

CULTURAL RESILIENCE AND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY DEATH RITUALS OF
THE CHINESE HOA IN HO CHI MINH CITY

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I have combined a historical analysis of traditional Chinese death rituals in China with an ethnographic record of contemporary death rituals practiced in the Chinese Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City. At its core, this thesis is a study of Chinese Hoa cultural resilience, adaptation and the use of death rituals as a process of “reinscription” of Chinese Hoa cultural identity through the maintenance of traditional customs and practices. During my research it became evident from the traditional and contemporary rituals (analyzed here) that contemporary death rituals are in many ways more complex, albeit generally less onerous, than their traditional predecessors. Rather than adopting Vietnamese traditions and incorporating them into their own death rituals, the Chinese Hoa people in Ho Chi Minh City have instead modified and re-invented old rituals and situated them within a modern context as a means of maintaining their ethnic identity.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Tra Huong Thi Duong (Duong Thị Hương Trà in Vietnamese) was born in January 20, 1978 in Hue, Central Vietnam. Tra attended Quoc Hoc Hue Gifted High School where she studied English and literature from 1993 to 1996. During her three years of high school at Quoc Hoc, the teachers inspired her to pursue her passion for the social sciences and humanities. At the age of 18, she moved from Hue to Ho Chi Minh City to attend University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Oriental Studies, as a Chinese major, graduating with honors. After her graduation she joined the Vietnamese Studies Faculty at the University becoming lecturer teaching Vietnamese language and culture. During her time as a lecturer she was nominated by the university to apply for numerous fellowships for graduate study in anthropology. In competition with other junior lecturers from other institutes in Vietnam she won the Ford Foundation Fellowship for Anthropology and Sociology Study (FASS) administrated by Center for Educational Exchange with Vietnam (CEEVN) – an affiliate of American Council of Learned Societies. This fellowship enabled her to come to Cornell University for a Master's Program in Anthropology which she completed in the spring in 2015.

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INTRODUCTION

My initial interest in studying the death rituals of Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City can be traced back to research I did in my junior year (1998 – 1999). During the time I was a young student working on my BA in Chinese Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City, I began a collaboration with two other classmates on a research project we called *Traditional death and marriage rituals of the Han people (Nghĩ lễ hôn nhân và tang ma cổ truyền của người Hán)*.¹ This research relied on texts written in Chinese, English and Vietnamese and reconstructed the rituals as they were described by the authors. As this project began to evolve, I became more interested in studying Chinese death rituals than Chinese wedding rituals. For me Chinese death rituals are particularly meaningful because of the importance they place on filial devotion to family, and because of the enduring strength of Chinese customs, traditions and rituals which have been passed down for thousands of years. They are also interesting from a purely psychological standpoint because of the insight they provide into how people from this ancient and highly sophisticated society have employed various strategies to cope with grief over the past several thousand years.

Living in District 3 in Ho Chi Minh City very near a large, vibrant and flourishing Chinese Hoa community, I was attracted to the richness of their culture, their closely-knit society and the dynamism of their economic activities. Thus, after beginning to do research on the Chinese, I very quickly decided to focus on the Chinese Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City.

¹ According to <http://www.chinaembassy-fi.org/eng/zggk/t819041.htm> the Han Chinese (Han zu) make up 91.51% of the total population in China. “China’s mainland population grows to 1.3397 billion in 2010: census data,” *Embassy of People’s Republic China in the Republic of Finland*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.chinaembassy-fi.org/eng/zggk/t819041.htm>.

In June of 1998, while by chance I happened to be passing by a Teochew Chinese funeral home, I witnessed what seemed me at the time to be a rather strange scene taking place. A tall imposing looking man who appeared to be about 40 years old was kneeling down on his hands and knees. His head was bare, on his feet he wore a pair of cheaply made flip-flops and his clothes were made from a white homespun weave and unhemmed. As I watched him, he began crawling across a concrete floor into the funeral home. Slowly, he made his way about 25 meters across the funeral home to a coffin on which was displayed a picture of a woman who looked to be about 70 years of age. After he finally arrived at the coffin, an old man stepped forward from a crowd of observers standing nearby and handed him a triangular hat and a vest and belt made from sackcloth. Three small bags were hanging from the belt. Once he had completed dressing himself, the old man handed him three lighted sticks of incense and a staff about 60cm long. On top of the staff were two pieces of joss paper, one blue and one red, and one piece of sackcloth. He then kowtowed four times and began to wail and call to his deceased mother. After observing him for a time, I left the funeral with my mind full of questions about these complex and puzzling rituals whose purposes I could not fathom.

The following day, I returned to the funeral home where the body of the man's mother still lay in state. While I was there, I was fortunate to meet with a man who would eventually become one the key informants for my research, Mr. Lý Tú Trác. Mr. Lý was the presiding mourner in the funeral, the husband of the deceased and the father of the man I had seen the day before. He also happened to be a ritual specialist and therefore an expert on Chinese death rituals. Mr. Lý explained that all of the rituals I had witnessed the day before had evolved from the traditional Chinese funeral ritual *Thiên lý bồn tang* which has been practiced in China for more than 2500 years and that, when a family member passes away, a filial child may have to

travel thousands of miles in order to return home and fulfill their duty to their deceased parent.²

If a son is unable to make it in time for the final laying out of his deceased parent, when he arrives traditions requires that he crawl from gate house or funeral home where the body lies in state to the coffin of the deceased parent. This is intended to symbolize the exhaustion caused by the agonizing journey made in haste that the son has undergone in order to arrive in time for his parent's funeral. The bared head, cheap flip-flops and unhemmed coarse homespun cloth worn by the son demonstrate a lack of concern for his appearance caused by his grief. The ritual I had witnessed, in which the old man handed the bereaved son a vest, a hat and a staff was an evolution of the *Cheng fu* ritual. These and other specific details regulating the type of mourning garments described above are the legacy of the Five Degrees of Mourning, which have played an important role in Chinese Confucian culture and funeral rites for thousands of years.

After listening carefully to Mr. Lý's explanation of the ritual I had witnessed, I began to wonder how a Chinese family that had been living in Vietnam for five generations, and in particular a man such as Mr. Lý's son, who was born in Vietnam but had immigrated to the United States in 1978 when he was 18 years old, could preserve customs and traditions whose roots date back thousands of years. I was struck by the resilience of Chinese culture and the importance the Hoa people placed on maintaining their identity so many years after they had left their homeland in southern China.

As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 2, during the long history of immigration and settlement in what was formerly known as Gia Định province, and, in more recent times, has been known as the Nam Bộ area, a large majority of the Chinese immigrant community was

²Normally this duty only applies to males. An unwed daughter or a married daughter does not need to fulfill this requirement.

culturally Han and originated from the Hoa Nam areas of Southern China.³⁴⁵ After moving to the Nam Bộ area, they would play an important role in building and developing Vietnamese society, culture and economy in southern Vietnam.

The Chinese immigrated to southern Vietnam over a period spanning several hundred years. The most significant wave of immigration into Nam Bộ occurred in the 17th century. Most of these immigrants were soldiers and mandarins from the Ming Dynasty who left mainland China as part of a mass migration resulting from the failure of the “bài Mãn phục Minh” (rising up to overthrow the Qing Dynasty and restore the Ming Dynasty) movement led by Dương Ngạn Địch (楊彥迪) and Trần Thượng Xuyên (陳上川).⁶ Nguyen Lord, Nguyễn Phúc Tần, granted these two immigrant groups land to pioneer and settle in the area then known as Giản Phố, (an earlier name for the Gia Định area)⁷. Until the first half of the 20th century, there were numerous groups of Chinese immigrants to the Nam Bộ region of Vietnam. During the last 300 years,

³According to General Statistic Office, Nam Bộ is an area comprising the south of Vietnam and divided into two regions East and West. East Nam Bộ includes the following provinces and cities: Bình Phước, Bình Dương, Đồng Nai, Tây Ninh, Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, Hồ Chí Minh City; West Nam Bộ include these provinces and city: Long An, Tiền Giang, Bến Tre, Vĩnh Long, Trà Vinh, Đồng Tháp, Hậu Giang, Sóc Trăng, An Giang, Kiên Giang, Bạc Liêu, Cà Mau, and Cần Thơ city. See in “Số đơn vị hành chính có đến 31/12/2011 phân theo địa phương (The Numbers of Administrative Units Divided According to Location that are Valid until 12/31/2011),” *Tổng Cục thống kê (General Statistics Office)*, July 14, 2014, <http://www.gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=386&idmid=3&ItemID=12817>.

⁴Gia Định was once a large administrative unit which was established in 1698 and existed until 1975. In recent times, the name Gia Định is only used to refer to a neighborhood in the central area of Bình Thạnh district, Ho Chi Minh City. See in: Thạch Phương and Lê Trung Hoa, eds., *Từ điển Thành phố Sài Gòn Hồ Chí Minh (Dictionary of the City of Saigon/Ho Chi Minh)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Trẻ (Tre Publishing House), 2001), 328.

⁵Chen Ching-Ho, “Mấy điều nhận xét về Minh Hương xã và các cổ tích tại Hội An Part 1 (Comments on the Minh Hương Xa and the Remnants of the Chinese Community in Hoi An),” *Việt Nam khảo cổ tập san, Bộ giáo dục Sài Gòn (Vietnamese Journal of Archeology, Ministry of Education Saigon)*, no. 1 (1960): 16–17.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷This event was recorded in several Vietnamese historical documents such as:

Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên*, vol. 1 (Trung tâm Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn Quốc gia, Viện sử học: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, n.d.).

Lê Quý Đôn, *Phủ Biên tạp lục (Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier 1776)*, trans. by Đỗ Mộng Khương, Nguyễn Trọng Hân, and Nguyễn Ngọc Tinh (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội (Social Sciences Publishers), 1997).

Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thông chí (嘉定城通志)*, trans. by Lý Việt Dũng (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Tổng hợp Đồng Nai, 2004).

Chinese, alongside Việt, Khmer and Chăm, worked hard to cultivate the Nam Bộ region, making significant contributions to the areas' economic development.

At this point, it is important to define some of the basic terminology that is used to describe key concepts that define the identity of the Hoa people in Vietnam. Because English does not have a well-developed set of terminology for discussing the cultural, linguistic and historical differences that distinguish the myriad of influences that make up the Chinese Hoa identity, in this thesis, I will use a variety of different terms derived from English, Chinese and Vietnamese to differentiate the particular communities or subjects referred to in my study.

As I write this introduction, there is conflict taking place between China and Vietnam over a small chain of islands in the East Sea. Within the context of this conflict, the position and identity of the Hoa in Vietnam has become a topic of discussion in the Vietnamese-Chinese community. Recently, Thanh Niên newspaper published an article in which a Vietnamese-Chinese author identifying himself as Mân Việt writes:

First of all, please do not refer to us as Chinese (người Trung Quốc). I was deeply saddened when I read articles in a number of newspapers that misrepresented the Vietnamese-Chinese (người Việt gốc Hoa) as Chinese (người Trung Quốc). As with millions of Chinese descendants (người gốc Hoa) in other countries, our ancestors immigrated many generations ago. Many of us don't even remember our motherland in China. We only know that our roots are Triều Châu, Quảng Phủ, Phúc Kiến, Hẹ hayải Nam through our heritage language. The Chinese (người Trung Quốc) usually refer to us as Vietnamese (người Việt Nam) and we also define ourselves as Vietnamese when we communicate with Chinese. When referring to ourselves we call ourselves Tang ren (Tang people). Please refer to us as Tang people or the Minh Hương or người Việt gốc Hoa. Please do not call us Chinese (người Trung Quốc) and please understand that the người Việt gốc Hoa is not Hoa Kiều (overseas Chinese) and Hoa Kiều are not Chinese. Chinese (người Trung Quốc) are Chinese nationals. Our ancestors came to Vietnam and have roots here that go back many generations. Our friends, neighbors, wives, husbands and relatives are mix of Vietnamese-Chinese (người Việt gốc Hoa) and ethnic Vietnamese (người Việt gốc Việt). Much of the time we cannot distinguish Vietnamese

from Tang people. Those who can speak our ancestral language are considered Tang people. Those who cannot speak it are considered Vietnamese.⁸

This article provides a window into the important distinction the Hoa draw between their national identity and their cultural identity.⁹ While their national identity is clearly defined as Vietnamese the distinction between who is culturally Vietnamese and who is culturally Tang can become somewhat murky. As the author of the column referring to himself as Mân Việt states in the article, when speaking to Chinese people from mainland China, a Chinese Hoa will refer to themselves as simply Vietnamese. Mr. Mân Việt emphatically does not want to be referred to as người Trung Quốc which he identifies as a Chinese national. According to Mr. Mân Việt, when speaking to ethnic Vietnamese (người Việt gốc Việt) Chinese Hoa refer to themselves as the “Tang people or the Minh Hương or người Việt gốc Hoa.” These terms represent important distinctions that need to be clarified because they reflect the process of integration undergone by Chinese immigrants within Vietnamese society.¹⁰

Within their own community, Vietnamese Hoa people are divided into 5 distinct linguistic groups, each with its own dialect. These groups are called respectively, Cantonese (Quảng Đông), Hokkien (Phúc Kiến), Teochew (Triều Châu), Hakka (Hẹ) and Hainanese (Hải Nam).¹¹ Over the 300 years they have lived in the area around what is today called Ho Chi Minh City, the Chinese community has preserved much of their traditional culture. At the same time, three centuries of intermingling and constant interaction with the other ethnic groups in the Nam Bộ area has significantly altered the character of their culture and society.

⁸ Mân Việt, “Tâm tình của một người Việt gốc Hoa (The Confidences of a Chinese Vietnamese),” *Thanh Niên newspaper*, July 14, 2014, <http://www.thanhnien.com.vn/pages/20140517/tam-tinh-cua-mot-nguoi-viet-goc-hoa.aspx>.

⁹ Thanh Niên (Youth) newspaper, the source of this article is generally considered to be an orthodox communist newspaper that has long been a mouthpiece for the Vietnamese Communist party line. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that this article is at least somewhat representative of the government position regarding this subject.

¹⁰ Mân Việt, “Tâm tình của một người Việt gốc Hoa (The Confidences of a Chinese Vietnamese).”

¹¹ William G. Skinner, *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, 1950), 19.

However, particularly in regard to their death rituals, certain aspects of their ethnic culture have been steadfastly preserved. Similar to other diaspora communities in Southeast Asia, the practice of rituals that connect ethnic Chinese with their past “has contributed to the reinscription of ethnic boundaries” between Chinese and Vietnamese in Ho Chi Minh City.¹² This reinscription has been an important source of historical and cultural continuity in a community that has undergone the inevitable transformations brought on by assimilation to a new national identity. The resulting convergence of cultural continuity and localization has led to the emergence of a new localized Chinese Hoa identity and society with its own distinct characteristics, customs and practices.¹³

As Mr. Mân Việt has pointed out, the question of what it means to be Chinese is also not necessarily easy to define. For instance, the Tang community in Vietnam sees itself as being more closely related to the Taiwanese than to the mainland Chinese. Thus, their cultural traditions and rituals, and even their economic orientation, are more clearly rooted in a Chinese diaspora community that has existed in Taiwan and Southeast Asia for hundreds of years than in mainland China.¹⁴

Vietnamese-Chinese death rituals are one of the primary methods used by Hoa to distinguish between their Vietnamese national identity, and Chinese cultural identity. These rituals are considered one of the most important duties a person must fulfill in their family life

¹² Andrew C. Willford, *Cage of freedom, Tamil identity and ethnic fetish in Malaysia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 83.

¹³ Terminology and inspiration derived from: Chee-Beng Tan, “Chinese Identities in Malaysia,” in *Chinese Overseas : Comparative Cultural Issues* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 91–92.

¹⁴ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 7, April 19, 2000.

and reflect a culture and spiritual life and philosophy which are deeply rooted in Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist traditions.¹⁵

The influences of neo-liberal economic policies, globalism and instant communications, and the pressures of modern life have eroded much of the cultural continuity connecting these communities to their traditions. Chinese death rituals provide the Hoa a way of maintaining a connection with their past and situating their families and communities within a larger cultural framework and history. As Roberta Greenwood has observed:

Migration reinforces the need to preserve a sense of “rootedness” defined in relation to the past generations, and by bringing the ancestors to new homes, the local groups find one means of expressing its identity... Chinese burial customs relate directly to a continuing association between the living and the ancestors, for the ultimate benefit—it must be said—of the living.... Its function, whether in China or this country, is to sustain the sense of roots and identity by honoring the continuity of the patrilineal lineage. Through the dead, the living defines their identity, and migration only reinforces the need for territorial and cultural affiliation with the past.”¹⁶

In this thesis, I will compare an historical analysis of traditional Chinese death rituals in China with an ethnographic record of contemporary death rituals practiced in the Chinese Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City. Underlying all this research is a study of cultural resilience, adaptation and the use of death rituals as a process of “reinscription” of Chinese Hoa cultural identity.¹⁷

Sources and Methods

I have relied on a wide variety of different types of sources while writing this thesis. In Chapter One, I have analyzed, synthesized, and compared texts written in Chinese, including ancient Confucian manuals as well as contemporary Chinese academic works in order to

¹⁵ Wendy L. Rouse, ““What We Didn’t Understand: A History of Chinese Death Ritual in China and California,” in *Chinese American Death Rituals - Respecting the Ancestors* (UK: AltaMira Press, 2005), 21–23.

