

CHINESE BURIAL CUSTOMS IN HONG KONG *

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Before 1949, burial customs in China were largely geared to the traditions of a predominantly agricultural country. Except in the New Territories, however, Hong Kong was not in a position to follow the same rural traditions of burial procedure and therefore was forced to evolve a pattern more or less of its own. The postwar change of Government in China has led to even further changes in local burial customs.

For non-Christian Chinese in Hong Kong the focus of burial practices is the veneration of family ancestors. In its extreme form this can be taken to mean the belief that if surviving relatives and descendants pay sufficient respect to their dead, the dead in their turn will exercise a benevolent influence over the lives and prosperity of their family.

The deceased is considered to be in a better position to watch over his earthly descendants if buried close to his native place, where it is also, of course, easier for his family to pay their respects to him. This has led to the practice of conveying the deceased back to the place in China whence he came and interring him in a traditional burial ground. It is well known that, no matter where they die, the bodies of overseas Chinese have, where possible, usually been conveyed back to their homes for burial; when they could afford to do so, relatives have followed this same principle where death occurred in Hong Kong. Coffins and remains of Chinese who died in various parts of the world, e.g. Borneo, the Philippines, Indonesia, the U.S.A., have been shipped to China via Hong Kong which in prewar and immediately postwar days enjoyed a certain pre-eminence as a transit centre for the onward movement of human remains.

The trans-shipment was not always immediate. Circumstances often imposed some delay. To meet the difficulties of holding the coffin temporarily, the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals in prewar days set up in Hong Kong a coffin repository in Sandy Bay where remains could be stored on payment of a monthly fee. This repository served its original purpose well till 1949 when difficulties arose in the way of transferring bodies into China. At present, there is virtually no movement of coffins into China, with the result that the repository has gradually accumulated

* The writer wishes to make it clear that, in putting forward this article, he has simply recorded information which has come to his notice incidentally in connection with other duties. He is neither an anthropologist nor a trained research worker, but simply an amateur with an interest.

nearly 10,000 coffins, urns and containers. The accommodation ranges from single rooms, where one or more coffins rest on trestles, to larger rooms holding hundreds of coffins, together with exhumed remains in a variety of receptacles, e.g. earthenware urns, rattan baskets, wooden boxes and even secondhand tin containers. In some cases, all trace of the relatives of the deceased has been lost and it is proposed to re-inter such remains in a special Tung Wah plot at the Sandy Ridge Cemetery, to which further reference will presently be made.

A clear pattern is now emerging, whereby Hong Kong has almost ceased to be a transit centre for the conveyance of deceased Chinese to their native place. The next best alternative, both for overseas dead and Chinese residents of Hong Kong itself, is to bury in Hong Kong instead, though that is not to imply that local cemeteries are doing a brisk business in snapping up overseas trade.

In examining the details of current burial procedure, a distinction must be drawn between the urban areas and the New Territories. In the congested urban areas, where land is needed for development and health measures assume greater importance, there is not the same freedom in choice of burial grounds. Relatives must decide whether to bury the dead in a private cemetery, with higher fees, or in a public cemetery, with lower fees and compulsory exhumation of remains after a period of years.

Taking the urban areas first, let us trace the events of a typical funeral. Unlike the earlier traditional habits of mainland China, where preparations for burial were largely carried out by members of the family, the current practice in Hong Kong is for the relatives, on death occurring in their midst, at once to call in an undertaker or someone from a funeral parlour. The undertaker provides a coffin, encoffins the body and conveys it thus to a cemetery for burial, but he is debarred by law from bringing dead bodies on to his own business premises. A funeral parlour on the other hand has wider scope. Its staff will enter the home of the deceased and remove the body to the parlour, either in a basket-woven container coloured silver, blue or yellow, or on a plain canvas stretcher. The advantage of using a funeral parlour instead of an undertaker lies in the fact that, with the body actually held temporarily on the premises of the parlour, it is possible there to carry out funeral rites which would be otherwise inconvenient where an undertaker conveyed the encoffined body direct from the home to the cemetery.

