, or Water-*chñg* is performed to ensure that souls can be saved from the Blood, Fire, or Water Hell respectively to be reborn as humans (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 91–95).

In Malaysia, the *chñg* is usually made of bamboo and shaped into a long cylinder with two layers: inner and outer. The outer layer is glued with colorful paper of different patterns and paper figurines that represent the ghosts of the underworld while the inner part is made with paper without patterns. There is a long pole in the middle of the *chñg* so that it can be fixed on the ground to allow the *chñg* to be turned. The colors of the *chñg* depend on the type of death. Blood-*chñg* uses red *chñg* (see Fig. 8), Fire-*chñg* uses red-black *chñg* while Water-*chñg* uses white-cyan *chñg*. According to Lee, the Fire-*chñg* ritual exists only in Malaysia as Taiwan and China do not have Fire-*chñg*. Traditionally, the Blood-*chñg* ritual was used only for women who died while giving birth, but it has since extended to all people who suffered blood-related death.



Fig. 9. Image of a girl turning the red *chñg* during the *khan-chñg* ritual (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 94).

3.3.2 Items and Their Meanings

To perform *khan-chñg*, one must prepare a *chñg*, a banana tree, a chicken or duck placed in a bamboo cage, a bucket of red water, a small paper boat (red or green), a pair of clogs, a water basin, towels, a small papier-mâché ladder, a black papier-mâché crow, a red papier-mâché crow (white or cyan crow if Water-*Chñg*), and the clothes worn by the deceased to be placed on top of the bamboo cage (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 91–93).



Fig. 10. Example of some items that are used in the ritual (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 92).

According to Lee, each item mentioned in the previous paragraph has its meaning. The banana tree is watered with red water so that when the bucket is emptied, it symbolizes the blood Pool Hell dries up and the soul is delivered. As the Hokkien saying goes: “A banana (tree) gives birth to its son and dies for its son”.⁴⁰ Therefore, the banana tree was originally used to “advise” the souls of women who died in pregnancy or childbirth to accept their death. The chicken or the duck is used in the Blood-*Chñg* or the Water-*Chñg* respectively to save the souls from drowning

⁴⁰ Hokkien. King-tsiò thòò kiánn uī kiánn sí 弓蕉吐团為团死.

in the Pool Hell. The crows are used to “eat” away the leeches that are sticking to the souls. The usage of the boat and the ladder will be explained in the next subsection. Lastly, the clothes and the towels are prepared so that the souls can change into them after being delivered from the Pool Hell (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 95).

3.3.3 Performing the Ritual

Before the start of the ritual, a statuette that represents the deceased is glued to the bottom of the *Chñg*, while a ghost figure is glued to the top of the *Chñg*. The priest chants the prayers and the family members rotate the *Chñg* and drop the moon blocks. Only when the moon block is in the *shengjiao* position can the statuette advance to the second level (see Fig. 6). For every increase in a level, the priest breaks that level’s inner layer. When the statuette finishes the seventh level, the priest breaks the ghost figure on the top of the *Chñg*. Then, the priest puts the statuette into the paper boat, circles it below the *Chñg*, bathes the statuette, and brings it up the ladder. The last step of bringing the statuette up the ladder is to symbolize the deliverance of the soul from the Pool Hell (Lee, *Hun Qi Gui Tian* 91–95).

3.3.4 Rituals for Non-Hokkien

There are no rules and regulations forbidding non-Hokkiens to perform the *khan-chñg* ritual for the deceased. Nonetheless, most, if not all, non-Hokkiens perform only the Blood-*Chñg* rituals. Tee told me that Teochew people reserve the Blood-*Chñg* ritual for only women who died during pregnancy or childbirth. For Cantonese, Master Choy told me that the priests recite the *Blood Lake Sutra* (*xuehujing* 血湖经) instead of performing the Blood-*Chñg* to deliver the souls of the women who died during pregnancy or childbirth from the Blood Pond. In all cases, *khan-chñg* for the non-Hokkiens refers to the practice of the Blood-*Chñg* ritual.