¹⁶ Roberta S. Greenwood, “Old rituals in New Lands: Bring the Ancestors to America,” in *Chinese American Death Rituals - Respecting the Ancestors* (London: AltaMira Press, 2005), 258.

¹⁷ Willford, *Cage of freedom, Tamil identity and ethnic fetish in Malaysia*, 83.

reconstruct traditional Chinese death rituals as they were practiced in imperial China.¹⁸ This research was conducted with guidance and generous assistance from Professor Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, a faculty member of the Chinese Studies Department at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City. I have also made extensive use of academic works in English and Vietnamese as well as Vietnamese archival sources such as documents, records and other materials kept in the university and archives and libraries in Ho Chi Minh City and in the private libraries of scholars living in Ho Chi Minh City.¹⁹

In researching and writing Chapter Two, I have employed an ethnological methodology using fieldwork, in-depth interviews and participant observation in order to record and create a detailed record of contemporary Hoa death rituals in Ho Chi Minh City. This research was done during the period between 1998 and 2000, and conducted in District 5, District 6 and District 11 where the largest concentrations of Chinese Hoa populations exist. During the course of this fieldwork, I have observed Chinese funeral rites in funeral homes *Tang nghi quán* and in family homes where funerals were taking place. I have also visited Chinese ancestral halls to learn how many generations of Chinese ancestors for each surname were worshipped by their descendants and visited Buddhist pagodas and Taoist temples that often hold funeral services. Furthermore, I conducted numerous interviews with elderly Chinese Hoa who were experienced ritual

¹⁸These four books are: He Lian Kui, *A study of Chinese rituals and customs* (中國禮俗研究) (臺北: 中華書局, 1962).

Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (儀禮, 禮記: 人生的法度) (上海: 上海古籍出版社, 1997).

Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历) (北京: 气象出版社, 1998).

Patricia B. Ebrey, tran., *Chu Hsi's family rituals: a twelfth century Chinese manual for performance of cappings, weddings, funerals and ancestral rites* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ “Thư viện Khoa học Tổng hợp Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (General Science Library Ho Chi Minh City),” August 14, 2014, http://www.gslhcm.org.vn/?set_language=vi&ccl=vi.

“Thư viện Khoa học Xã hội Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (Social Sciences Library in Ho Chi Minh City),” August 14, 2014, <http://libsiss.org.vn/vn-1-0/home.html>.

“Trung tâm Thông tin Thư viện - Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn (University of Social Sciences and Humanities Library),” August 14, 2014, <http://lib.hcmussh.edu.vn/>.

specialists with extensive knowledge of the procedures regulating Chinese Hoa death rituals. These interviews helped provide me with a more thorough understanding of the customs and rituals I had already observed.

The names of the people I interviewed for this research project are as follows: Mr. Lý Tú Trác, Teochew, living in Ward 1, District 5; Mr. Trương Qua, Cantonese, living in Ward 6, District 5; Mr. Trần Bảo Trung, Hainanese at Hainanese Tian Hou Temple (chùa Bà Hải Nam - 海南天后廟), District 5; and Priest Huỳnh Trụ, head of Cha Tam church. The insights and observations gained from conducting interviews with these members of the Hoa Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City have proven to be an invaluable resource, providing me with up to date and reliable sources of information regarding contemporary customs and practices of Chinese death rituals.

Chapter 1: A Historical Analysis of Traditional Chinese Death

Rituals in China

1.1 The Origin and Meaning of Chinese Death Rituals

It is a commonly held belief in Asia and in China, in particular, that funeral rites are meant to provide a focus for two important human philosophical and emotional needs, sentiment and morality.²⁰ Every human being has a lineage and it is that from which their sentiments derive. The poem *Liao e* (蓼莪) contained in the book *The Classic of Poetry (Shi Jing 詩經)*, alternatively known as *The Book of Odes*, is one of Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism.²¹ This poem (translated below) exemplifies fundamental traditional Chinese themes and moral lessons regarding filial piety and sacrifices made by parents for their children:

Long and large grows the e;—
It is not the e but the hao.
Alas! alas! my parents ,
With what toil ye gave me birth !

Long and large grows the e;—
It is not the e but the wei.
Alas! alas! my parents ,
With what toil and suffering ye gave me birth !

When the pitcher is exhausted,
It is the shame of the jar .
Than to live an orphan,
It would be better to have been long dead .
Fatherless, who is there to rely on?
Motherless, who is there to depend on?

²⁰ He Lian Kui, *A study of Chinese rituals and customs* (中國禮俗研究), 85.

²¹ Shi Jing (Book of Odes), an anthology of songs, poems, and hymns, is a famous work of ancient Chinese literature. It consists of 311 poems (6 without text) dating from the Zhou Dynasty (1027-771 BC) to the Spring & Autumn Period (770-476 BC). Geographically, these poems were collected from the area which is now central China and the lower Huang He (Yellow River) Valley of north China, the cradle of Chinese civilization. The area covers what are today Shan Xi, Shan3 Xi, Shan Dong , He Nan, and Hu Bei provinces
See in: "Shi Ji Zhuan," *University of Virginia Library*, July 14, 2014,
http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=Chinese/uvaGenText/tei/shi_jing/AnoShih.xml;chunk.id=AnoShih.0.2.1;toc.depth=100;brand=default.

When I go abroad, I carry my grief with me ;
When I come home, I have no one to go to .

O my father, who begat me!
O my mother, who nourished me!
Ye indulged me, ye fed me,
Ye held me up, ye supported me ,
Ye looked after me, ye never left me ,
Out and in ye bore me in your arms .
If I would return your kindness,
It is like great Heaven, illimitable,
Cold and bleak is the Southern hill;
The rushing wind is very fierce .
People all are happy;—
Why am I alone thus miserable?
The Southern hill is very steep;
The rushing wind is blustering .
People all are happy;—
I alone have been unable to finish [my duty]²²

The author of the classic work of Confucian poetry tells us that our parents gave birth to us and raised us moment by moment with painstaking care. Without our parents we are bound to suffer greatly. Thus, our parents' good deeds are as high as heaven and as deep as the ocean. Nothing can reciprocate this kindness. Therefore, if you are someone who does not suffer greatly when your parents pass away, then you are not a moral human being.

According to Confucian tradition, the duty of a devoted child is to nurture their parents when they are still alive and to prepare an adequate funeral when they depart this life. Nurturing parents when they are still alive and sending them off with a funeral when they pass way is an act of filial piety that everyone must fulfill.

²² “202 Liao e,” *University of Virginia Library*, July 14, 2014,
[http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=Chinese/uvaGenText/tei/shi_jing/AnoShih.xml;chunk.id=AnoShih.2;toc.d](http://xtf.lib.virginia.edu/xtf/view?docId=Chinese/uvaGenText/tei/shi_jing/AnoShih.xml;chunk.id=AnoShih.2;toc.depth=1;toc.id=AnoShih.2;brand=default)
epth=1;toc.id=AnoShih.2;brand=default.

The chapter called *Questions about Mourning for Three Years* (三年問) contained in Jing li 經禮 (or Li ji禮記) says:²³

All living creatures between heaven and earth, being endowed with blood and breath, have a certain amount of knowledge. Possessing that amount of knowledge, there is not one of them but knows to love its species. Take the larger birds and beasts - when one of them has lost its mate, after a month or a season, it is sure to return and go about their old haunts. It turns round and round, utters its cries, now moves, now stops, and looks quite embarrassed and uncertain in its movements, before it can leave the place. Even the smaller birds, such as swallows and sparrows, chatter and cry for a little before they can leave the place. But among all creatures that have blood and breath, there is none which has intelligence equal to man; and hence the feeling of man on the death of his kindred remains unexhausted even till death.

Will any one follow the example of those men who are under the influence of their depraved lusts? In that case, when a kinsman dies in the morning, he will forget him by the evening. But if we follow the course of such men, we shall find that they are not equal to the birds and beasts. How can they live with their kindred, and not fall into all disorders? Will he rather follow the example of the superior man who attends to all the methods by which the feeling of grief is set forth? In that case, the twenty-five months, after which the mourning of three years comes to an end, will seem to pass as quickly as a carriage drawn by four horses is whirled past a crevice. And if we continue to indulge the feeling, it will prove to be inexhaustible. Therefore the ancient kings determined the proper medium for mourning, and appointed its definite terms. As soon as it was sufficient for the elegant expression of the varied feeling, it was to be laid aside.²⁴

From these classic works of Confucianism, we know that Chinese death rituals were a collection of ceremonies to express compassion and to honor and worship the deceased.

Confucius (孔子 *Kong zi*, 551 – 479 BC) tells us that, to govern a country, the three most important things were eating, funerals and ancestral rites.²⁵ According to Mencius (孟子 *Meng zi*, 372 – 289 BC), “the royal way to rule a country is to make the people feed the living and mourn

²³ Which is one of the books in Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism

²⁴ James Legge, tran., “Questions about the Mourning for Three Years - San Nian Wen - 三年問,” *Chinese Text Project*, July 14, 2014, <http://ctext.org/liji/san-nian-wen>.

Nguyễn Tôn Nhan, tran., *Kinh Lễ* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Văn học (Literature Publishers), 1999), 311–312.

²⁵ Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam văn hóa sử cương* (*A Historical Overview of Vietnamese Culture*) (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1992), 215.

the dead without regret.”²⁶ Because these ideas are so deeply rooted in Chinese culture, philosophy and psychology, the customs and habits that govern Chinese death rituals are even more complex than those in Chinese wedding rituals.

Mencius writes, “In the old days, people whose parents passed way did not bury them, but instead wrapped them up and stored them in the cave.” According to *The Annals of the Han* (Also known as *The Book of the Later Han* (后漢書): “the production of the inner coffin and outer coffin began in the age of *Huang di* (黃帝).” Beginning with the *San dai* era (三代), (21st century BC to 3rd century BC), coffins were commonly made from clay. During the *Yin Shang* era (殷商), 16th century – 11th century BC the Chinese began building their coffins using wood as well as clay.²⁷²⁸

By examining the evolution of Chinese *zang* character “葬” (meaning “to bury” or “burial”), we can conclude that the practice of ceremonial burial was being abstractly conceptualized and recorded in written language as early as the Shang dynasty (see picture 1 below).²⁹ Based on archeological evidence and the discovery of tombs built by the Dawenkou culture which date back more than 5000 years, we know that the custom of ceremonial burial in coffins in China is among the earliest examples practiced by any civilization.³⁰

²⁶養生喪死無憾、王道之始也

²⁷ He Lian Kui, *A study of Chinese rituals and customs* (中國禮俗研究), 86.

²⁸ San Dai is the era of the three dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou), commonly believed to mark the beginning of Chinese civilization.

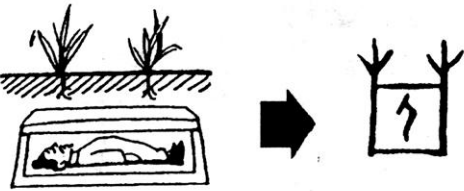
²⁹ Lý Lạc Nghị and Jim Waters, *Tìm về cội nguồn chữ Hán (In Search of the Origins of Chinese Characters Relevant to Vietnamese)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thế giới (The World Publishers), 1997), 616.









³⁰ Patricia B. Ebrey, “Neolithic Tombs at Dawenkou,” *A Visual Sourcebook of Chinese Civilization*, July 14, 2014, <https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/archae/2dwkmain.htm>.

葬 [葬, 葬]

Táng

Ví dụ, an *táng* [bury, burial].
Âm Bắc Kinh: Zàng.



Giáp cốt văn	Tam thể Thạch kinh	Tiểu triện	Lệ thư
			
Khải thư	Thảo thư	Hành thư	Chữ Gian thể
			

Giải thích:
Nghĩa gốc là "chôn người chết." Hình vẽ của chữ trong Giáp cốt văn là một thi thể trong quan tài chôn ở dưới đất, trên mặt đất đã có cây cỏ mọc lên. Trong Tiểu triện, giữa là 死 tử (chết), trên và dưới đều là có cỏ. *Lễ ký:* *Táng* là tạc (trang 615); tạc là không muốn người khác nhìn thấy.* Cũng viết là 葬, 葬.

Trích dẫn:
• 《礼记》：“葬也者，藏也；藏也者，欲人之弗得见也。Táng dã giả, tạc dã; tạc dã giả dục nhân chi phát đắc kiến dã.”

616

Picture 1: *Zang* (葬) character

In the *zang* 葬 character, a dash was used to indicate that the corpse was laid out on a plank and another plank was used to cover it. The character for burial depicted in *oracle bone inscriptions* (甲骨文), recorded in a written language in use during the *Shang* dynasty (商代)

16th to 11th century BC, was a corpse in a coffin buried underground with grass growing on the ground above it.³¹ In *small seal characters* (小篆), the *zang* 葬 consists of a character 死 meaning “death,” and below and above the character for death the ground is covered with grass (艹).”

Another interesting example of ancient death rituals depicted in an early Chinese script is the character *diao* (吊), [used to write the word *diao wen* (吊文), meaning funeral oration, which translates as “visiting the dead.”] *Diao* combines the meanings of two characters (會意). This character, which is intended to depict a person armed with a bow walking behind a corpse in order to ward off birds and other wild animals, provides evidence of well-developed death rituals dating from around the 14th to the 11th century. (see picture 2 below).³²

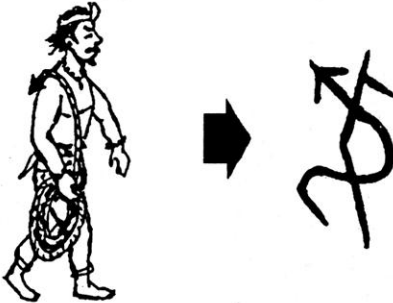
³¹ Ancient Chinese characters inscribed on the bones of turtles and other animals and used for divination during the early Bronze Age.









³² Lý Lạc Nghị and Waters, *Tìm về cội nguồn chữ Hán (In Search of the Origins of Chinese Characters Relevant to Vietnamese)*, 195.

吊 [弔]

Điếu

Ví dụ, *điếu văn* [offer condolences],
 Âm Bắc Kinh: D i ò o.



Giáp cốt văn	Kim văn	Tiểu triện	Lệ thư
			
Khải thư	Thảo thư	Hành thư	Chữ Giản thể
			

Giải thích:
 Hình chữ giống một người tay cầm mũi tên có mang theo cả dây tơ. *Điếu* là chữ gốc của "雉" mà nghĩa đã mất từ rất lâu. Sách cổ thường dùng với nghĩa như truy điệu người chết, thăm hỏi, thương cảm v.v. Chữ trong Kim văn đồng nghĩa với 叔 *thúc* (chú), và 淑 *thục* (trong từ *thục* nữ).

Các chữ phụ:
 叔 *Thúc*: trong từ *thúc* bá
 淑 *Thục*: trong từ *thục* nữ

Picture 2: *Diao* (吊) Character

The *Wu yue chun qiu book* (吳越春秋 – *Ngô Việt Xuân Thu*) states, “In the old days, when a person died, people wrapped the body of the deceased in white grass and placed it in the fields. Filial children did not have the heart to see their parents eaten by wild animals so they

built the tomb to protect the corpse.”³³ This is said to be the origin of the Chinese tradition of building tombs.³⁴

The invention of the wooden coffin led to the addition of many other funeral rituals such as washing the corpse, putting a broken gem and rice into the mouth of the dead body, wrapping the corpse with fabric and attiring the dead body in traditional clothing. This was followed by the creation of grades of mourning, mourning garments and other customs and death rituals. These rituals were practiced in a variety of different ways depending on the region and the particular clans involved.³⁵

After the *Zhou* clan unified ancient China by conquering all the rival clans and forming the early feudal kingdom from 1046 to 256 BC, funeral rites became much more uniform and standardized. These funeral rites were recorded in *Zhou Li – the Rites of Zhou* (周禮), a book detailing the proper order and implementation of these rituals.³⁶ This book was written in the “Spring and Autumn period” between 772 BC and 476 BC. In his books *Li ji, The Book of Rites* (禮記) and *Yi li, The Book of Etiquette and Rites* (儀禮),³⁷ Confucius (551 – 479 BC) puts great emphasis on the concept of filial piety and the importance of ancestral rites in funeral rites. These writings became the humanistic theoretical cornerstones establishing Confucian funeral rites, customs and practices.³⁸

1.2 Fundamental Concepts and Philosophies Underlying Chinese Death

Rituals

³³ He Lian Kui, *A study of Chinese rituals and customs* (中國禮俗研究), 87.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 84.

³⁶ “The Rites of Zhou - 周禮,” *Chinese Text Project*, July 14, 2014, <http://ctext.org/rites-of-zhou>.

³⁷ The Rites of Zhou, The Book of Rites and The Book of Etiquette and Rites are together known as “Three Li”

³⁸ Rouse, “What We Didn’t Understand: A History of Chinese Death Ritual in China and California,” 21.