Chinese in Hong Kong dislike holding a dead body overnight in the private home. They much prefer its immediate removal after death. Neighbours too are far from happy at the thought of death in the near vicinity, nor in earlier days used they to be

in favour of allowing the body to be removed in a coffin past their particular floor in a two or three storeyed tenement building. Chinese coffins usually consist lengthwise of four sections of tree trunk and are therefore bulky, irrespective of whether the coffin is cheap or one of the expensive polished varieties. Manoeuvring these coffins up and down narrow tenement staircases, with inevitable banging against walls, might be likened to death tapping at the door: a harbinger of bad luck.

To meet this problem of removal from upper floors in the urban areas, it used to be the custom up till five or six years ago to construct a bamboo staging outside the building, so that the coffin could be taken out of the window and be brought down the staging to the hearse in the roadway. The custom has now almost entirely disappeared for a number of reasons, largely economic: new buildings have grown too high for stagings to reach most upper storeys; the cost of long bamboo from China has risen enormously as a result of its use for scaffolding in the current building boom; the practice of glassing-in verandahs and balconies has made windows too small for coffins to fit through; traffic congestion in the streets makes the authorities chary of allowing even more obstruction in the form of these stagings on roads and pavements. To take their place as a means of removing the body from the private premises, basket-woven containers or stretchers have come to be used, and they are far less expensive.

If an undertaker is engaged, he will prepare the body in the deceased's home, encoffin and remove it either direct to the cemetery or to a Government cemetery depot in Hong Kong or Kowloon, where it can be held overnight pending Government conveyance to a public cemetery. A farewell pavilion at each depot provides free facilities for the relatives to hold services of any denomination or to perform other last rites.

If a funeral parlour is engaged, the body is conveyed in the basket-woven container or stretcher to the parlour for preparation, encoffining and almost invariably a service. In a few cases, embalming is carried out but this is a refinement that seems to hold no particular significance, since burial takes place normally within the forty-eight hours allowed by law for the body to remain on the premises. In parts of China, it apparently used to be the custom to delay burial for periods of up to seven weeks. But the more tropical climate of Hong Kong and the ever-present risk of disease has made it necessary to insist on a forty-eight hours limit in funeral parlours.

When encoffined in a funeral parlour, the body is placed in a farewell room where it is customary for the immediate relatives to maintain a vigil (overnight, if necessary) until the time comes for conveyance to a cemetery or crematorium. During the vigil and funeral, the close relatives (i.e. widow and widower, sons and

daughters, daughters-in-law and grandchildren) are often dressed in the traditional mourning colour of white, usually in a costume provided by the funeral parlour and consisting, for women, of a white skirt and an upper garment resembling half a sack with one corner placed over the head. Men tend to wear white gowns, with a white band tied round the forehead. A thin surcoat of sack-cloth (haaù ma pò 孝麻布) may be worn over the white mourning clothes by a widow, daughter and daughter-in-law of the deceased; a son may wear a smaller square of sack-cloth over his head.

Friends and relatives will pay their respects to the deceased by bowing towards the coffin three times and once towards the chief mourners, who are usually ranged to one side and may be kneeling with their heads towards the ground. For this public lying in state, the deceased is sometimes placed in a special coffin that leaves the upper portion of the body temporarily exposed. Before burial, the missing portion of the coffin lid will be replaced. The farewell room throughout the vigil and lying in state may be lit with candles and incense sticks, often making the atmosphere uncomfortably heavy and oppressive. In the past, it was customary to bang gongs throughout the vigil, to keep away the evil spirits, but this practice is now prohibited to avoid nuisance to neighbours. It is also customary amongst the less well-to-do for the female relatives of the deceased, particularly a widow, to give a public demonstration of grief in the form of wailing, weeping and loud cries. Mute grief would neither satisfy custom nor perhaps offer adequate incentive to the spirit of the deceased to exercise a benevolent influence on his descendants.