Section 4: Discussions

4.1 Special Rituals and Confucianism Values

The Blood-Chñg ritual and the "Breaking the Hell" ritual can be seen as expressions of filial piety, a core value in Confucianism. Filial piety refers to the duty and respect that children have towards their parents and ancestors, which includes taking care of them in life and also in death. Both rituals involve the survivors hiring priests or monks to save their ancestors from Hell, thus displaying filial qualities. Almost all Malaysian Chinese understand the concept of karma or “you reap what you sow”, and believe that every soul will be judged by Yama in Hell after death. Nonetheless, some people are willing to hire priests to perform the Blood-Chñg ritual and the Breaking the Hell ritual to snatch their ancestors’ souls from Yama so that these souls can enter the pure lands or have a better rebirth.

When asked if the action of snatching souls from Yama can be seen as an interference with the afterlife “justice system” and generate bad karmic results, Jin Tee mentioned that these are not the main concern when performing these rituals. For family members and relatives of the deceased, the most important thing that they care about is that these special rituals are conducted successfully so that the souls of their loved ones will not be suffering in Hell. Moreover, for those who are still alive, these rituals also serve as a solution to comfort them to accept the fact that their loved ones have passed away and they should move on.

From my experience, most Malaysian Chinese never question the purpose and consequences of performing these rituals to save their ancestors from Hell. This is because they are taught that a filial child will be obedient to his or her parents and treat them nicely so that the parents will not be sad. Therefore, even at death, a filial child needs to ensure that his or her

parents are treated just like how there are still alive.⁴¹ Not wanting their parents to suffer and feel sad is one of the reasons why the survivors are willing to perform these rituals. Another reason why survivors are willing to perform these rituals is they believe that filial piety is able to move the Heavens or receive good merit. *The Twenty-four Filial Exemplars* recorded that filial sons are able to receive blessings from the Heavens. For example, Shun was extremely filial to his evil stepmother and Heavens decided to protect him from danger, while Guoju was willing to bury his son alive to have extra food for his mother so the Heavens decided to award him with gold.

Even if interfering with the afterlife “justice system” might create bad karma, Malaysian Chinese believe the merit or blessings received from being filial will outweigh any potential bad consequences. Thus, it can be seen that the value of filial piety as highlighted in Confucianism is the driving force behind the practice of these special rituals as they demonstrate the lengths to which some people are willing to go to fulfill their duties towards their ancestors and ensure their well-being, even beyond death.

4.2 Blood-*Chñg* and the Status of Women

Among the three special rituals discussed in this paper, the Blood-*Chñg* ritual is a ritual specifically designed for women who died during childbirth or pregnancy. Traditionally, this ritual was used only for women who died while giving birth, but it has since extended to all people who suffered blood-related death. Although the Blood-*Chñg* ritual did not originate from Malaysia, some Malaysian Chinese still practice this ritual as they believe that it will help the souls of the women who suffered during childbirth or pregnancy. This highlights the traditional gender roles and patriarchy that exist within the Malaysian Chinese community.

⁴¹ (When your parents are) alive, serve them with propriety; (when they) die, bury them with propriety, worship them with propriety.” (Analects 2:5)

Regardless of what women do in their lifetime, they are considered within the Taoist context as being spiritually unclean due to menstrual blood and childbirth (Wu). Thus, the women's souls can only be saved from Hell if the *Blood Lake Sutra* is chanted or the Blood-*Chñg* ritual is performed. From my experience of growing up within the Malaysian Chinese community, women always help out in funeral rituals, but they never complain or question the necessity or reasoning behind the Blood-*Chñg* ritual or any rituals performed specifically for women. In fact, I also personally know some Malaysian Chinese women who think that menstrual blood is impure and they will not go to temples or attend any religious events so that they will not “contaminate” the holy places (*chuhui* 触秽).