Death rituals are an expression of philosophical beliefs, attitudes and emotional reactions human beings confront when they are faced with the inevitability of death. These rituals help provide answers to questions of human identity and place within the natural order, addressing such fundamental concerns as Where will we go after death?, Is there such a thing as a soul?, and Is the soul eternal? From an awareness of the body and a consciousness of being, early humans began to imbue the natural world around them with a spiritual essence. This led to the development of animism as a spiritual tradition. The belief systems established by animistic traditions continue to play a significant role in the folklore and the religious customs of many Asian societies. Therefore, the soul is the central underlying concept governing the practice of Chinese death rituals.³⁹

The concept of the soul is at the core of traditional Chinese religious belief and practice. Death rituals are the primary channel through which these beliefs are expressed. Traditionally, the Chinese believe that the human soul is a non-material element that exists eternally after the body has already decayed. Every human soul is composed of two elements . “...the *hun* embodies the spiritual and intellectual energy of the individual while the *po* enables physical action. At death, the *hun* separates from the body and ascends to the realm of immortal beings, *xian*, while the *po* remains with the body.”⁴⁰

“Birth, Aging, Illness, Death” are four necessary stages that will inevitably occur in every life.⁴¹ Like every occurrence in the physical world, if there is a start, then there will be a finish, and, where there is life, then there will inevitably be a corresponding death. The Han Chinese, in

³⁹ Dương Thị Hương Trà, “Ảnh hưởng của Nho giáo trong tang lễ của người Hoa tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (The Influence of Confucianism on Funeral Rituals of the Hoa Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City),” *Tập san Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn (Journal of Social Science)s and Humanites*, no. 20 (2002): 49.

⁴⁰ Rouse, ““What We Didn’t Understand: A History of Chinese Death Ritual in China and California,” 22.

⁴¹ 生老病死

similar fashion to many other Asian cultures, believe that death is not the end, but rather merely the end of this life, after which the soul goes on to enter another life. This way of thinking originates from Buddhist doctrine. Many Chinese also believe in *determinism*. According to this philosophy, the existence and the fate of every human being is predestined. Death is the end of destiny. The fate of each person is predetermined in the register of vital statistics of 南曹北斗 (*Nam Tào Bắc Đẩu*).⁴²

A human being is made of two parts, the body and the soul. One part is physical and the other spiritual. After a person dies, the soul leaves the body to go to the afterworld where life is not so different from life in the earth. Thus, according to Chinese tradition, deceased people are buried with many of their belongings in anticipation that they will use them in their new life in the next world. Most Chinese believe that, although people inevitably die, their souls continue to exist and will reincarnate into a new body. The world of death and the world of living (陰 陽 *Yin Yang*) are separate worlds, but they are not totally disconnected. The soul can travel back and forth between these two worlds easily. Both *Liao zhai zhi yi - the strange stories from a Chinese studio* (聊 齋 誌 異) and *er shi si xiao - Twenty four filial exemplars* (二 十 四 孝) contain stories of people from the living world who go to the afterlife and then return to the world of the living. Although these stories may be fictional, the belief in life after death is deeply-rooted in Chinese culture and philosophy. Irrespective of the veracity of these ideas, these beliefs offer consolation which helps ease the suffering and misery caused by the death of loved ones.⁴³⁴⁴

⁴² Nguyễn Tử Quang, “Nam Tào Bắc Đẩu,” *Diễn hay tích lạ*, August 31, 2014, <http://4phuong.net/ebook/12918617/19023302/nam-tao-bac-dau.html>.

⁴³ Bồ Tùng Linh, *Liêu trai chí dị (Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio)*, trans. by Cao Tự Thanh (HỒ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Phụ Nữ (Women Publishers), 2013).

⁴⁴ David K. Jordan, “二十四孝 The 24 Filial Exemplars by GUŌ Jūjìng 郭居敬,” August 31, 2014, <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/shiaw/shiaw00.html>.

With regard to their death rituals, the Chinese hold two mutually exclusive and contradictory ideas in their minds simultaneously. One is a spiritual conviction that posits that death is a transitional phase that leads from one life to another. Thus, funeral rites are considered a way of saying goodbye to the souls of dead before they begin their journey to the afterlife. The other is a more secular philosophy which considers death to be the end, meaning the person will disappear from the earth forever. Thus, funerals are also held to express compassion for those who have suffered the loss of a family member or friend and sorrow for their loss.

Because the first idea is that a funeral is simply to say a temporary goodbye to the deceased who has passed on to the next world, the mourners should moderate their sadness. For this, they explode firecrackers, and play musical instruments loudly in order to wish the deceased a pleasant journey and a happy new life. However, because they also believe in the second idea, that death is the end, the mourners do not want to let the dead go; they still hope that the soul might return to the body of the deceased. Therefore, there are customs which seek to draw the dead back to the world of the living such as placing the corpse of the deceased individual's body on the ground so that it might absorb revitalizing forces from the earth and return to life as well as other rituals to call the soul back to the body.

Since they believe that the dead will be going on to live in the other world, the Chinese take funeral rites very seriously. Carefully planning their parents' and grandparents' funeral is considered to be one of the most important events in a person's life. Thus, for the children or grandchildren of a deceased person, holding a funeral for parents or grandparents to express their filial devotion is one the most significant and meaningful ways of showing gratitude to their parents. Because the Chinese traditionally believe that even though a person dies his or her soul continues to exist forever, they, therefore, have a responsibility to satisfy all of the essential

needs of the deceased in the afterlife. If they fail in this sacred duty, the soul of the offended person will return to lament and pester the offending relative. The organization and meticulous execution of all these complex funeral rituals is motivated in large measure by these beliefs. The more sumptuous the feast, the more people participate, the more days it goes on, the more expensive a funeral is, the more whole-hearted and pious the bereaved is, the better attended the soul of the departed will feel in the afterlife, and the more others will perceive the person as having done their filial duty for the deceased relative.

Friends and relatives customarily do not consider that a proper funeral is the end of their duty. Simply taking care of funeral rites is not sufficient to satisfy all needs of the deceased in the afterlife. Because of a strongly held belief that the spirit world and the world of the living are intimately intertwined, maintaining this invisible bond is considered extremely important. In order to do this, the living must offer sacrifices and venerate the dead, not only in the time of mourning but also long after that. Veneration is the medium through which the tangible world and the sacred universe come into contact with each other. The Chinese have traditionally believed that the souls of deceased relatives will usually stay with the ancestral altar which has been dedicated to them, where they can receive offerings and so that they will be able to remain close to their descendants. In this way, they are able to follow and help them when necessary. The Chinese tradition of ancestor worship has been taken very seriously by each successive generation, and as a result, this veneration has continued to be passed down through the centuries.

1.3 A Historical Analysis of Traditional Chinese Death Rituals in China

1.3.1 The Sequence of Events and Procedures in Chinese Traditional Death Rituals

Chinese traditional death rituals, especially those of the wealthy royal mandarins and kings, are extremely complex and require numerous steps to complete. Scholars have counted all of the steps included in these death rituals, and found they may have as many as 40 or more different rites.⁴⁵ In order to reconstruct the traditional Chinese death rituals described in this section, I have analyzed and compared the works of He Lian Kui, Zeng Qiang Wu and Li Xue Ying as well as numerous interviews with my informants.⁴⁶⁴⁷ As a reference, I have used the *Ci hai* (辭海) dictionary.⁴⁸ I have also relied heavily on Patricia Buckley Ebrey's translation of Chu Hsi's Family Ritual for English translations of Chinese terminology related to Chinese death rituals.⁴⁹ As a result of this research, I have catalogued a list of thirty-four distinct funeral rituals practiced by the Chinese. In this thesis, I will describe the sequence of rituals according to the order in which they occur.

1.3.1.1. *Chu zhong* (初終)

In traditional Chinese culture, people who are very close to death (*lin zhong* 臨終), especially older people, will usually have children or grandchildren around them when they breathe their last breath. This is commonly referred to as the last farewell moment (*song zhong* 送終). Immediately after a person has just stopped breathing, their bereaved family members will cried out loudly and then place the body of the deceased on the floor. This is called *xia ta* 下塌.

⁴⁵ He Lian Kui, *A study of Chinese rituals and customs* (中國禮俗研究), 89.

⁴⁶ Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历).

⁴⁷ Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (仪礼, 礼記: 人生的法度).

⁴⁸ Xia Zheng Nong, *Ci hai* (辭海) (Shang Hai: 上海辞书出版社, 1989).

⁴⁹ Ebrey, *Chu Hsi's family rituals: a twelfth century Chinese manual for performance of cappings, weddings, funerals and ancestral rites*.

After that, they will place the body of the deceased on the *ling chuang* (靈床)⁵⁰ and perform the *she wei*設幃ritual which translates as “hanging a curtain around the bed.” At this time, the head of the deceased should be pointed towards the front door of the house. An oil lamp is placed at his or her feet, which should burn continuously while the body remains in the home. This light is called the light of the Buddha (*fu deng*佛燈). When the deceased has been laid out on the *linh sàn* this signifies that the deceased has already passed away.⁵¹⁵²

1.3.1.2 *Guai hun* (招魂): calling-back ceremony

Once the person has expired, one of their descendants takes an outer garment that the deceased has worn, climbs to the roof of the house, turns his face to the north and calls to the soul of the deceased three times. They will then roll up the outer garment and throw it in front of them.⁵³

1.3.1.3 *Fu gao* (赴告)

Fu gao is the announcement of the death to the relatives and friends. The Chinese have a saying, “多則百日, 少則一月, 訃告亲友,” which translates as “within a minimum of one month and maximum of 100 days the bereaved must announce the death to relatives and friends.”⁵⁴

1.3.1.4 *Mu yu, fan han* (沐浴, 飯含)

Mu yu translates as washing the corpse and *fan han* translates as placing broken gems and broken rice into the mouth of the deceased.⁵⁵⁵⁶

⁵⁰ *Ling chuang* 靈床 is a bed or a platform on which to lay a death body. Xia Zheng Nong, “*Ling chuang*,” *Ci hai* 辭海 (Shang Hai: 上海辞书出版社, 1989), 1201.

⁵¹ *Shou zhong zheng qin* 壽終正寢: this is an old expression meaning old people die of illness.

⁵² Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历), 129.

⁵³ Xia Zheng Nong, “*Guai hun*,” *Ci hai* 辭海 (Shang Hai: 上海辞书出版社, 1989), 779.

⁵⁴ Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历), 132.

1.3.1.5 *Ming xing* (銘旌)

Ming xing 銘旌 is a rectangular banner which is placed in front of the coffin with the name and the surname of the deceased written on it.⁵⁷

1.3.1.6 *She ling pai* (設靈牌)

Ling pai is a tablet made from paper or wood. The name and surname of the deceased are written on the tablet.⁵⁸

1.3.1.7 *Xiao lian* (小殮) Preliminary Laying Out

Xiao lian translates as “ritual for dressing the body of the deceased.” Chinese call this *chuan shou yi* 穿壽衣 which means “wearing the longevity garments for the dead.” According to Zeng Qiang Wu, among ordinary Chinese, the custom exists that when a person has reached the stage of breathing their last breath, their descendants will dress their dying relative in longevity garments so that they will not have to travel naked into the netherworld.⁵⁹ The longevity clothes used to dress the dying relative (*shi zhuang* 尸裝) will usually have multiple layers, these layers come in sets of seven, nine, and so on, with the largest number being thirteen. They avoid using even numbers. These numbers derive from a commonly held belief among Asians that even numbers are lucky, as a result, these numbers are frequently used in celebrations such as weddings and old people’s birthdays. Odd numbers are unlucky numbers and are frequently used in funerals.

⁵⁵ Han Zou Li, “Mu yu,” *Xin hua ci dian* (新華詞典) (Beijing: Shang wu yin shu guan, 1998), 236.

⁵⁶ Han Zou Li, “Fan han,” *Xin hua ci dian* (新華詞典) (Beijing: Shang wu yin shu guan, 1998), 638.

⁵⁷ Xia Zheng Nong, “Ming xing,” *Ci hai* 辭海 (Shang Hai: 上海辭書出版社, 1989), 1929.

⁵⁸ Xia Zheng Nong, “Ling pai,” *Ci hai* 辭海 (Shang Hai: 上海辭書出版社, 1989), 1201.

⁵⁹ This custom seems to be counterproductive, because any unnecessary strain on a person in this condition might weaken them further with potentially serious consequences.

After dressing the body of the deceased, the bereaved will use a silk shroud to cover his or her face. This custom is called *zi sun bei* 子孙被, meaning “wearing his descendants’ blanket.”⁶⁰

1.3.1.8. *Da lian* (大殓) Final laying out

One day after the preliminary laying out, the final laying out will take place. In this ritual, the body of the deceased is placed inside the coffin. During the ritual, the bereaved will lean on the coffin while weeping and moaning for an extended period of time in order to express that they are overwhelmed by feelings of desolation and sadness. After this, they will close the lid of the coffin. There is a custom that forbids the bereaved from allowing their tears to fall onto the body of the deceased. The Confucian manual *Jing li* 經禮 says: “On the third day, place the body of the deceased into the coffin, while the body is still on the bed; it is called *Thi* (*shi* 尸 corpse). Once it has been put into the coffin, it is called *Cǐu* (*jiu* “the coffin with the corpse.”) When the bereaved touches the *Thi* or the *Cǐu*, they must weep and cry out. Because of their compassion for the deceased and their misery, they need to struggle and bewail their loss to ease the pain in their grief-stricken hearts.”⁶¹ While the coffin with the deceased inside still lies in state in the house, the bereaved take turns sitting on the mats maintaining a constant vigil beside the coffin, this is called *qin xi* 寢息, meaning “guard the coffin day and night.”⁶²

1.3.1.9 *Diao lin* (吊臨)

Once relatives and friends have been informed that a person has just passed away, they will come to pay their last respects to the deceased. As part of this process, they will bring

⁶⁰ Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历), 129.

⁶¹ Nguyễn Tôn Nhan, *Kinh Lễ*, 303.

⁶² Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历), 130.

offerings to the funeral, give their condolences to the bereaved and assist them during the funeral.⁶³

1.3.1.10 *Cheng fu* (成服)

The Chinese call this ritual *pi ma dai xiao* 披麻帶孝, which translates as “wearing a mourning costume made from coarse gauze and a straw hat to mourn the deceased.” This ritual occurs one day following the final laying out. Each member of the bereaved is assigned a mourning garment based on their consanguinity with the deceased and in accordance with regulations laid out in the Five Grades of Mourning⁶⁴

1.3.1.11 *Fu wen* (訃聞)

At this time the funeral director officially writes an announcement to inform the friends and relatives of the deceased of the date of the memorial. The announcement is written on a large white sheet of paper, the number of words should be an odd number, there should be three words written in large letters, *dang da shi* 當大事 which translates as “there is bereavement in their family.”⁶⁵

1.3.1.12 *Zhao xi ku dian* (朝夕哭奠)

朝夕哭奠 translates as “in the morning” (朝) and “in the afternoon” (夕) the bereaved will offer sacrifices, grieve for the deceased and serve them food and beverages as if they were still alive. This ritual will be repeated every day until the corpse has been buried.⁶⁶

1.3.1.13 *Jie san* (接三)

⁶³ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 1, June 5, 1998.

⁶⁴ Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历), 130.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁶ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 1.

According to my informant Mr. Trương Qua, this is a ritual which should take place every three days. In this ritual, the bereaved will set up an altar and hold a large ceremony, and the presiding mourner will read funeral orations (*diao wen* 吊文) under the supervision of a ritual specialist.⁶⁷

1.3.1.14 *Zou qi* (作 七)

According to Mr. Trương Qua, for this ritual, the bereaved should make a vegetarian offering every seven days. The first seven days are called *sơ thất*, “the first seven.” The second period of seven days is called *nhị thất*, “the second seven.” The third period of seven days is called *tam thất*, which translates as “the third seven,” and the progression continues for seven days. Every seven days after the death date, the bereaved will hold a ceremony, until the *thất thất*, which means “the seventh seven” or a total of 49 days have passed. At this point, the bereaved will hold a large ceremony, and the ritual ends. This ritual is rooted in the Mahayana Buddhist belief that, after 49 days, the soul of the dead will leave the body forever. Before this period of time is over, the soul might return to the body and the person could be resurrected. Therefore, if the body of the deceased is buried too early, they might return to life after they have already been buried.⁶⁸

1.3.1.15 *Ti zhu* (題 主)

The *shen zhu* 神 主 is an ancestral tablet. In the center of the tablet, the name and surname of the deceased are written. The names and surnames of the people who worship the deceased

⁶⁷ Trương Qua, Interview 1, July 6, 1998.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

are written on the lower right corner. The tablets are made from stone or wood. They are used to worship the deceased.⁶⁹

1.3.1. 16 Shi zhai zhao (筮宅兆)

In this ritual, a geomancer will assist the bereaved in finding an appropriate piece of land for burial of the deceased. The Chinese believe that the location of their ancestors' graves can have a great effect on the lives of their descendants, especially with respect to their prosperity. Virtually every wealthy family spends a substantial amount of money on hiring a reputable geomancer to help them find land with the proper *feng shui* to bury the deceased.⁷⁰

1.3.1.17 Bei guo ji ming qi (備槨及冥器)

Guo 槨 Translates as “the outer coffin”⁷¹; and, *ming qi* 冥器 translates as “the belongings that will be buried with the deceased.” In the past, people made belongings for the dead from clay, wood or stone. Under the Song dynasty, people often used paper. In the Ming dynasty, people used tin and lead. During this period, besides the daily necessities and belongings, people also made houses, livestock, wife and concubines for the deceased.⁷²

1.3.1.18 Ze ji an zang (擇吉安葬)

At this point, the descendants must choose a good date and time to bury the deceased. For this purpose a fortune-teller will be hired to choose a date and time based on their horoscope, their date and time of birth and the date and time of their death. The Chinese believe that for any important events, choosing the proper time will impact how successful the event will be.