In practice, the last rites at a funeral parlour usually continue till midday, for the practical reason that it may take the whole morning to complete formalities such as registering the death and making arrangements with the relevant authorities for burial or cremation. The body is then taken by motor hearse to the cemetery or crematorium, accompanied by relatives. Friends may also accompany the hearse if they wish, but there is no objection to their departing earlier after the last rites have been performed. For a particularly large funeral, the journey to the cemetery may be preceded by a ceremonial procession in the neighbourhood, with funeral bands, mourners on foot, the hearse with the coffin, and large wicker framework plaques covered in silver and blue paper describing the deceased. The writer once saw a one-quarter mile procession, with no less than sixteen separate bands, complete an entire circuit of the Happy Valley race course before departing for the cemetery. Some of the funeral bands may be hired by the descendants of the deceased; other bands may be hired by friends wishing to offer condolences.

At the cemetery, the coffin is normally lowered into the grave without further ceremony and the hole filled. Just before the hole is filled, it is customary for each member of the family present to throw in a handful of earth. After filling, two candles are usually lit and placed near the head of the grave and three incense-sticks nearer the foot. Sometimes, absent members of the family may depute other relatives to set out candles and incense-sticks on their behalf, in which case the proportions are still observed. An offering of oranges may be peeled and placed on the grave, together with paper money. Finally, crackers are let off.

Occasionally, after the coffin has been lowered and before the earth is thrown in, a male descendant present will make a cut in a live cock so that blood flows out. The cock will then be held over the grave to allow its blood to drop on the coffin and sides of the hole, in the traditional hope that the breeding properties of the cock will be transmitted to the deceased. Provided that the deceased is over middle age, sex normally makes no difference. A more modern version of this practice omits the incision on the cock, which is simply swung over the hole on the end of a piece of string.

The last rites sometimes involve the assistance of Taoist or Buddhist monks, even though neither the relatives nor the deceased may necessarily profess complete belief in either of those religions. The monks normally appear in a team of five: the leader with the other four ranged in pairs. Their form of service usually follows the pattern of Taoist and Buddhist chanting, accompanied by music, the striking of bells, small brass ringing bowls and wooden sound-boxes (*muk ue* 木魚). In major funerals, where the body is held elsewhere than in a funeral parlour, the last rites may continue for seven full days before burial, with further services every 7th day for a total of forty-nine days. If expense proves too much, some of the weekly services may be omitted but it is customary to include the 5th one, when married daughters and granddaughters are expected to contribute either wholly or in part; the final service is also required. At these weekly rites, the next-of-kin may sometimes cook rice and beans (red or green) which are then eaten by relatives in the hope of attaining long life (*chué shaü faân* 爇壽飯).

Another custom still often encountered is the placing of several pairs of trousers on the deceased, whether male or female. Half a dozen pairs of trousers is not uncommon. Based on a pun between the Cantonese *foð* (褲 "trousers") and *foð* (富 "riches"), the object is to provide wealth for the spirit of the deceased. Including jacket and underwear, an even number of garments is normally placed on a male; an odd number on a female.

In the New Territories, there are at present no funeral parlours and few undertakers. As in the agricultural interior of China, practical responsibility still falls mainly on the kinsmen of the deceased. The customary burial of villagers is in two stages: initial coffin burial, and subsequent exhumation and re-interment of remains. Having encoffined the body, the relatives normally sustain the vigil directly outside the home under a temporary shelter. Burial then takes place in a traditional village area, but no monument is erected beyond a small unshaped stone at the head of the grave. After five years or more, the body is exhumed. The bones will be cleaned by the family and be placed either in a funerary urn (*kam t'aap* 金塔) or in a formal masonry grave (*shaan fan* 山墳) shaped like a horseshoe. In the funerary urn, the bones will be arranged in a manner as if the deceased were sitting in the Buddhist lotus posture.