As a result of this belief, women may be excluded from certain roles or activities due to their perceived impurity. This is evident because most of the funeral rituals are performed by male priests. Master Choy told me that in the past, only males could become Taoist priests, but nowadays, females can also become priests. Nonetheless, there are some rituals that female priests can not perform such as the chanting of the *Blood Lake Sutra* or Crossing the Bridge because they menstruate.

In my interviews, some interviewees used the term “that thing” to refer to menstrual blood. Within the Malaysian Chinese community, menstruation is considered a taboo topic and people try to avoid talking about it or they discuss it with euphemisms. As society develops and progresses, we should critically examine the traditional beliefs and practices that may be holding women back and try to instill the correct view and knowledge among young people through classes such as Biology or sex education.

4.3 Special Rituals as the Dying Heritage

In recent years, more and more people have chosen to opt out of funeral rituals with folk religion elements and instead opt for pure Buddhist or religionless rituals suggesting that these traditional rituals may be becoming a dying art. As society progresses and modernizes, these traditional practices can become less relevant or appealing to younger generations as they see these practices as superstitious, cumbersome, or environmentally unfriendly. In addition, the growing awareness and appreciation for the simplicity and peacefulness of Buddhist rituals (one that is vegetarian, no animal sacrificed, and no burning of paper figures or money) is also a reason why the more noisy and superstitious Chinese folk religious rituals are decreasing in popularity.

The decline in popularity of these special rituals could be seen as a reflection of changing cultural attitudes and beliefs. However, it is worth noting that these rituals still hold significant cultural and historical value and are an important part of Chinese tradition and heritage. For example, the rituals performed by the priests during funerals are not simply just the chantings of prayers, but they also involve music, singing, and performances. Most of the practices are passed down through lineage and they would disappear if no one performs them in the future. With Chinese folk religion rituals decreasing in popularity, certain traditional craftsmanship might also be at risk such as the making of joss sticks and papier-mâché items used in the special rituals. We can choose to not practice a certain ritual due to it being outdated, superstitious, or misogynistic, but we should not ignore the performances and craftsmanship aspect of the ritual as they are an important cultural heritage that may die out.

Conclusion

Every living being will experience death as it is an essential component of the cycle of life. Depending on how death is viewed, funerary rituals can take the form of a simple, standalone sermon, or they can assume a more elaborate form that consists of multiple programs that last for days. Through the study of funeral rituals, one can observe how each culture has its way of handling death and making sure the survivors can accept death and move on. In this paper, we see how the special rituals practiced by Malaysian Chinese for unnatural deaths fulfilled their functions from the perspective of cultural anthropology and religion.

The special rituals performed by Malaysian Chinese for people who died unnaturally are based on two assumptions: all souls will be judged in Hell by Yama, and souls of those who died unnaturally will be stuck in Hell. Therefore, these special rituals are there to help deliver the poor souls from Hell so that the souls do not need to wait in Hell until their designated lifespan end. There may indeed be some parts of the rituals that cause more confusion than others, for example, does a pregnant woman who died in a car accident go to the Pool Hell or the City of Unjust Death, or why are women spiritually unclean just because they have menstrual cycles? Some people might criticize that these rituals are superstitious and useless, but I believe that these traditional rituals have played their parts because they form the basis of rules about how one can grieve and move on. Everyone has their own beliefs, so if these rituals can make the survivors feel better, it is useful in promoting positive values and mental well-being. Nonetheless, I hope that the younger generation can be educated to have the right view instilled within them so that they do not grow up believing that women are spiritually unclean because they menstruate.

The performances and craftsmanship in these rituals are precious. They should be preserved and passed on so that future generations can understand Malaysian Chinese culture and heritage, something that is increasingly important in a country that is becoming more polarizing along ethnic and religious lines. As the Chinese are an ethnic minority in Malaysia with decreasing population, it is also challenging for them to preserve their cultural practice in the long run. Thus, I hope that this paper can motivate more scholars in relevant fields to research and record Malaysian Chinese culture, especially funerary cultures so that they can be a reference for those who wish to study this topic in the future.

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