⁶⁹ Xia Zheng Nong, “Shen Zhu,” *Ci hai* 辭海 (Shang Hai: 上海辞书出版社, 1989), 1789.

⁷⁰ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 1.

⁷¹ Đào Duy Anh, *Việt Nam văn hóa sử cương* (*A Historical Overview of Vietnamese Culture*), 148.

⁷² Xia Zheng Nong, “Ming qì,” *Ci hai* 辭海 (Shang Hai: 上海辞书出版社, 1989), 1563.

Therefore, in the past, many families would leave the corpse in temporary shelter sometimes for a period lasting many days waiting for a good time and dates to bury them.⁷³

1.3.1.19 *Kai diao* (開 吊)

According to the procedure of rituals, from 3.1.9 *diao lin* 吊 臨 until before burying, each of the relatives and friends of the dead have already brought offerings to the funeral. However, the family usually chooses a date to hold a memorial ceremony for the dead. On that day, the bereaved will prepare food and beverages to offer relatives and friends,

1.3.1.20 *Zu dian* (祖 奠)

The bereaved hold a ceremony in front of the ancestral hall and inform the ancestor that it is time for the deceased to join the ancestors in the afterworld.⁷⁴

1.3.1.21 *Ling tie* (領 帖) This ritual is listed in He Lian Kui's book, but I was unable to find any details regarding its practice.⁷⁵

1.3.1.22 *Chen qi* (陳 器) involves arranging the belongings to bury with the deceased.⁷⁶

1.3.1.23 *Fa yin* (發 引) is the ritual for moving the coffin and departing from the home of the deceased to the place of burial. At this time, the hearse containing the deceased begins to move. The people who travel with the hearse to pay their last respects hold rectangular flags to guide the soul of the deceased. The flag is usually made from white cloth.⁷⁷

⁷³ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 2, June 2, 1998.

⁷⁴ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 1.

⁷⁵ He Lian Kui, *A study of Chinese rituals and customs* (中國禮俗研究), 71.

⁷⁶ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 1.

⁷⁷ Xia Zheng Nong, "Fa yin," *Ci hai* 辭海 (Shang Hai: 上海辭書出版社, 1989), 560.

The order of the funeral procession is Demon Quellers, Incense Table, Grave Goods, Inscribed Banner and the Food Table, Soul Carriage, Shades Streams, and Coffin.⁷⁸

1.3.1.24 *Lu ji* (路祭)

On the way to the burial site, friends of the deceased arrange an offering along the side of the road. They may or may not set up a tent as an offering. This ritual is called an oblation for the path of the deceased. When the coffin arrives, the bereaved will burn incense, pour tea and wine on the table to worship and then begin to wail. At this point, the presiding mourner will bow to the friends of the deceased, after which the funeral continues.⁷⁹

1.3.1.25 *An zang* (安葬) The coffin is lowered into the grave and then the grave is filled with soil.⁸⁰

1.3.1.26 *Ji hou tu* (祭後土) The purpose of this ritual is to ask the god of the earth for permission to bury the deceased at the chosen location.⁸¹

1.3.1.27 *Hui ling* (回靈) This ritual is listed in He Lian Kui's book, but I was unable to find any information regarding its practice.⁸²

1.3.1.28 *Yuan fen* (圓墳) After the burial the bereaved will chose a date to place a mound of soil on top of the gravesite. Usually, the date chosen is within three days after the burial.⁸³

1.3.1.29 *Zu ku* (卒哭) One hundred days after the death date the bereaved finishes the period in which they cry for the deceased.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Ebrey, *Chu Hsi's family rituals: a twelfth century Chinese manual for performance of cappings, weddings, funerals and ancestral rites*, 118–119.

⁷⁹ Xia Zheng Nong, "Lu ji," *Ci hai* 辭海 (Shang Hai: 上海辭書出版社, 1989), 2212.

⁸⁰ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 2.

⁸¹ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 1.

⁸² He Lian Kui, *A study of Chinese rituals and customs* (中國禮俗研究), 89.

⁸³ Võ Mai Bạch Tuyết, Interview 2.

1.3.1.30. *Fu yu zong ci* (祔於宗祠) *Fu* is a ritual that takes place one day after *Zu ku*.

The deceased's ancestral tablet is brought to their ancestral hall so that the soul of the deceased will be worshipped along with their ancestors.⁸⁵

1.3.1.31. *Zhou nian dian ji* (週年奠祭) This ritual is also called *xiao xiang* 小祥 and takes place 13 months after the death date. This date is calculated starting with the beginning of the funeral and does not count an intercalary month.⁸⁶

1.3.1.32. *Da xiang* (大祥) This ritual takes place on the 25th month after the funeral not counting intercalary months.⁸⁷

1.3.1.33 *Tan ji, chu fu* (禫祭, 除服)

Tan ji: This ritual takes place on the 27th month after the death date not counting intercalary months. On that date the bereaved makes an offering called the Final Offering.⁸⁸

Chu fu: In this ritual the bereaved burns all of the mourning garments they have worn and returns to a normal life. This ritual marks the end of the mourning period.⁸⁹

1.3.1.34 *Sheng ji* (生忌)

According to Mr. Lý Tú Trác, the Chinese have a ritual in which the children of the deceased celebrate the birthday of the deceased. This ritual is practiced for three years at which time the mourning period ends.⁹⁰

1.3.2 *Wu fu* (五服) The Five Grades of Traditional Chinese Mourning

The level of mourning required is based on the consanguinity of the bereaved with the

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Xia Zheng Nong, "Fu yu zong ci," *Ci hai* 辞海 (Shang Hai: 上海辞书出版社, 1989), 1782.

⁸⁶ Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历), 132.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Lý Tú Trác, interview 4, August 16, 1999

deceased. There are five distinct grades of mourning:

- *Zhan cui* (斬纋) untrimmed sackcloth
- *Qi cui* (齊纋) even sackcloth
- *Da gong* (大功) greater processed cloth
- *Xiao gong* (小功) lesser processed cloth
- *Si ma* (緦麻) fine hemp⁹¹⁹²

Chinese methods for defining the levels of consanguinity follow the lineal line starting with the Ego (the Ego being the starting point of the male line). Above the Ego is the father, and below him are his sons, the three adjoining generations. Further back, along the lineal line, is the father of the Ego's grandfather, the great grandfather. Next are his grandsons. These are the five nearest generations in terms of consanguinity. Above that is the grandfather of the grandfather – the great-great grandfather. Below that, along the lineal line, is the grandson of the grandson – the great-great grandson. In total, they encompass nine generations. *Collateral relations* refers to the fraternal relationship of two males who have the same father. If two males from different fathers have the same grandfather, they are cousins. If the two males have the same great grandfather, they are second cousins, and if they have the same great-great grandfather, they are third cousins.⁹³⁹⁴ I have summarized the scope encompassed by nine generations of bloodline relationships of Chinese in the following chart entitled “Mourning Grades for Nine Generations of Agnatic Kinsmen.”⁹⁵⁹⁶ (See Chart 1 below)

⁹¹ Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (儀禮, 禮記: 人生的法度), 69.

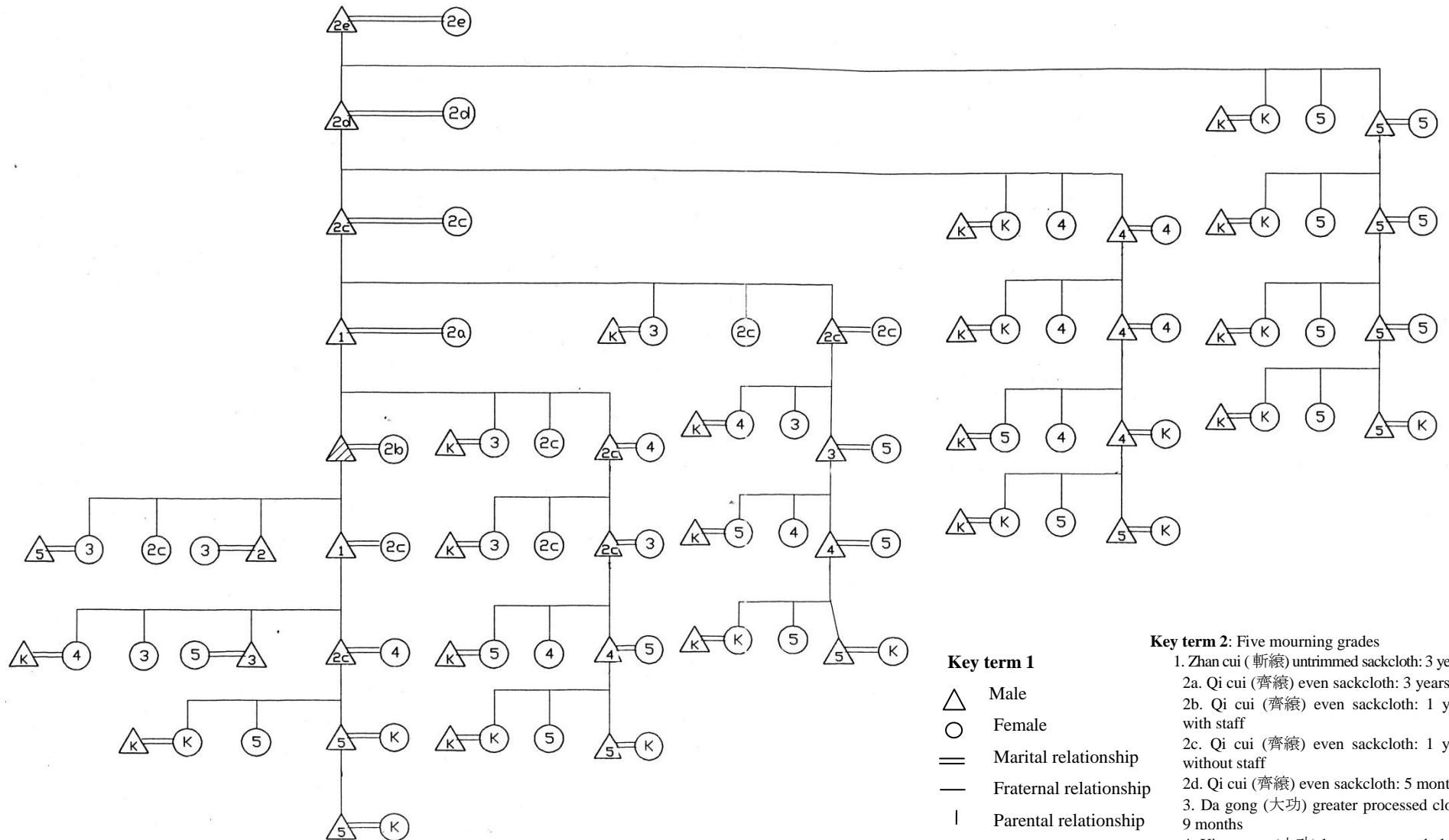
⁹² I have used the translation in Patricia Buckley Ebrey's *Chu Hsi's Family rituals for the terminologies of five mourning grade*: Ebrey, *Chu Hsi's family rituals: a twelfth century Chinese manual for performance of cappings, weddings, funerals and ancestral rites*, 86–96.

⁹³ This paragraph is an interpretation and explanation of the following sentences contained in the *Li ji* by Li Xue Ying: “親親，以三為五，以五為九。上殺，下殺，旁殺，而親畢矣”，Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (儀禮, 禮記: 人生的法度), 69.

⁹⁴ The preceding sentence was translated as follows by James Legge: “In counting kindred (and the mourning to be worn of them), the three closest degrees become expanded into five, and those five again into nine. The mourning diminished as the degrees ascended or descended, and the collateral branches also were correspondingly less mourned for; and the mourning for kindred thus came to an end.” James Legge, tran., “Record of Small Matters in the Dress of Mourning - Sang Fu Xiao Ji - 喪服小記,” *Chinese Text Project*, July 16, 2014, <http://ctext.org/liji/sang-fu-xiao-ji>.

⁹⁵ Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历), 131.

CHART 1: MOURNING GRADES FOR NINE GENERATIONS OF AGNATIC KINSMEN



The Chinese created five mourning grades based on nine levels of consanguinity.

1.3.2.1 Untrimmed sackcloth is the highest grade of mourning. The garment used for this is very coarse sackcloth that is untrimmed at the hem. This signifies that the mourner is so bereaved he or she does not care about his or her appearance. The period of obligation is three years. The people responsible for this level of mourning are:

- The unwed sons and daughters for their deceased father.
- The mainline grandson for his grandfather when the father is already deceased and he is the double heir.⁹⁷

- The wife or concubines for the husband.
- The father for his first son.

Among this category of mourners, the sons and the mainline grandson will wear these garments and carry a bamboo staff. Three years is the longest prescribed amount of time to be in mourning, but, in reality, it is only twenty-five months. Although the bereaved may still grieve for the loss of the loved one, the prescribed period of mourning is over, and the bereaved may return to their normal lives.⁹⁸

1.3.2.2. *Even* sackcloth is the second highest grade of mourning. This type of garment is made from coarse sackcloth that is hemmed at the bottom. The period of mourning is not fixed but instead depends on the bereaved.

- If the father still lives, the son will mourn his biological mother, his step-mother or his foster mother by wearing even sackcloth and carrying an eleococca wood staff for a

⁹⁷ The term “double heir” was borrowed from Patricia Ebrey as a translation of 承重孙. Ebrey, *Chu Hsi's family rituals: a twelfth century Chinese manual for performance of cappings, weddings, funerals and ancestral rites*, 89.

⁹⁸ Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (仪礼, 礼记: 人生的法度), 69.

period of one year.⁹⁹ If the father has already passed away, the son will have to mourn them for a period of three years.

- The mother should mourn the death of her eldest son for a period of three years.

- The Ego mourns the death of his paternal grandparents, his father's younger brothers and his father's younger brother's wife, his father's brother and his father's older brother's wife, his older brother and his younger brother and his own wife and his nephew and niece for a period of 1 year.

- Daughters-in-law mourn their parents-in-law for a period of one year.

- The Ego mourns his great-grandparents' parents for three months¹⁰⁰

1.3.2.3 Greater processed cloth is the third grade of mourning and uses a slightly coarse processed cloth. This period of mourning is nine months. The bereaved responsible for this level of mourning are,

- The Ego when mourning the death of his cousin.

- Parents-in-law when mourning their eldest daughter in-law.

- A wife when mourning the death of her husband's paternal grandparents, a husband's father's younger brother and a husband's father's younger brother's wife, a husband's father's older brother and a husband's father's older brother's wife.

- A father's sister when mourning the death of her nephew.

- A second-born child when mourning his older or younger brother's mother or wife.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹I use the English translation "eleococca wood" by James Legge to translate 桐 in 喪服小記 sang fu xiao ji Legge, "Record of Small Matters in the Dress of Mourning - Sang Fu Xiao Ji - 喪服小記."

¹⁰⁰ Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (儀禮, 禮記: 人生的法度), 69.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 69–70.

1.3.2.4 Lesser processed cloth is the fourth grade of mourning and uses a slightly fine processed cloth. This period of mourning is five months. The bereaved responsible for this level of mourning are,

-The Ego when mourning the death of his paternal grandfather's younger brother or older brother, his father's younger brothers or older brothers, his second cousins, his maternal grandparents.

- The parental grandfather when mourning the death of his grandson.¹⁰²

1.3.2.5 Fine hemp is the lowest grade of mourning and made from very fine processed cloth. This period of mourning is three months. The bereaved responsible for this level of mourning are,

-The Ego when mourning the death of his paternal great, great grandparents, his paternal great grandparents' older brothers and younger brothers.¹⁰³

One notable fact is that the daughter does not have an assigned grade of mourning. It is generally accepted that an unwed daughter will have the same grade of mourning as a son, both in terms of mourning for her relatives and in terms of the grade of mourning required should she pass away. The required grade of mourning for a daughter who has already been wed should be lower than a son by one level.¹⁰⁴

During the Tang dynasty, the regulations for grades of mourning were altered slightly. When the father is still alive, the period of time the Ego should mourn his mother or a daughter-in-law should mourn her parents-in-law, became three years, instead of the one year prescribed previously.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, during the reign of Minh Thái Tổ (in the year 1374),

¹⁰² Ibid., 70.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

the prescribed period in which a son should mourn his mother was changed from even sackcloth to untrimmed sackcloth.¹⁰⁶

The Chinese have also created a meticulous and detailed set of regulations governing mourning practices and procedures (*tang phục tổng đồ*) which include regulations for the Ego mourning nine generations of his extended family and regulations for a wife mourning her husband's extended family. Regulations for a daughter who is already married mourning her extended family are reduced by one level. There are also regulations for a husband mourning his wife's extended family and regulations for a male child mourning his maternal extended family.¹⁰⁷ Chart 1 illustrates the typical regulations for the Ego mourning the nine generations of his extended family. Besides the aforementioned outer garments, Chinese mourning garments also include shoes, belts, caps and staves.

When a child dies the grade of mourning is dependent upon their age. Children who die from ages sixteen to nineteen are considered upper early deaths; children from ages twelve to fifteen are considered middle early deaths; and those from eight to eleven are considered lower early deaths.¹⁰⁸

It is readily apparent that the five grades of Confucian Chinese mourning are extremely meticulous and strict. If a person were to follow all of these regulations, it seems likely that he (or she) wouldn't have a day when they are not mourning except for the day they die. Even the degree of grief the bereaved is allowed to express is regulated.