The siting of funerary urns and horseshoe graves is of particular importance. Relatives will go to great lengths to ensure that the *fung shui* 風水 of the site is propitious. In other words, they wish to ensure that the benevolent influence of the site will protect the deceased, as a member of the family, so that he in turn will look kindly upon his relatives. The site is usually high up, commanding a view of water, and on a ridge or spur which represents, for instance, a dragon, snake, shrimp or crab in its formation. Standing with one's back to a horseshoe grave, one sees a half circle within a radius of ten yards, which is normally regarded as sacrosanct. Disturbance of the ground is regarded with strong disfavour. Traditionally, the left arm of the panorama in front should consist of a long ridge (containing a "green dragon") and the right arm of a shorter ridge (containing a "white tiger"). In a horseshoe grave, the exhumed remains are buried in a jar in the centre, just in front of a stone plaque (*pei shék* 碑石) that records the name of the deceased, the date of his death, and other details. Important graves of recorded ancestors or founders of a clan are often flanked by a small shrine (*haú t'ó* 后土) on either side and sometimes another behind, at a distance of ten to twenty feet from the main grave. The object of the shrines is to persuade the earth god to look after the grave.

Whether the exhumed remains are to be placed in a funerary urn or in a horseshoe grave seems to be governed by the sex and general standing of the deceased in the clan, or even by the financial state of the relatives at the time of exhumation. The remains are normally fit for exhumation after a minimum of five years of burial, but, even so, exhumation should not strictly take place unless there has been no pregnancy amongst the deceased's close female relatives in the immediately preceding nine months. This requirement, which would tend to impose some hardship

on the male relatives, can be got round by omitting pregnant wives from the ceremony. There is also a belief that exhumation should not take place during the years on which fall the 51st, 61st, 71st and other such birthdays of the male head of the family.

In Chinese public cemeteries, the same principle of exhumation is practised. At the end of each year, the particular coffin section where burials have been taking place is closed and left untouched for five years. At the end of that time, an official notice of intention to clear graves is published, giving relatives six months in which to exhume remains privately and re-inter them in the urn section. Any remains not exhumed privately on the expiry of the period of notice are then exhumed by Government and the remains re-interred in an urn section. The cleared coffin section is then eventually used again for coffin burials.

Applying equally to urban and New Territories burials are the two important grave worshipping festivals of Ching Ming (105 days after the winter solstice, i.e. either 5th or 6th of April) and Chung Yeung (9th day of the 9th moon, i.e. in October). The first is the more important. The second was originally not a grave-worshipping festival at all, but an occasion for climbing to the top of a mountain to avoid evil spirits. Since so many graves are situated on hills, the practice of combining the hill climb with an opportunity of worshipping at graves has been developed.

Strict Cantonese belief also requires that, at *ch'un she* (春社), which falls annually about two weeks before the Ching Ming festival, relatives should pay their respects to persons who have died within the past year. This ceremony usually takes place at home and its participants are restricted to older persons.

At the Ching Ming and Chung Yeung festivals, it is customary for whole families to make an outing to their relatives' graves. There, offerings of pork, fruit and flowers are presented; incense and candles burnt; prayers offered; crackers let off. Minor repairs to the graves may be carried out and undergrowth cut back. Coffin graves in the New Territories may be marked with lime at the end and all types of graves usually have a piece of red paper and another piece of white paper underneath the red, tucked under a stone beside them. Exhumations will often be carried out at the Ching Ming festival. At the Tung Wah coffin repository, caskets of remains are opened and the bones spread out to air on sheets of paper.

Chinese believe that the spirit of a person leaves the body on death. In Hong Kong the general belief is that it descends into hell where the judge decides on the basis of the earthly merits of the deceased whether it may be allowed to return to earth by reincarnation as a child or, if very evil, as an animal. The main fear of the dead consists rather of the belief that to

touch the dead is to run the risk of becoming infected by an aura of ill-luck (*sz yan fung* 死人風) whereby all the misfortunes of the deceased will be transmitted.

Amongst fishermen fear of the dead and of ill-luck is particularly pronounced. At Tai O on the north-western end of Lantau, fisherfolk on their death bed may be taken from their boats to die in a special house maintained for the purpose near the cemetery.

