

Chinese Funeral Traditions

The rules around death are very important to all members of Chinese society. Special attention is paid to the care of the dead and very specific rules are followed. It is widely believed that bad luck will come to the family that does not honor the rules.

In Chinese culture, traditions can vary depending on the deceased's role in the family, their age, the manner of death, and their position in society. Care for one's parents is complete and without question, so when a parent or elder dies, funeral planning falls to the eldest son and his children. A parent may not perform funeral planning for their child, so an unmarried person is taken to a funeral home upon death. Chinese rules also say that an older person must not show formal respect to a younger person. A child is therefore buried in silence and no funeral ceremonies are performed.

Funeral traditions differ throughout China. Some Chinese people follow Christian beliefs and burial traditions. In Mainland China, there is land available for cemeteries, so Christian burials take place. Some Chinese people believe in the teachings of Buddha. In Hong Kong, the Buddhist practice of cremation is encouraged because the land there is needed for farming.

Chinese Christians

Many Chinese Christians believe a person's body should be at home at the time of death. Often, a person who is dying in a hospital will be brought home to die peacefully, surrounded by loving family members and friends.

When a death occurs, the family will immediately remove any mirrors from the home. They believe that anyone who sees the reflection of a casket will have more sorrow. Religious statues are covered with red paper, and a white cloth is placed across the main door of the house. A gong is also placed at the entrance: on the left of the doorway for the death of a male and on the right for a female.

After death, the body is dressed in a favorite outfit by the family or funeral professional in preparation for what is called a wake. This is a time when friends and family gather to visit and speak kindly about the life of the deceased (dead person). They pray together and believe their prayers help their love one go to heaven sooner.

The color of clothing for friends and family is very important. Only the deceased's spouse, children and daughters-in-law wear black, since their sadness is thought to be the greatest. If anyone else wears black, it is considered very insulting. Grandchildren of the deceased wear dark blue and great-grandchildren wear light blue. Siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles may also wear light blue. All others attending a funeral wear bright colors, even white, to signify that their relationship to the deceased was not as strong as close family members. Red is not worn because it is the color of happiness and worn at weddings.

A candle is lit and placed near the casket, and family members ensure that the flame burns throughout the entire time of the wake, from three to seven days. Those who live past the age of ninety are honored with the longest wake of seven days. During the wake, family and friends bring beautiful flower wreaths – traditionally white irises – that have banners printed with verses or rhymes. They also give the family white envelopes holding money in odd amounts to help pay for the funeral and bring good luck to the dead person, with the largest amounts from family members. Family members fold prayer paper into the shape of as many Chinese coins as possible to bring more good luck to their loved one in the afterlife.

On the day of the funeral, the family prays before the casket is taken to the burial site. The eldest son of the deceased traditionally rides along with the casket, with everyone else following. The family is in a state of sadness for 100 days after the burial. A piece of colored cloth worn on the sleeve of each family member indicates their sadness: black is worn by the deceased's children, blue by grandchildren and green by great grandchildren.

Chinese Buddhists

Within the Chinese Buddhist community, death has great religious meaning. It marks the moment when new life begins through rebirth and is a powerful reminder of Buddha's teachings. They stress the importance of making every moment count. Human birth is precious, and life has great value. Every Buddhist must be aware of and prepared for death, because it can happen at any time.

When death is near, Buddhists are instructed to think about their holy writings. Giving one's final thoughts to Buddha and his teachings brings good luck in the new life. Buddhists feel that the things they own, people they know, fame and power all vanish at the time of death. None of these can be carried over into the next life. Where and how a person is reborn, however, depends on their good and bad actions in life. So it is very important for a Buddhist to prepare for death by living in a good and kind manner.

After death, relatives and friends pour water over one hand of the deceased in a bathing ceremony. They then place the body in a casket and surround it with flowers, candles and sticks of incense. If possible, a photograph of the person is placed alongside and colored lights are hung around the casket.