-Facial expressions: The bereaved who mourn in untrimmed sackcloth should maintain a countenance which is exceedingly gloomy and solemn, heartrendingly miserable.

¹⁰⁶ Xia Zheng Nong, *Ci hai* (辞海), 309.

¹⁰⁷ Zeng Qiang Wu, *Folk Custom Etiquette and Ten Thousand Years Calendar* (民俗礼仪万年历), 130.

¹⁰⁸ Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (仪礼, 礼记: 人生的法度), 70.

Ebrey, *Chu Hsi's family rituals: a twelfth century Chinese manual for performance of cappings, weddings, funerals and ancestral rites*, 95.

With respect to the bereaved attired in even sackcloth, his or her countenance should very gloomy and solemn, extremely sad.¹⁰⁹

- Emotions to be expressed in a particular tone of voice while weeping: The bereaved who mourn in untrimmed sackcloth should be breathless and grief-stricken; the bereaved who mourn in even sackcloth should sob and their tone should be despondent. The bereaved who mourn in greater processed cloth should weep alternatively in low and high tones. The bereaved who mourn in lesser processed cloth and fine hemp should periodically utter mournful, pitiful noises.¹¹⁰

- Expressions in speech: When asked a question, the bereaved who mourns in untrimmed sackcloth should only gesture and never speak. When asked a question, the bereaved who mourns in even sackcloth is allowed to answer, but they must not initiate a conversation. The bereaved who mourns in greater processed cloth is allowed to speak but must not engage in extended conversation. The bereaved who mourns in lesser processed cloth and fine hemp can engage in conversation but must not speak about anything comical or cheerful.¹¹¹

- Diet of the bereaved: Beginning at the time of the funeral, the bereaved who mourns in untrimmed sackcloth must abstain from eating for three days. The bereaved who mourns in even sackcloth must abstain from eating for two days. The bereaved who mourns in greater processed cloth must abstain from eating three meals. The bereaved who mourn in lesser processed cloth and fine hemp must abstain from eating two meals. After the deceased is placed in a coffin the bereaved who mourn in the untrimmed sackcloth can eat gruel in the mornings and in the afternoon. The bereaved who mourn in even sackcloth should eat whole

¹⁰⁹ Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (《仪礼, 礼记: 人生的法度》), 71.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

grain rice and must not eat meat or fruit. The bereaved who mourn in greater processed cloth are not allowed to eat soybean jam and salt. The bereaved who mourn in lesser processed cloth and fine hemp are not allowed to drink wine.¹¹²

- Accommodations for the bereaved: The bereaved who mourn in untrimmed sackcloth should live in a cottage made from grass and sleep on a grass mat. They should sleep with their heads resting on a pillow made of soil. They are not allowed to remove their sackcloth belt. The bereaved who mourn in even sackcloth may stay in a house made from soil or made from wood and sleep on a mat made from a finer quality grass. The bereaved who mourn in greater processed cloth are allowed to sleep on a normal mat. The bereaved who mourn in lesser processed cloth and fine hemp may sleep on a bed.¹¹³¹¹⁴

In *Kinh lễ*, as translated by Nguyễn Tôn Nhan, a similar set of regulations is outlined:

-During their parents' funeral, the bereaved must weep and eat plain food and are not allowed to eat fresh fruit. After one hundred days, they are allowed to eat fresh fruit, and after twenty-five months, they are allowed to eat normally. When their period of mourning has ended, they are allowed to drink wine. At first, they must only drink sweet wine and eat only dried meat.

- Immediately after a parent has died, the filial child must remove his or her hat and hairpin, tie up his or her skirts and walk barefoot. Their arms must be folded, and they must weep pitifully, their hearts must ache, and they should not drink or use a stove for cooking for three days. They should only eat a small amount of gruel brought to them by a neighbor.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Much of the preceding information cited here in footnotes 100 - 104, derives from Li Xue Ying's book on page 71, which is an interpretation and explanation of the Classical Chinese text *Li Ji – The Book of Rites* Chapter “間傳 - JianZhuan - Treatise on Subsidiary Points in Mourning Usages.” For more details see James Legge, tran., “Treatise on Subsidiary Points in Mourning Usages - Jian Zhuan - 間傳,” *Chinese Text Project*, July 16, 2014, <http://ctext.org/liji/jian-zhuan>.

¹¹⁵ Nguyễn Tôn Nhan, *Kinh Lễ*, 303–304.

1.3.2.6. The Role of Funeral Rites in Chinese Families and Society

In Chinese Confucian culture, the Five Degrees of Mourning are more than just rituals intended to assist the bereaved to cope with the loss of a family member. These rituals are also a visible representation and a physical manifestation of the importance placed on consanguinity in Chinese society. Until recently, Confucian Chinese family members would often refer to each other using kinship terms based on their relative positions within the Five Degrees of Mourning.¹¹⁶

In traditional Chinese culture, consanguinity within the Five Degrees of Mourning is also used as a basis for collective punishments and rewards. In imperial China, a crime committed by one individual could result in punitive measures being taken against an entire family who shares consanguinity with that person within the Five Degrees of Mourning. For example, during the Song dynasty the regulations regarding consanguinity stated that if one person from a family joined a rebellion against the Emperor, no one within the Fifth Mourning Degree (*Si ma*-Fine Hemp) of that individual would be allowed to participate in the national exams and become a mandarin.¹¹⁷ The Chinese imperial government used Confucian regulations governing funeral rituals to reinforce the concept of consanguinity as a means of increasing its control over Chinese society. Therefore, traditional Chinese families should act and be viewed as cohesive units and the success and happiness of one family member and the failure of another should be shared by other members of the family.¹¹⁸

Because of this tradition, a very strong emphasis is placed on family relationships, including relationships with family members who might be considered in western culture to be distant relatives. This has resulted in Chinese families attaining a very high level of

¹¹⁶ Dương Thị Hương Trà, “Ảnh hưởng của Nho giáo trong tang lễ của người Hoa tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (The Influence of Confucianism on Funeral Rituals of the Hoa Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City),” 54.

¹¹⁷ Li Xue Ying, *Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, Book of Rites: the Testimonies of Life* (《仪礼, 礼记: 人生的法度》), 74–75.

¹¹⁸ Dương Thị Hương Trà, “Ảnh hưởng của Nho giáo trong tang lễ của người Hoa tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (The Influence of Confucianism on Funeral Rituals of the Hoa Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City),” 54.

cooperation which has been extended outward to a larger Chinese community. For example, members of the same clan and those sharing the same surname or even people originating from the same hometown will often assist each other out of a sense of shared heritage.¹¹⁹

Chapter 2: An Ethnographic Description of Chinese Hoa

Contemporary Death Rituals in Ho Chi Minh City

2.1. An Overview of Chinese Community in Ho Chi Minh City

2.1.1 A Historical Synopsis of Chinese Settlement in the Mekong Delta

The earliest known information regarding the presence of Chinese in what is today southern Vietnam was recorded by the Chinese emissaries Khang Thái and Chu Ứng who traveled to Funan in 229AD on behalf of the Wu Dynasty. This account has since been lost, but some of its contents are known because it was referenced by later Chinese dynastic historians.¹²⁰

During the late 13th century, the emissary Zhou Da Guan (Châu Đạt Quan in Vietnamese) was sent by the Yuan dynasty in China to Angkor to establish diplomatic relations. Zhou spent the much of 1296 -1297 living in Angkor. After returning to China, he wrote a detailed account called *The Customs of Chenla* (*Chân Lạp phong thổ ký*). His account contains three references to Chinese living in what he referred to as the Chenla area. The section called *inhabitants* (*lưu ngụ* 留寓) describes the circumstances of the Chinese presence in the region.¹²¹ Another section of the account describes the business activities engaged in by the Chinese (*mậu dịch* 貿易).¹²² And a third section, which makes reference to the Chinese, describes Chinese products that were popular in the Khmer Empire during this time period (*Dục đắc Đường hóa* 欲得唐貨).¹²³ From this account, we know that the Chinese had

¹²⁰ Nguyễn Công Bình, Lê Xuân Diễm, and Mạc Đường, *Văn hóa và cư dân vùng đồng bằng sông Cửu Long (Culture and residents in Mekong Delta)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội (Social Sciences Publishers), 1990), 25.

¹²¹ Châu Đạt Quan, *Chân Lạp phong thổ ký (The Customs of Chenla)*, trans. by Lê Hương (Saigon: Kỷ nguyên mới (New Era), 1973), 124.

¹²² Ibid., 137.

¹²³ Ibid., 136.

created a flourishing trade network in the Angkor/Chenla region which included what is today known as southern Vietnam.

The Chinese who came to this area during this period were primarily merchants seeking markets for their goods.¹²⁴ They generally referred to themselves as Tang people and were highly regarded by the natives in the areas in which they did business.¹²⁵ At this point, the Chinese had not yet formed any sizable communities. These Chinese visitors to the region were overwhelmingly male. Thus, no permanent Chinese settlements were established. Those who did stay were quickly assimilated into Khmer culture.¹²⁶

In 1644, in China, the Ming Dynasty collapsed and the Manchu Qing assumed power. The “Overthrow the Qing to Restore the Ming” movement began in reaction to this seizure of power. In 1645, the Qing dynasty instituted a regulation called the “Strict Ordinance of Wearing Pigtailed” forcing their Han subjects to shave their heads and grow a pigtail in the customary style of the Manchu Qing.¹²⁷ Ming dynasty loyalists refused to surrender and to assimilate the Qing customs. They were accustomed to growing their hair long and referred to themselves as “the long-haired soldiers.”¹²⁸

As of result of this conflict, large numbers of Ming dynasty loyalists immigrated in mass from Kuangdong, Fujian and Kuangxi to areas in Southeast Asia, creating a number of new diaspora communities. Among this wave of emigrants, many elected to settle in what was then the southern part of the Viet kingdom (the Inner Realm or *Đàng Trong* as it is known in Vietnamese). During this time period the following settlements of Chinese were established: Minh Hương xã in modern day Hội An (Faifo as the French called it); Minh

¹²⁴ Ibid., 108.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 98.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 108.

¹²⁷ Chen Ching-Ho, “Mấy điều nhận xét về Minh Hương xã và các cổ tích tại Hội An Part 1 (Comments on the Minh Huong Xa and the Remnants of the Chinese Community in Hoi An),” 17.

¹²⁸ Vương Hồng Sển, *Sài Gòn năm xưa-Tuyển tập Vương Hồng Sển. (Saigon in the Past- A Part of the Vương Hồng Sển Collection)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Văn học (Literature Publishers), 2002), 12.

Hương xã Thanh Hà phố in Huế; Nông Nại Đại Phố in Cù Lao; Phố Biên Hòa, Mỹ Tho Đại Phố in Tiền Giang and Trấn Hà Tiên. In 1778, Chinese immigrants founded the Chợ Lớn settlement in an area that is today part of Ho Chi Minh City.

This thesis focuses on those Chinese who settled in and around Ho Chi Minh City. Three hundred years ago, the area that is today known as southern Vietnam was a vast largely-untamed wilderness. In the 17th century, the entire population of what is presently known as the Mekong Delta, was little more than 40,000 people.¹²⁹ Most of these inhabitants were Khmer, Việt and Cham people. Pioneers from what is today north and central Vietnam began making their way south to form new settlements in these sparsely inhabited but extremely fertile areas in the Mekong Delta.

Throughout much of the 16th and 17th century, the Việt kingdom was divided between two warring factions. The Trịnh lords and the Nguyễn lords, the Trịnh controlled the area north of the Gianh river called the Đàng Ngoài (Outer Realm). The Nguyễn lords occupied the area south of the Gianh river known as the Đàng Trong (Inner Realm). Within the Inner Realm the Nguyễn lords were plagued by numerous conflicts, most notably with the Tây Sơn in Bình Định (1770-1802), but also with the Khmer and the Siamese military in the Mekong Delta. In this context and throughout this time period, the Chinese settlers who immigrated to this area remained steadfastly aligned with the Nguyễn lords against the Siamese, the Khmer and the Tây Sơn.¹³⁰

2.1.1.1 Họ Mạc and the Land of Hà Tiên

According to *Hà tiên trấn hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả* (a genealogy of the Mạc clan in Hà Tiên), one of the early founders of the Chinese Hoa community named Mạc Cửu was

¹²⁹ Nguyễn Văn Huy, *Người Hoa tại Việt Nam (The Chinese Hoa in Vietnam)* (Paris: Nhà xuất bản NBC (NBC Publisher), 1993), 28.

¹³⁰ For more information on the regional conflicts among the Việt people in Nam Bộ during this period, see Keith W. Taylor, “Regional Conflicts among the Việt People between the 13th and 19th Centuries,” in *Guerre et Paix en Aise de Sud-Est* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998).

born in Quảng Đông province in China on November 6, 1655, eleven years after the fall of the Ming dynasty.¹³¹¹³²¹³³ Mạc Cửu was a merchant seafarer whose travels took him to ports all over Southeast Asia. Under the leadership of Trịnh Thành Công, Mạc Cửu assisted in the development of trade networks in Southeast Asia.¹³⁴¹³⁵ In 1671, unwilling to shave his head and wear a pigtail, as the “Strict Ordinance of Wearing Pigtailed” required of him, Mạc Cửu instead decided to settle in what the Vietnamese refer to as Chân Lạp (aka the Khmer kingdom) in modern day Cambodia.¹³⁶¹³⁷ Because he was intelligent and a shrewd businessman he was appointed by the king of Chân Lạp, Nặc Ong Non, to oversee foreign trade for his kingdom.¹³⁸

After spending some time serving in this capacity, Mạc Cửu asked the king for permission to found a settlement in a border region of the Khmer kingdom (aka Chân Lạp) on the Mekong Delta. The king acceded to his request, appointing him governor (*Okna*) of the new town. Gathering together a group of landless Chinese, Indians, Việt and Khmer peasants, Mạc Cửu established a settlement. Gradually, they began to transform the landscape, cultivating the land and attracting foreign traders to establish new trade routes. Named Hà Tiên, the new town quickly grew in size.¹³⁹

¹³¹ Hà Tiên trấn hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả (The Genealogy of the Mac clan, Governors of Ha Tien) is an account of the history of the Mac clan in Ha Tien. It was written by Vũ Thế Dinh, a subordinate of the Mac family, in 1818. In this thesis I have used the most updated translation by Nguyễn Văn Nguyên in 2006, see Vũ Thế Dinh, *Hà Tiên trấn hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả Hà Tiên (The Genealogy of the Mac Clan, Governors of Ha Tien City)*, trans. by Nguyễn Văn Nguyên (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thế giới (The World Publisher), 2006).

¹³² Ibid., 36.

¹³³ Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thông chí (嘉定城通志)*, 159.

¹³⁴ Hân Nguyên, “Hà Tiên, chìa khóa Nam tiến của dân tộc Việt Nam xuống đồng bằng sông Cửu Long (Ha Tien the Key to the Southern Vietnamese Expansion into the Mekong Delta),” *Tập san Sử Địa (Journal of History and Geography)*, no. 19–20 (1970): 264.

¹³⁵ Trịnh Thành Công (Zheng Cheng Gong or Konxinga) was a Ming loyalist who resisted the takeover by the Qing Dynasty and hoped to restore the Ming Dynasty.

¹³⁶ Vũ Thế Dinh, *Hà Tiên trấn hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả Hà Tiên (The Genealogy of the Mac Clan, Governors of Ha Tien City)*.

¹³⁷ Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thông chí (嘉定城通志)*.

¹³⁸ Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên*, 1:122.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

In 1679, taking advantage of an internal conflict in the Khmer (Cambodian) royal family, the Siamese military invaded the Khmer Empire venturing as far as Hà Tiên, sacking the town and capturing Mạc Cửu and his family. Mạc Cửu was then taken to Siam as a prisoner. Around this time a civil war broke out among two powerful factions in Siam. The resulting chaos created by this infighting allowed Mạc Cửu and his family to escape and return home to Hà Tiên.¹⁴⁰

In 1708, following the advice of one of his counselors, Mạc Cửu sent two emissaries to Huế to ask Minh Vương Nguyễn Phúc Chu if Hà Tiên could be brought under his protection and be annexed by the Nguyễn lord. Minh Vương Nguyễn Phúc Chu accepted his request and granted Mạc Cửu the title (*Tổng Binh Cửu Ngọc hầu*) and a position as a vassal at his court. In 1711, Mạc Cửu arrived in Huế to kowtow before his new lord.¹⁴¹¹⁴² This action solidified the Nguyễn lord's political control of Hà Tiên and the surrounding areas.

Mạc Cửu's choice to submit to the Nguyễn lords was a pragmatic political choice based on the relative strengths of the three competing military powers in the region: a weak and still declining Cambodian empire; a distant Siam; and an expanding and relatively nearby territory under the control of the Nguyễn lords. In 1698, the Nguyễn lords had established the town of Gia định, solidifying the growing Việt influence in the Mekong Delta.¹⁴³ The Cambodian empire at this time was in steep decline. Racked with civil strife and under constant attack from their Siamese neighbors, the Cambodian monarchy had few resources available to protect their eastern border.¹⁴⁴ Mạc Cửu's marriage to Bùi Thị Lắm a Việt

¹⁴⁰ Vũ Thế Dinh, *Hà Tiên trấn hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả Hà Tiên (The Genealogy of the Mac Clan, Governors of Ha Tien City)*, 37–38.