During funeral processions in both the urban areas and the New Territories it is the practice to scatter different types of paper, representing money, along the route to the burial ground, particularly at cross-roads where traditionally malevolent spirits tend to congregate. It is hoped that in the confusion caused by the evil spirits grabbing the money the spirit of the deceased will be able to pass unscathed. The remainder of the paper money thrown out at points other than cross-roads is for the use of the spirit of the deceased in making his way back to his home three days after death (*saam ch'iu ooi wan* 三朝回魂). In many homes, a corner in a hall or passage may be reserved for a tablet and memorial, to house the spirit on its return to the home. This return of the spirit may at first sight be difficult to reconcile with the belief that the spirit descends into hell. The answer is that according to Chinese belief each dead person has a number of spirits. The descent of one of these spirits into hell is often assisted at the burial by the scattering and burning of specially printed hell bank notes (*meng t'ung chi pai* 冥通紙幣), together with paper effigies of clothes, suit-cases, motor cars, steam ships, aeroplanes, etc., often of most elaborate and detailed construction.

The impact of crowded living conditions, economy and improved public health have had their gradual effect in changing the pattern of Hong Kong burial custom. Except for paupers, by far the greater proportion of Chinese dead from the urban areas (numbering some 10,000) are now buried in the public cemetery at Wo Hop Shek, near Fan Ling in the New Territories. Coffins may be conveyed by rail from Kowloon daily as a service included within the burial fees that are \$5 or \$15 according to size of coffin. Only some 20% of the coffins are carried to the cemetery by private hearses at the expense of the relatives. Of the balance brought by rail, not more than half are attended by relatives. It is obviously not possible in a public cemetery to site graves in accordance with individual interpretations of good *fung shui*. The fact that each coffin is simply allotted the next vacant space in the burial terrace is readily accepted, although it must be admitted that the majority of terraces are well up the hillside with a commanding view of distance and water. Similarly, when the routine six months' notice of intention to exhume remains from the coffin sections is given, it is unusual for relatives

to clear the graves privately in more than half the cases. The balance is left to Government to clear. The deduction might be drawn that, although there may well be relatives still at hand in Hong Kong, they accept the Government service in clearance as perfectly adequate for the purpose and as a useful means of saving themselves expense.

Every year, in addition to Chinese dead mentioned above, the bodies of nearly 10,000 paupers are left to Government to dispose of. The term "pauper" does not imply that the deceased were homeless and abandoned. Most of the deaths occur in charitable institutes and hospitals. In most cases, there were relatives available but for one reason or another, usually economic, they preferred not to claim the body, being satisfied that the free burial (at the Sandy Ridge Cemetery, Lo Wu) and subsequent exhumation provided by Government would be sufficient to meet changed conditions.

Where possible, attempts are made at public Chinese cemeteries to meet burial customs. Facilities are provided at the Ching Ming and Chung Yeung festivals, in the form of special trains with reduced fares for relatives; crowd control; temporary latrines, etc. Trees and plants with flowers in the traditional mourning colours are planted, e.g. yellow allamanda, white spider lilies, purple thunbergia, white and yellow frangipanni.

It must be emphasized that this brief description of current Chinese burial customs in Hong Kong represents no more than the observed practice at a particular point of time. Custom is a living body that changes gradually from generation to generation. It would therefore be unwise to assume that all these customs will survive. The impact of congestion, lack of burial space and improving social conditions in Hong Kong may well cause further changes. In particular, the proposed official encouragement of cremation as a means of disposal of the dead may do much to upset the current burial pattern, although it will follow the Buddhist practice more closely. The basic factor seems to be that Hong Kong Chinese are not so much concerned with the means of disposal of the dead as with being able to pinpoint the eventual resting place of the remains of the deceased, whether in the form of bones or ashes. Exhumation, as such, seems to play no significant part in the process except as a practical means of reducing the physical bulk of the deceased to proportions that will either fit into a funerary urn or below a horseshoe grave. Cremation, therefore, which serves the same practical purpose as exhumation in reducing bulk, should equally prove unobjectionable to Hong Kong Chinese, backed as it is by Buddhist belief. In short, one may expect that within a generation cremation may largely replace burial and exhumation as a means of customary disposal of Chinese dead in Hong Kong.