Since Buddha's death, many Buddhists have chosen cremation to free the soul from the body. They believe that several stages of life called *bardos* continue for hours or days after the body dies, so cremation does not take place right away. Sometimes, it is delayed to wait for distant relatives to arrive or to show special honor to the dead. In these cases, holy men (monks) come to the house one or more times each day to chant (sing prayers). Food is offered to the monks to increase the importance of the deceased.

Frequently the body of a famous or rich person is kept for a year or more in a special building at a temple. Waiting this long before cremation shows respect for the person and allows time for religious ceremonies that will help them in the afterlife. When this happens, ceremonies are held on

the seventh, fiftieth and hundredth days after death. As long as the body is present, the spirit can benefit from gifts, speeches, and songs. After cremation, the spirit is cut off from the physical world.

On the day of cremation, a man carrying a white banner on a long pole leads the walk to the place cremation will be held. He is followed by elderly men carrying flowers in silver bowls. Next, a group of eight to ten monks hold a broad ribbon that extends to the casket behind them. The casket may be carried by guests called pall bearers or pulled in a funeral car by a large number of friends and relatives who feel that they are performing their last good deed for their loved one. During the service at the cemetery, monks sit facing the casket and lead the mourners in singing prayers. The casket is then placed on a stack of bricks and family and friends toss lit candles, incense and wood beneath the casket to start the burning. Later the ashes may be gathered and kept in a container called an urn.

Taiwanese Culture

In Taiwan there are many time-honored rules that help a family deal with the death of a loved one. At the moment of death, an oil lamp is lit to light the way into the afterlife. A last meal of boiled rice and a hard-boiled egg is placed at the foot of the deceased, and special paper money is burned as an offering. As family and friends gather, they begin to talk to the deceased, weeping and even shouting out apologies. Family members change into dark-colored clothing. Women let their hair down and remove all make-up; all hats and shoes are removed.

Taiwanese people believe earth energies affect health and well-being. They will hire a geomancer – someone who reads such energies – to identify the safest and best day to hold the funeral. They avoid days when dangerous monsters created by bad burials might be roaming.

Friends and relatives are informed of a death through printed announcements. White paper is the color of sadness, but happy pink paper is used when a person has lived for seventy-five years or more. A square piece of white paper with one Taiwanese character meaning death is placed on the front door of the home of the deceased to let people know about the death; neighbors place a small piece of red cloth on their doors to show the way to the house with white.

Religious decorations and statues are covered with white sheets and no offerings are made during the wake (the time between death and the funeral ceremony). The wake can last for two to three weeks, until the best day determined by the geomancer. During this time, the family is expected to wear the dark clothing they put on at the time of death. They welcome friends and relatives into their home and accept gifts of flowers, incense, fruit, candles and paper money. A small "soul table" is set up to display a photo of the deceased and display the gifts.

At a time specified by the geomancer, a ceremony is held to transfer the body into a casket using a special white cloth. As priests chant and ring bells, the family works together to surround the body with rough paper and cover it with another special cloth. They often place

personal items in the casket for good luck. This is a time of deep sadness, because it is the last time family members will see the deceased.

Poems are read and incense is burned in honor of the deceased, and guests walk to the grave site. People are hired to carry the caskets, and paid musicians, singers, dancers and wailers (loud, mournful criers) accompany the group. Once each guest has tossed a handful of dirt onto the grave, final offerings are made and incense burned. Rice, nails or money are given to the children as reminders to be faithful family members of the ancestors. The entire group then follows a different route to return home, so that the ghost will not follow them.

Special offerings are made to the deceased every seven days after death. Some families do this for forty-nine days and other families for seventy-seven days. On these days, food is placed on a table in front of the home for the soul to eat, and paper money is burned so the deceased can present this money to the officials of the underworld to get a better afterlife.

Each year in the spring, families gather at gravesites to clean them, present food and wine, and burn paper money as an offering to the dead. This is also a day to remember and worship all one's dead ancestors.