¹⁴¹ Vũ Thế Dinh, *Hà Tiên trấn hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả Hà Tiên (The Genealogy of the Mac Clan, Governors of Ha Tien City)*.

¹⁴² Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thông chí (嘉定城通志)*.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 111–112.

¹⁴⁴ Hân Nguyên, “Hà Tiên, chìa khóa Nam tiến của dân tộc Việt Nam xuống đồng bằng sông Cửu Long (Ha Tien the Key to the Southern Vietnamese Expansion into the Mekong Delta),” 265.

woman from the Biên Hòa and the birth of their children strengthened his ties to Việt society and culture.¹⁴⁵

In the 40 years Mạc Cửu governed Hà Tiên the town grew to be a large prosperous settlement, attracting many ethnic Indians, Chinese, Khmer and Viet people to establish homesteads there. Mạc Cửu died in 1735 at the age of 81.¹⁴⁶ His oldest son Mạc Thiên Tứ wrote an obituary that was sent to the Nguyễn court in Huế. In 1736, Mạc Thiên Tứ was allowed by the Nguyễn lords to succeed his father. Promoted to the rank of Khâm sai đô đốc, Mạc Thiên Tứ was granted many privileges including the right to collect taxes and mint coins. Mạc Thiên Tứ was considered a capable and talented leader and a worthy successor of his father Mạc Cửu. Under his leadership the government and military was reorganized, a citadel and roads were built and a new marketplace was established attracting merchants to the area. Mạc Thiên Tứ was also a famous poet who authored two volumes of poetry that are still studied in Vietnam today. Mạc Thiên Tứ governed Hà Tiên for 45 years.¹⁴⁷

The establishment of a large and prosperous settlement in Hà Tiên in area that is today the southern-most region of mainland Vietnam contributed significantly to the growing Việt sphere of influence surrounding the sparsely inhabited Mekong Delta, and would eventually lead to a gradual annexation of the territories in between Gia định in the north and Hà Tiên in the south.¹⁴⁸

2.1.1.2 Dương Ngạn Địch and Trần Thượng Xuyên

In January of 1679, during the reign of Nguyễn lord Nguyễn Phúc Tần, two former generals in the Ming dynasty, one named Dương Ngạn Địch and another called Trần Thượng

¹⁴⁵ Vũ Thế Dinh, *Hà Tiên trấn hiệp trấn Mạc thị gia phả Hà Tiên (The Genealogy of the Mac Clan, Governors of Ha Tien City)*, 14.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁴⁷ Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thông chí (嘉定城通志)*, 160–161.

¹⁴⁸ Hân Nguyên, “Hà Tiên, chìa khóa Nam tiến của dân tộc Việt Nam xuống đồng bằng sông Cửu Long (Ha Tien the Key to the Southern Vietnamese Expansion into the Mekong Delta),” 267–268.

Xuyên, joined forces to lead an expedition of more than three thousand followers with 50 ships, which landed at Tư Dung and Đà Nẵng.¹⁴⁹ This group of political refugees from the Qing dynastic takeover were allowed by Nguyễn lords to remain under their protection. Because it was believed they would have difficulty integrating into Vietnamese society and also, probably, because this was viewed as an opportunity for the Nguyễn lords to further expand their influence in the Mekong Delta, they were allowed to form a settlements in Đông Phố (an old name for Gia Định) eventually founding the cities Mỹ Tho and Đồng Nai in the Mekong Delta.¹⁵⁰ This was the largest single wave of Chinese immigration in the history of the southern expansion of the Việt kingdom and had a significant and far-reaching impact on the character and cultural evolution of the area that would later become southern Vietnam.

During the period of their settlement in Đàng Trong, the Chinese immigrants switched their political allegiance and identity from Chinese to Viet, while at the same time maintaining many of their ancestral cultural ties and customs. Within this history of over three hundred years of Chinese settlement and close interaction with Việt people, the Chinese Hoa people have maintained a close connection with their culture and ancestors while simultaneously making a profound contribution to the creation and expansion of the modern Vietnamese state in southern Vietnam.

2.1.2 Chinese Hoa Identities in Ho Chi Minh City

Since the Việt people gained independence from China over one thousand years and established a Việt kingdom, there have been scattered waves of Chinese immigration that have occurred for a variety of different reasons. These Chinese settlers have traditionally been identified by the particular dynasty that was in power in China at the time they emigrated from China. For example, immigrants who settled in the Viet kingdom from the

¹⁴⁹ Today this place is known as Tư Hiền, Phú Lộc county, Thừa Thiên Huế province.

¹⁵⁰ Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam thực lục tiền biên*, 1:91.
Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Định thành thông chí* (嘉定城通志), 110.

Han dynasty in times past have referred to themselves and been referred to by Việt people as Han people. Similarly, immigrants to the Việt kingdom from the Tang dynasty are referred to as Tang people and so on and so forth.¹⁵¹

The most enduring of these terms in Vietnam today is Tang. The Tang dynasty, which held power in China from 618AD until 907AD, has long been considered a golden age of Chinese civilization. During this period, Chinese influence in Asia reached new heights, literature and the arts flourished and many areas of China experienced an expansion of foreign trade and stable economic growth. Thus, through the successive dynasty's which took power after the fall of the Tang, many Chinese, while traveling outside of the Chinese homeland, have continued to refer to themselves as Tang as a means of associating themselves with this revered dynasty.¹⁵² For example, during my interviews with Mr Lý Tú Trác he requested that I refer to the Hoa community as Tang people, although, he and his family had immigrated to the Mekong Delta in the 19th century.¹⁵³

During the exodus of Ming loyalists to Southeast Asia that took place during the 17th century, the Nguyễn lords welcomed thousands of Chinese immigrants into their territories and allowed them to become Việt nationals. These immigrants formed their own communities and were allowed to participate in the national exams and serve in the government by becoming mandarins. Many of these immigrants married Vietnamese women and assimilated to Vietnamese customs and traditions. This group and their descendants are referred to as Minh Hương 明香, meaning the people who maintain the cult of the Minh

¹⁵¹ Châu Thị Hải, *Người Hoa Việt Nam và Đông Nam Á: Hình ảnh hôm qua và vị thế hôm nay (The Chinese Hoa in Vietnam and Southeast Asia: A Picture of the Past and the Status Today)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội (Social Sciences Publishers), 2006), 27, 31.

Trần Khánh, *Người Hoa trong xã hội Việt Nam (thời Pháp thuộc và dưới chế độ Sài Gòn) (The Chinese Hoa in Vietnamese Society under the French Colonial and Saigon Regimes)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội (Social Sciences Publishers), 2002), 23.

¹⁵² Châu Thị Hải, *Người Hoa Việt Nam và Đông Nam Á: Hình ảnh hôm qua và vị thế hôm nay (The Chinese Hoa in Vietnam and Southeast Asia: A Picture of the Past and the Status Today)*, 29.

¹⁵³ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 2, July 2, 1998.

Dynasty.¹⁵⁴ In 1827, fearing that this name for a Chinese-Vietnamese community would offend the Manchu Dynasty, Emperor Minh Mạng decreed that the word Hương 香 referring to the cult of the Minh Hương would be changed in meaning to refer instead to a different definition of the word Hương 鄉 meaning village.¹⁵⁵

Under the French colonial government tens of thousands of Chinese from China were recruited to work as coolies and in a variety of other jobs on plantations and in factories throughout Cochinchina. These Chinese workers were referred to as Hoa Kiều and treated as foreign nationals. As a result they were required to pay a residency tax and other fees required of non-citizens who wished to work in Cochinchina.¹⁵⁶ As per the policy of the Nguyễn since 1787, (later adopted by the French), these workers were divided into five different *bang* (or congregations) based on the dialect they spoke.¹⁵⁷ Each successive new wave of immigration has contributed to the formation of the Chinese Hoa community as it exists in southern Vietnam today.

In the later part of the 1950s, the term người Việt gốc Hoa came into wide usage in southern Vietnam. Around this same time, it also began to be used in official government's documents by the Republic of Vietnam. For example, this terminology was used in documents related to the 1955 law enacted by Ngô Đình Diệm regulating the citizenship of immigrants and their descendants. According to this law, the Minh Hương and Hoa Kiều (later immigrants who still hold nationalities outside Vietnam) that were born in Vietnam are Vietnamese citizens regardless of what nationality they held previously. As result of this new law, after 1958, only about 3000 Chinese people living in Vietnam retained their foreign

¹⁵⁴ Đào Trinh Nhất, *Thế lực Khách trú và vấn đề di dân vào Nam Kỳ* (Chinese Power and Issues of Immigration into Southern Vietnam) (Hà Nội: Bút ký Trung Hoa, 1924), 15–16.

¹⁵⁵ Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên* (Trung tâm Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn Quốc gia, Viện sử học: Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, n.d.).

¹⁵⁶ Tsai Mau Kuey, *Les Chinois au Vietnam* (Paris: Thư viện quốc gia, 1968), 53–54.

¹⁵⁷ Đào Trinh Nhất, *Thế lực Khách trú và vấn đề di dân vào Nam Kỳ* (Chinese Power and Issues of Immigration into Southern Vietnam), 19.

citizenship, the majority of them being either from Taiwan or Hong Kong. The purpose of this new policy was to reinforce a sense of Vietnamese national identity among the Chinese living in southern Vietnam.¹⁵⁸

According to the Vietnamese national census and other official government documents there are five criteria that define Chinese Hoa people.

1. They must have origins among the ethnic Han or have been assimilated by the Han.
2. They must live outside of mainland China.
3. They must have obtained citizenship within the country in which they live.
4. They must preserve the culture of their ancestors, such as language both written and spoken and preserve at least some of their traditional customs and practices.
5. They must consider themselves to be Hoa people.¹⁵⁹

2.1.3 Distribution of Chinese Hoa in Ho Chi Minh City

As William Skinner has pointed out, “over 90% of the Chinese in Southeast Asia have their origins in Southeast China, especially the provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien. In overseas Chinese communities many important social, economic and even political distinctions follow dialect-group lines.”¹⁶⁰ According to a statistical analysis done in 1992, the Chinese Hoa population in Ho Chi Minh City is divided into five distinct dialect-groups.

¹⁵⁸ Nguyễn Văn Huy, *Người Hoa tại Việt Nam (The Chinese Hoa in Vietnam)*, 76–77.

Trần Khánh, *Người Hoa trong xã hội Việt Nam (thời Pháp thuộc và dưới chế độ Sài Gòn) (The Chinese Hoa in Vietnamese Society under the French Colonial and Saigon Regimes)*, 26–27.

¹⁵⁹ Trần Khánh, *Người Hoa trong xã hội Việt Nam (thời Pháp thuộc và dưới chế độ Sài Gòn) (The Chinese Hoa in Vietnamese Society under the French Colonial and Saigon Regimes)*, 29.

Châu Thị Hải, *Người Hoa Việt Nam và Đông Nam Á: Hình ảnh hôm qua và vị thế hôm nay (The Chinese Hoa in Vietnam and Southeast Asia: A Picture of the Past and the Status Today)*, 39.

Phan An, *Người Hoa ở Nam Bộ (Chinese Hoa in Southern Vietnam)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội (Social Sciences Publishers), 2005), 7.

¹⁶⁰ Skinner, *Report on the Chinese in Southeast Asia*, 2.

The relative size of each dialect-group can be broken down as follows, 56% Cantonese, 34% Teochew, 6% Hokkien, 2% Hainanese, 2% Hakka.¹⁶¹

According to census data collected in 2009, the distribution of the Chinese Hoa population in Ho Chi Minh City is as follows:¹⁶²

Chart 2: Population by District, County and Ethnicity

	Total population	Population divided by ethnicity				
		Kinh (Việt)	Hoa	Khmer	Chăm	Other
Total	6.109.493	5.676.502	408.809	9.138	6.074	8.970
All districts	5.134.013	4.713.334	399.290	7.326	5.803	8.260
District 1	196.316	178.033	17.195	180	530	378
District 2	128.278	127.174	662	119	49	274
District 3	198.905	190.681	7.489	285	245	205
District 4	180.350	173.803	6.133	72	166	176
District 5	172.466	111.663	59.839	339	263	362
District 6	239.627	174.039	64.560	378	487	163
District 7	163.689	162.631	1.562	295	90	111
District 8	359.954	324.684	32.982	614	1.470	202
District 9	204.331	202.616	606	596	167	346
District 10	234.761	211.218	22.854	146	215	328
District 11	223.942	127.175	95.532	410	91	734
District 12	288.080	286.006	1.425	234	40	375
Gò Vấp District	449.678	441.947	5.712	237	475	1.307
Tân Bình District	394.770	383.330	10.327	379	46	668
Tân Phú District	369.046	338.603	29.184	629	48	582
Bình Thạnh District	418.349	412.545	4.820	308	377	299
Phú Nhuận District	174.844	169.871	4.039	95	707	132
Thủ Đức District	337.063	332.637	2.874	502	186	864
Bình Tân District	399.564	365.678	31.495	1.506	151	734
All counties	975.480	963.168	9.519	1.812	271	710
Củ Chi County	286.577	285.392	820	203	32	130
Hóc Môn County	245.246	241.925	3.112	94	27	88
Bình Chánh County	304.586	297.599	5.010	1.360	189	428
Nhà Bè County	73.206	72.788	349	32	4	33
Cần Giờ County	65.865	65.464	228	123	19	31

¹⁶¹ Mạc Đường, *Xã hội người Hoa ở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh sau năm 1975 (tiềm năng và phát triển)* (The Society of the Chinese Hoa in Ho Chi Minh city after 1975 - Potential and Development) (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội (Social Sciences Publishers), 1994), 31.

¹⁶² Census data collected in 2009 by Statistical Office in Ho Chi Minh City: “Cục Thống kê Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (Statistical Office in Ho Chi Minh City),” July 14, 2014, <http://www.pso.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/web/guest/home;jsessionid=77408B883C869D244DF65400A74AF73A>.

2.2 An Ethnographic Description of the Contemporary Death Rituals of the Chinese Hoa Community in Ho Chi Minh City

2.2.1 Preparing for death.

When a person is about to reach the moment of their last breath, their soon to be bereaved relatives should discreetly make the following preparations:

- Choose a location in a graveyard to build a crypt. In modern times, the Chinese Hoa have used cement to construct their crypts. The crypt is called *jin jing* (金井) which means “the golden well.” If the deceased still has a living spouse, they should construct a double crypt. The wife’s crypt should be constructed on the right side and the husband’s on the left, which adheres to the traditional concept that men should be located on the left and women on the right.¹⁶³ Currently, because of a lack of available land, the regulations governing how to choose a location for the crypt are not as strict as the regulations used in traditional Chinese death rituals (See 1.3.1. 16 *Shi zhai zhao*). However, the bereaved should always make an effort to find a suitable piece of land, because it is believed that the *feng shui* of the tomb can affect the future prosperity of the bereaved.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Trương Qua, Interview 2, June 15, 1999.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.



Picture 3: Crypt

- Preparing the coffin: In modern times, Chinese Hoa people have not maintained the custom of buying a coffin to reserve for their parents. Instead they purchase it at a place that specializes in making and selling coffins. The quality of the coffin varies greatly depending on the price. The coffins are usually made from varnished wood with a red lacquer painted with gold. Both ends of the coffin have the following Chinese character inscribed into the wood (壽), meaning that the deceased will have eternal life in the next world.

- Purchasing clothes to lay out for the deceased: Traditionally, in the past, when the parents of Chinese Hoa families from Chợ Lớn began to become old and infirm, they would buy cloth to store in their house in anticipation of the time when they would need to sew burial clothes. They are called “longevity clothes” (壽衣).¹⁶⁵ These days burial clothes are usually made by the coffin sellers and sold with the coffin.

¹⁶⁵ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 7.

- Making *ming xing*: The bereaved will purchase a cloth banner from the coffin seller on which they write the name of the deceased. This is a simplified version of the *ming xing* ritual 1. 3.1.5 *Ming xing* (銘旌).

Depending on the financial situation of the particular family, the bereaved will prepare money and contact and invite a ritual specialist from their congregation and hire one or more groups of funeral musicians. They make all the preparations for the funeral to ensure that the ceremony will take place with the proper formality and according to the prescribed rituals. An atmosphere of grief-stricken sorrow and confusion should pervade the entire family of the bereaved. The bereaved will gather around the dying relative and begin to wail and cry and look upon the living face of their loved one for the last time. Last words are exchanged between the dying and the bereaved. This moment is called the *song zhong* 送終 “the last farewell.”

2.2.2 Rituals for a death that has just occurred:

Immediately after the relative of the bereaved has just stopped breathing, the bereaved will cover their ancestral altar with a red cloth which has been prepared for this moment. The Chinese believe that the soul of the deceased will become a “new ghost” who is very ferocious and that new ghost will pester their ancestors’ souls and prevent them from re-entering the house.¹⁶⁶ An explanation of this belief can be found in a book by J.M. de Kermadec titled *Cholon Ville Chinoise*:

According to ancient folk belief the soul of a human being has two parts, the first part belongs to the lower part of the soul. This part is primitive and can create disaster and can harm the living, because this part of the soul is cruel and brutal, therefore, in funeral rites the liturgist usually performs the ritual to counteract this part of the soul. The second part of the soul is the high part. This is the better part of the soul and is associated with the intellectual and religious. Before this part of the soul can experience salvation it must first endure a process of judgment in hell. Therefore, the bereaved will usually prepare lower-world furnishings and

¹⁶⁶ Trương Qua, Interview 2.

money for the deceased to ready the deceased for this journey. The second part of the soul will return to their ancestral tablet (which will be respectfully worshipped in their home) to support and protect their family.¹⁶⁷

Later on, once the deceased has been buried, the bereaved will remove the red cloth from ancestral altar, fold it and place it on the altar of the deceased. After one hundred days, the red cloth will be burned.¹⁶⁸ During the time the coffin remains in the home, the Chinese Hoa use red cloth or white cloth to cover all of their furniture which is constructed of glass, or alternatively, they may use lime and water to mark crosses on all of the furniture containing glass in order to prevent the glass from reflecting the image of the coffin. It is a common belief among the Hoa that if the glass reflects the image of a coffin, it will bring more deaths or bad luck to the family of the deceased.¹⁶⁹

Next, after person has breathed their last breath and the red cloth has been laid on the altar, the bereaved will announce the death to the community. In times past, family members brought incense and flowers to a nearby temple. Today they burn incense and worship at a small shrine dedicated to their god in order to announce that the relative's soul has just departed from this life.¹⁷⁰ One of the male children of the deceased will go to a local congregation to which the family belongs. He will bring with him a basket of mandarin oranges. In Chinese, mandarin oranges are called *ju zi* 桔子, which is a homonym of *ji* 吉, meaning lucky or propitious. Although a funeral is a sad event for his family, he brings good omens to friends and family and asks that they come and give condolences to his parents in order to fulfill his filial duty. The Teochew will usually bring four mandarin oranges because in their dialect the word four *si* (四) is a homonym of *shi* (世) the word "generation." When he gives his friends and relatives four mandarin oranges, he does this as a symbolic gesture to wish them eternal luck. The Cantonese usually bring nine mandarin oranges because in their

¹⁶⁷ Jean M. Kermadec, *Cholon ville Chinoise* (Saigon: Societe Asiatique d'Editions, 1955), 90–91.

¹⁶⁸ Trương Qua, Interview 2.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 7.

dialect nine *jiu* 九 is homonym of *jiu* 久 of the word eternal. Therefore, they bring nine mandarin oranges as symbol of their desire to wish friends and family eternal luck.¹⁷¹

At the same time, people who are close relatives, but not descendants of the deceased, will announce the death to their friends and relatives by printing an obituary in the newspaper or through other media. They do not allow the direct descendants to announce the death because the descendants should be so heartbroken and stunned that they are not yet willing to accept the death of their loved one.¹⁷² If the deceased has descendants that are far away, they must be notified so that they can return home and mourn. The process of announcing the death in contemporary funerals is similar to the ritual 1.3.1.3 *Fu gao* (赴告) in traditional Chinese funerals.

After announcing the death, the bereaved reach the stage where they are overwhelmed by the loss of their loved one. At this point, they gather around the body of the deceased and begin to wail and cry and bemoan the demise of their family member. The bereaved will then kowtow before the body of the deceased. After which, the family will often invite a group of Buddhist monks to chant from Buddhist scriptures to pray for the salvation of the soul of deceased and to pray for peace and serenity for the bereaved. This ritual is called *ju ai* 舉哀.¹⁷³

By now, relatives and friends have all been notified of the death, and they gather at the home of the deceased to help organize the funeral. They will determine who will be the presiding mourner, and who will lead the ceremony. The presiding mourner will usually be the oldest son or the eldest main-line grandson. Some friends and relatives will assist the presiding mourner to officiate in the ceremony. They are called *si yi* 祀儀, meaning ritual

¹⁷¹ Trần Bảo Trung, Interview 1, March 10, 2000.

¹⁷² Lý Tú Trác, Interview 6, April 2, 2000.

¹⁷³ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 7.

assistant.¹⁷⁴ They will help greet the guests who arrive to give condolences to the family, make a record of the gifts and provide any support needed for organizing the funeral.

While waiting for the date scheduled for the preliminary and final laying out of the corpse of the deceased, the descendants use water infused with fragrant herbs to wash the body. They will then dress the body in a new set of burial clothes. If the deceased was a mother, then her daughter or daughter-in-law will complete the ritual. If the deceased was a father, then the son or son-in-law will complete the ritual.¹⁷⁵ According to traditional Chinese death rituals, this is called the 1.3.1.4 *Mu yu* ritual, which used to be very complex and detailed. In modern times, this ritual has been simplified to the point of becoming just another step in the ceremony.

According to my informant, Mr. Lý Tú Trác, in the past, after washing the body of the deceased, the Chinese Hoa in Chợ Lớn would put gems in the mouth of the deceased and place a light under the bottom of their feet. They called this “*kou han zhu, jiao wei deng*” (口含珠, 脚尾燈). In rich families or the families of mandarins, they would usually put seven gems in the mouth of the deceased. In ordinary families, they use seven grain of uncooked rice. This practice is intended to prevent the deceased from reporting their sins falsely when they are brought before the ruler of the underworld for judgment, and the light placed under the feet of the deceased must always be burning brightly because the soul of the recently deceased is panicked and gloomy, and therefore, it needs light to strengthen it.¹⁷⁶ This custom resembles the 1. 3.1.4 *fan han* ritual and “light of the Buddha” (佛燈) ritual used in traditional Chinese funerals. During the time I was in the field studying Chinese Hoa funerals rites in Saigon, I did not see this ritual practiced at the funerals I observed.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 6.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

After being washed, the corpse of the deceased is brought to the main room in the house. Because houses in Saigon these days are usually narrow, and most funerals take place in a funeral home, the place where the corpse is kept before being laid out is not strictly regulated by custom or tradition as it was formerly. The location is chosen as a matter of convenience in preparation for the laying out. At this point, the bereaved will lay out the clothes and the shroud and other belongs the deceased used when they were still alive. If the deceased is female, the belongings will include clothes, a mirror and combs. If the deceased is male, the belongings will include a wooden tobacco pipe and shoes.¹⁷⁷ Both males and females will have stacks of joss paper (ghost money) to prepare them for their journey to the underworld, and large bags of dried tea leaves will be prepared to spread around their bodies to absorb any evaporating moisture.

2.2.3 Rituals practiced while the coffin remains in the home

2.2.3.1 Laying out the corpse

- *Ji guan* 祭棺 Offerings to the coffin spirit. During this period, the bereaved will bring the prepared coffin to the main room where the corpse resides. A ritual specialist will then put the offerings into the coffin, and the descendants of the deceased will kowtow four times to the coffin, burn incense, light candles and ask the coffin spirit to receive the body of their parents. The offering usually includes a plate of colorful candies, a pair of candles, a dish of fruit and a dish of joss paper.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Trần Bảo Trung, Interview 1.

¹⁷⁸ Vietnamese traditional funerals have a ritual called “phạt mộc” which means *punish the wood*. According to Nhật Thanh, this ritual takes place in the following sequence. A ritual specialist will hold a knife in one hand and hold incense in the other. He will then speak an incantation and make a cutting gesture towards each piece of wood that the coffin is made from in order to extirpate the spirits or ghosts residing in the wood. Certain families who strongly believe in existence of these spirits will place a talisman inside and outside the coffin. The offering to the coffin spirit ritual in Chinese funerals and the *punish the wood* ritual in Vietnamese funerals, although different in practice, originate from similar beliefs. Both ethnic groups believe that the wood that coffin is made from contains malevolent ghosts or spirits that can harm the soul of the deceased. These beliefs originate from ancient animistic folk traditions that have been passed down for many generations. Nhật Thanh, *Đất lề quê thói* (Hà Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1992), 408.

- *Xiao lian* 小殮 Preliminary laying out of the deceased. While the body of the deceased is on the soul bed, if the deceased is female, her daughter will comb her hair and apply makeup to her corpse. If the deceased is male, the son will prepare the body. They will dress the body in a hat (*nón chén*), burial clothes and burial shoes. These garments are called longevity clothes. They have one inner layer made of white silk and several outer layers, either three, five or seven layers. The clothes are made of silk. Silk is used to cover the hands of the deceased.

It is a commonly held belief among the Chinese that during the initial period of forty-nine days after death, there will be one day when the soul of the dead will re-inhabit the body and the deceased may be returned to life.¹⁷⁹ It is also believed that while the corpse still lies in state, if a cat runs across the coffin of the deceased, the body will return to life. Therefore, both hands of the deceased should be covered because, should this occur, they may seize the nearest living person and take them with them to the underworld.¹⁸⁰ On top of the silk they place a paper fan on the right hand of the deceased and a handkerchief on the left hand to prepare them for their journey.

In order to avoid bad luck while the deceased is wearing the laying out clothes, the Chinese Hoa avoid dressing them with belts or in clothes with buttons.¹⁸¹ This taboo has its roots in the practice of using homonyms to express sentiments of congratulations or grief and to foster good luck and discourage bad luck. For example, the word for *fastening* a belt or *fastening* a button is “*tai*” (帶) which is a synonym of “*tai*” (帶) meaning *to lead*, which is associated with the idea that the deceased will lead their descendants into the afterlife. The buttons on the clothes of the deceased should be removed, so that the soul of the deceased will not be bound to the body and can therefore depart without difficulty. Traditionally,

¹⁷⁹ Trần Bảo Trung, Interview 1.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Kermadec, *Cholon ville Chinoise*, 96.

Chinese Hoa people also remove the pockets from the burial clothes of the deceased because pockets are the place where people store money. Removing them symbolizes the deceased leaving wealth and prosperity behind for their descendants.¹⁸² Ideally, burial clothes should be made from silk, brocade or satin. Fur, wool and other materials made from animal skins are not used because it is believed that dressing the deceased in animal skins could cause the deceased to be reincarnated as an animal.¹⁸³

-*Mai shui* 買水 buying water: Traditionally, the Chinese Hoa custom was to buy water from the river god. The sons and the oldest grandsons of the deceased bring a container, flowers, incense, candles, fruit and joss paper to a wharf on a river to worship the river god. They ask to buy water to wash the soul of the deceased.¹⁸⁴ In recently times, this ritual has been simplified and now only requires a short ceremony. The eldest son will go to a nearby faucet or a well and burn incense and joss paper to “buy the water.”

- *Mu yu* 沐浴 washing the dust off the soul of the deceased: The bereaved take turns standing next to the body of the deceased. A ritual specialist will hold a container of water recently bought from the river god. In his other hand, he will hold a small tree branch with green leaves on it. If the deceased was a mother, the tree branch should be from a bamboo tree (zhu 竹). If the deceased was a father, the tree branch should be from a pine tree (*song* 松).¹⁸⁵ A ritual specialist will guide the bereaved while practicing the ritual. Each member of the family in mourning will dip the branch in the container of water and make a symbolic gesture over the body of the deceased intended to cleanse the soul of the departed. While this ceremony is taking place, a Buddhist monk will chant scriptures in the dialect of the bereaved.

¹⁸² Trần Bảo Trung, Interview 2, April 15, 2000.

¹⁸³ Kermadec, *Cholon ville Chinoise*, 96.

¹⁸⁴ Lý Tú Trác, interview 6, April 2, 2000

¹⁸⁵ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 5, September 8, 1999.

The *Mu yu* ritual (1.3.1.4) and the ritual described above share the same name but are different. The former is a practical ritual for washing the body of the deceased. The latter is a symbolic ritual meant to wash the dust from the soul of the deceased so that it may achieve salvation.

- *Sheng shi* 生食 Feeding the body of the deceased: The bereaved approach the body of the deceased, and a ritual specialist stands next to them, guiding them through the ritual while holding a bowl of rice in one hand and a plate of sugar and tofu in the other. The bereaved take turns holding a pair of chopsticks and make gestures symbolizing that they are feeding the deceased. (See picture 16) This is then followed by gestures symbolizing that they themselves are tasting the food. These gestures signify that the children should serve meals for their parents first and are only allowed to eat after that. This ritual is meant to ensure that the deceased will be well fed before making the journey to the underworld, and the bereaved will have fulfilled their filial duty to their parents.¹⁸⁶

- *Da lian* 大殓 The final laying out: After feeding the deceased, the bereaved retreat and kneel facing the coffin. At this time, three or four ritual assistants will perform the final laying out of the deceased. They will place a layer of tea and ash inside the coffin. They will then place the body of the deceased inside the coffin. Joss paper will be placed on both sides of the head. A ritual assistant will then cover the body with layers of tea. The belongings of the deceased, who has been prepared for the journey to the underworld, will be placed on top of the coffin; joss paper will be placed on top of the belongings, holding them in place. Finally, everything including the corpse of the deceased will be covered with a red shroud. This red shroud is called *gai guan bei* 蓋棺被.¹⁸⁷ During the final laying out, the bereaved

¹⁸⁶ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 4, August 16, 1999.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

will kneel in front of the coffin and wail. A Buddhist monk will chant from Buddhist scriptures to pray for the salvation of the soul of the deceased.

- *Gai guan* 蓋棺 Placing the lid on the coffin: After the final laying out, the coffin is covered. At this point, the bereaved kneel, with heads facing down, in front of the coffin. The Chinese Hoa believe that if the bereaved hold their faces up, the deceased will see them, they will not have the heart to leave them behind, and they will take their descendants with them into the afterlife.¹⁸⁸ After several ritual assistants have sealed the lid on the coffin the bereaved will look up towards the coffin.

- *Shang xiao* 上 孝 Putting on the mourning garments: After placing the lid on the coffin, the bereaved will continue kneeling in front of the coffin. A ritual specialist will give each member of the bereaved a hat, clothes made from sackcloth, a staff and a belt. During this ritual a Buddhist monk will chant from Buddhist scriptures in the family's dialect.

2.2.3.2 *Jia dian* 家 奠 Rituals taking place after the coffin has been sealed but remains in the home.

- After the bereaved have put on their mourning garments, friends and relatives begin to arrive to give condolences to the deceased and the bereaved. The Chinese Hoa live in tightly knit communities. Depending on the nature of the complex web of relationships the deceased or the bereaved might have, they could potentially be members of many organizations. When a person passes away, the organizations to which they and their families belong will assign a group of people to go to the home of the deceased to give condolences. The gifts these groups of people usually give include an amount of money, a banner, a large candle, fresh flowers (usually tuberoses), a tray of fruit and a stack of joss paper. When a group arrives at the home of the deceased to give condolences, a funeral orchestra will play

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

music. The descendants of the deceased stand next to the coffin and prepare to kneel and give thanks to the group of condolers. The group of condolers will stand side by side in front of the coffin. A ritual assistant will then speak instructions for the ceremony in their dialect.

- “Offering incense” (上香): A ritual assistant will light three large incense sticks and pass them to the leader of the group of condolers. The group leader will then raise the incense to his forehead and kowtow four times, followed by four bows with fingers and palms pressed together in a prayer-like gesture in front of the coffin of the deceased.

- “Offering the candles” (燈明): A person from the group of condolers will hold a pair of candles in front of them at forehead level, followed by a circular gesture moving the candles from right to left.

- “Offering flowers” (鮮華): Another member of the group of condolers will hold a bunch of 10 tuberose and repeat the aforementioned circular gesture.

- “Offering fruit” (生果): A different member of the group will hold a large tray of fruit and make the same gesture.

- “Offering money” (奠金): Another member of the group will hold a tray of joss paper and make the same gesture.

At this point, a ritual assistant will speak about the virtues of the deceased and the relationship of the deceased with the condolers. The group of condolers will stand and listen solemnly to these remarks. After this, the ritual assistant will instruct the group of condolers to bow four times, saying “一鞠躬, 再鞠躬, 三鞠躬, 四鞠躬” which translates as “first bow, second bow, third bow, fourth bow.” Following these instructions, the group of condolers will bow once as each bow is announced. The ritual assistant will then say the words “祭拜,” and the group of condolers will then bow three times with their fingers and

palms pressed together in a *pai* gesture and retreat from the room while still facing the coffin. Next, the funeral orchestra will cease playing and the bereaved will burn the joss paper brought by the condolers so that the soul of the deceased will receive the money in the afterworld.

When friends and relatives arrive to give condolences individually, the Chinese Hoa ritual is similar to the Vietnamese ritual. The condoler stands in front of the altar of the deceased. A ritual assistant will light incense, usually one or three, and give them to the condoler. The condoler raises the incense to his or her forehead and quietly addresses the soul of the deceased with whatever words they feel are appropriate to comfort them. They will then kowtow four times in front of the coffin and place the incense upon the altar of the deceased. The descendants of the deceased then face the condoler and kowtow four times. At this point the condoler bows, holding fingers and palms pressed together in *pai* gesture towards the descendants of the deceased. This is to show humility. The condoler then retreats from the room while still facing the coffin.

After these rituals, each condoler will receive an envelope containing a very small amount of money, which is considered to be “lucky money,” to thank the condoler for sharing their grief and sorrow.

The condolers contribution to the bereaved is often more substantial and is often used to help defray some of the cost of the funeral. However, very wealthy families do not usually receive money from condolers. In this situation, the friends and relatives will give condolences to the bereaved in one of the following ways. - A condoler might bring a roasted pig to offer to the deceased by placing it on their altar.

- They could pay money to hire a funeral orchestra to play music to comfort the soul of the deceased and share grief with the bereaved.

- They could hire a group of Buddhist monks to attend the funeral and chant Buddhist scriptures to pray for the salvation of the soul of the deceased.

- They might also place an obituary in a local newspaper to publicly voice their grief to the family of the deceased. Chinese Hoa intellectuals often prefer this method. Each obituary will usually have two purposes: the first is to express grief; the second is to praise the merits and good qualities of the deceased.¹⁸⁹

Although the above regulations for giving and receiving condolences have existed for two thousand years, the details of the procedures governing these customs have remained relatively unchanged compared to the *Diao lin* (1.3.1.9) ritual discussed earlier in this paper. Giving and receiving condolences is a way of showing love between human beings and represents an important part of the Chinese moral code. The fact that these rituals remain relatively unchanged is proof that the core values that underlie Chinese philosophy regarding death rituals, as expressed in the adage *Nghĩa tử là nghĩa tận* (meaning attend the deceased's funeral no matter how you felt about them in life, as a last gesture of goodwill and all negative actions the deceased has taken should be forgiven after death) is still preserved.

Families who are having a funeral usually keep a gift recorder or family ledger. In this ledger is kept a list of people and organizations who attended the funeral to give condolences to the family of the deceased, or gave a small amount of money to help pay for the funeral. This list is a reflection of the family's whole network of relatives, friends and other social relationships. During their funerals Chinese Hoa families receive a great deal of assistance from their relatives and their social networks in terms of money, labor to help with preparing offerings, preparing the feast and performing rituals during the funeral. Helping a family while they are mourning is considered an important aspect of social etiquette that builds relationships between members of the community. Chinese families exchange gifts, which

¹⁸⁹ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 5.

generally come as money or labor to assist with the funeral. A strict accounting of the donations and assistance they have received is kept in the family's collective memory as well as in their ledgers so that in the future they can properly reciprocate these gifts.

- During the time the coffin remains in the house or the funeral home, before every meal, the bereaved will offer food to the soul of the deceased by placing food on the altar. The food will usually consist of the dishes the deceased enjoyed eating while he or she was alive. This daily meal offering ritual is similar to the traditional 1.3.1.12 *Zhao xi ku dian* ritual.

- In modern times during most Chinese Hoa funerals, the deceased does not lie in state for a long period in the home or in a funeral home. On average, a funeral will last from around three to seven days. Some funerals will only last a day and a night. It is rare that a funeral will last more than ten days because the expenditure in terms of time, energy and financial resources would prove too costly for the bereaved. I believe this is the reason why the rituals 1.3.1.13 *Jie san* and 1.3.1.14 *Zuo ji* were not practiced in any of the funerals I observed.

Chinese Hoa funerals in Ho Chi Minh City are influenced primarily by three religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. There are also such funerals for the Chinese Hoa Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, communities which make up about ten percent of the total Chinese Hoa population in this region.¹⁹⁰ Chinese Hoa families usually invite Buddhist and Taoist monks to attend offerings at their funerals as well.

¹⁹⁰ Nguyễn Thị Hoa Xinh, “Tín ngưỡng và tôn giáo người Hoa Quảng Đông ở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (Beliefs and Religions of the Cantonese in Ho Chi Minh City)” (Luận án Tiến sĩ khoa học Lịch sử chuyên ngành Dân tộc học (PhD Dissertation in Ethnology), Viện Khoa học Xã hội tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (Institute of Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City), 1997), 92.



Picture 4: Taoist nuns

2.2.4 *Zhu bin* (出殯) Rituals for removing and transporting the coffin and burial

After selecting a time and date to remove the coffin from the home of the bereaved, the friends and relatives help the bereaved prepare for the burial, helping with such tasks as arranging for the transportation of the coffin in a hearse, organizing the funeral procession, and preparing offerings.

During the early morning on the date of the burial, a funeral orchestra will arrive at the home of the bereaved to play music for the purpose of saying farewell to the soul of the deceased. Usually, friends and relatives hire this orchestra as a way of giving comfort to the

bereaved. Generally, the musicians play western instruments such as clarinets and drums or traditional Chinese instruments. While the music is playing, the presiding mourner worships in front of their ancestral altar. The presiding mourner respectfully informs their ancestors that it is time to bury the deceased and asks the ancestors in the afterworld to receive the soul of the deceased.¹⁹¹ This ritual is similar to the traditional Chinese 1. 3.1.20 *Zu dian* (祖奠) death ritual.

A ritual specialist chants from Buddhist scriptures to pray for the salvation of the soul of the deceased. They will then walk around the coffin holding a cup of water and dip a small tree branch in the water. As they walk, they flick the wet branch periodically causing droplets of water to scatter on the floor. The purpose of this ritual is to suppress or expel the evil spirits and protect the soul of the departed.¹⁹² The descendants of the deceased kneel on both sides of the coffin with males on the left and females on the right. Led by a ritual assistant, the descendants clasp their fingers and palms together in a prayer-like gesture and bow.

The friends and relatives, who will accompany the coffin of the deceased to the graveyard, take turns burning incense, worshipping and praying for the last time. The bereaved will usually give these people a paper fan and an envelope containing lucky money. The paper fan is for them to use on the journey to the graveyard, and the lucky money is intended to endow them with a good omen.¹⁹³

Offerings are arranged on a table placed in front of the coffin of the deceased. The offerings include a red roast pig, a boiled chicken, a roast duck, a basket of rice, a basket of *baozi* (a ball-shaped bun containing pork or chicken, onions, eggs, mushrooms and vegetables), fruit, wine, fresh flowers, incense, candles, and a large amount of votive paper.

¹⁹¹ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 4.

¹⁹² Lý Tú Trác, Interview 5.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

The roast pig will usually be brought by a son in-law or a relative as an offering and placed on a wooden tray. The four legs of the pig are splayed outwards. One flower is placed on the pig's head, one on its back, and one on its tail. A knife is placed on the pig's back with a rectangular piece of paper. The paper usually has Chinese characters on it that express the grief of those who brought it to the funeral. The family title (position of the deceased in the family) will be written on the lower right corner of the paper, and the name of the person who brought the pig to the funeral will be written on the lower left corner along with the word *kou bai* (叩拜).

It is very important that there be no shortage of votive paper during the funeral. The bereaved prepare clothes, blankets, a mosquito net, shoes, umbrellas, money, and gold, all made from votive paper and placed in a suitcase also made from votive paper. This suitcase will be burned after the coffin has been lowered into the ground.

Before the coffin is moved, the bereaved kneel and wail in front of it. A ritual specialist will chant from Buddhist scriptures to open a path for the coffin to be transported to the graveyard. The descendants then retreat and stand in columns with males in front and females behind them. The columns are arranged in order of oldest to youngest with paternal relatives before maternal relatives. A coffin bearer approaches and takes an incense bowl from the altar of the deceased. He discards the remains of the burned incense, then lights three new incense sticks which are placed in the incense bowl which is then given to the eldest son of the deceased. Another coffin bearer takes the photograph of the deceased from the altar and gives it to the second son (or child) of the deceased. Two small lanterns are taken from the altar of the deceased and given to their third son (or child). The coffin bearers tie wooden poles to the coffin with ropes so that it can be carried to the hearse.

At this point the coffin will be carried to the hearse under the supervision of a ritual specialist. As the coffin is carried from the home, the bereaved retreat, while still facing the

coffin, out onto the street. They then kneel while the coffin is being loaded into the hearse. Once the coffin has been placed on the hearse, an incense bowl and a large photo of the deceased is placed in the *xiang ting che* 相亭車, a car dedicated to transporting a picture of the deceased during the funeral procession. The procession then begins to move forward. A funeral procession usually moves using the following procedure.¹⁹⁴

- At the head of the procession will be the *ming xing* 銘旌 in the center of a cart with a large lantern, *da deng* 大燈, on each side. Behind this, in rows, will be numerous banners. All this funeral paraphernalia is described in more detail in section 2.5
- Second in line will be a car carrying four monks who chant from Buddhist scriptures to lead the way for the deceased (*zeng yin* 僧引). Just behind the front seats, two large paper dummies (*xian tong yu nu* 仙童玉女) are placed, intended to protect the soul of the deceased and expel evil spirits. Right behind and above the heads of the paper dummies are pictures of Bodhisattvas to help and support the soul of the deceased.
- Third in line in the procession is the car which transports the picture of the deceased (*xiang ting che* 相亭車).
- Fourth in line will be the hearse which carries the coffin (*ling che* 靈車).
- Fifth in line the descendants of the deceased walk behind the hearse and wail (*xiao chun* 孝春).
- Sixth in line are the friends and relatives of the deceased (*qi you* 戚友).

During the funeral procession, there should be at least one funeral orchestra following behind the descendants of the deceased. If there is more than one funeral orchestra, each orchestra is placed in a different area of the procession. The function of the music is to create

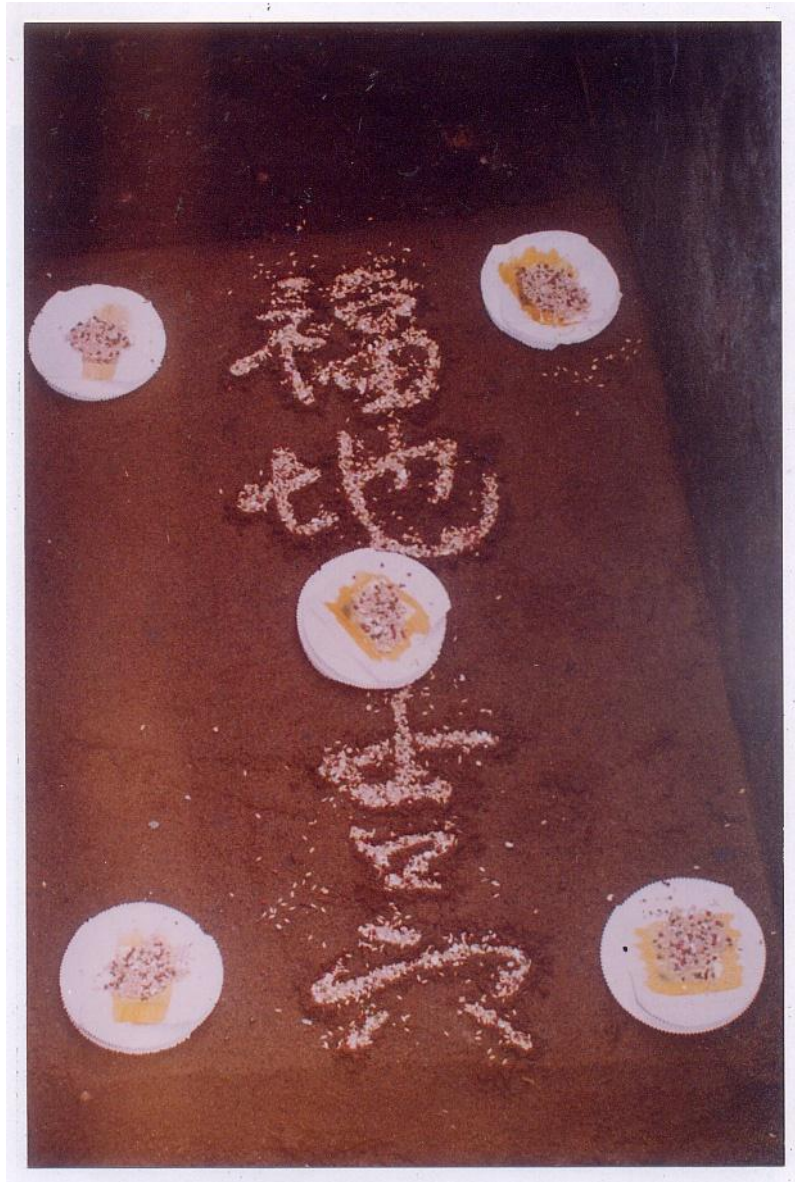
¹⁹⁴ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 7.

the appropriate atmosphere to help relieve the sorrow of the bereaved and those attending the funeral.

Traditionally, funeral processions would usually walk to the graveyard. However, in more recent times, graveyards tend to be on the outskirts of the city, and the route of the funeral may cover a great distance. So the bereaved often rent cars to transport friends and relatives and their offerings. Therefore, the funeral procession usually travels on foot for a period of time and then rides in cars for the remainder of the journey. The descendants of the deceased sit on both sides of the coffin in the hearse. This signifies that the descendants will stay beside their parents until the last moment. The descendants sprinkle joss paper along the way to the burial ground to “bribe” the ghosts and keep them busy collecting the money so that they will not disturb the funeral procession.

When the funeral procession arrives at the graveyard, the coffin bearers remove the coffin from the hearse. While the coffin is being removed from the hearse, the descendants of the deceased kneel and *pai* in front of the crypt which has been built for the deceased. A ritual assistant then spreads sand evenly around the floor of the crypt. After this, they place a mix of five different varieties of beans on circle-shaped pieces of joss paper on top of the sand. The beans and joss paper are placed one pile in each corner and one in the center of the crypt. The mix of beans will include green beans, red beans, white beans, black beans and soy beans. Each pile of beans represents one of the five elements *Wu Xing* philosophy, wood, fire, earth, metal and water.¹⁹⁵ They then use the same mix of beans to write four Chinese characters *fu di ji xue* 福地吉穴 which translates literally as “the happy land and a lucky crypt” meaning the crypt and the land will bring happiness and luck to the bereaved. (See picture 5 below)

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.



Picture 5: “the happy land and a lucky crypt” *fu di ji xue* 福地吉穴

Before lowering the coffin into the crypt, the bereaved arrange offerings, burn incense and kowtow to worship the god of the earth. The offerings for this ritual will include incense, candles, fruit, flowers, roast duck, boiled chicken and joss paper. After this ritual, the coffin bearers lower the coffin into the crypt under the supervision of a ritual specialist. At this point, the mourners kowtow and wail next to the crypt. The *ming xing* is placed on top of the coffin and buried with the deceased. The bereaved throws joss paper into the crypt around the coffin. After that, the bereaved and the friends and relatives of the deceased walk in line

around the entire crypt and throw a handful of soil and a flower (usually a tuberose) into the crypt. This is to signify that the bereaved and their friends and family will always look after the soul of the deceased. The coffin bearers then use shovels to fill the crypt with soil. A ritual assistant brings the same mix of five types of beans mentioned earlier and distributes them to the bereaved which they will bring home with them from the funeral. In Chinese the word for bean (種子) is a homonym of the word for children, so the Chinese Hoa believe that keeping these five different varieties of beans will bring good luck for their family.¹⁹⁶ After the coffin bearers have filled the entire crypt with soil, the bereaved and the friends and family of the deceased walk slowly around the crypt and wail. This is to show how much they still care for and miss the deceased and their reluctance to be parted from them.



Picture 6: Casket inside the crypt covered by the *Ming xing*

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

In recent times, the busy modern lifestyles of the Chinese Hoa people do not allow them to observe all of the intricate regulations required by the Five Grades of Mourning. After the coffin of the deceased has been buried, the bereaved remove their mourning garments and burn them beside the grave of the deceased.¹⁹⁷ After they have returned home, the bereaved pin a black patch on the left breast area of whatever clothes they normally wear to signify they are in mourning.¹⁹⁸

The bereaved return to their normal lives without having observed the numerous traditional requirements of the Five Grades of Mourning as they were practiced after burial in the past. Clearly, the Chinese Hoa observance of the Five Grades of Mourning with all of its details and intricacies has been simplified progressively over time to keep up with the changing social structures of modern life.

According to Nguyễn Thị Hoa Xinh, the Cantonese in Ho Chi Minh City have a custom. Within the first three months after burying a deceased relative, the bereaved should worship the deceased by arranging a temporary altar below the ancestral altar. On this temporary altar, they will put photos of the deceased, an incense bowl, as well as a vase of flowers and offer meals twice a day, when the sun rises and when the sun sets. After one hundred days, they will organize an offering, remove the temporary altar and invite the soul of the deceased to go to the ancestral altar. At this time, the family will replace the old ancestral tablet with a new one. An ancestral tablet should contain the name of the most recent five generations of male ancestors. Therefore, the new tablet will contain the names of the deceased, preceded by his most recent four male ancestors. The name of the fifth will be removed.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Nguyễn Thị Hoa Xinh, “Tín ngưỡng và tôn giáo người Hoa Quảng Đông ở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (Beliefs and Religions of the Cantonese in Ho Chi Minh City),” 56.

The ritual described above is the traditional 3.1.29 *Zu ku* (卒哭) ritual. The practice of bringing the ancestral tablet from the temporary altar to the ancestral altar is derived from the 3.1.30 *Fu yu zong ci* (祔於宗祠) ritual. Previously, these rituals were extremely elaborate, but in modern times, they have been simplified into a relatively uncomplicated ceremony. Depending upon the financial situation of the individual family, the bereaved might invite Buddhist monks to come and chant from Buddhist scriptures, and to pray for the salvation of the soul of the deceased. I have observed this ritual not only among in the Cantonese, but also among the other four groups of Chinese Hoa living in Ho Chi Minh City. However, the period of time the deceased will be worshipped on the temporary altar varies. For example, the Teochew worship the deceased on a temporary altar until the twenty-seventh month after the death date.²⁰⁰ At that point, they bring the ancestral tablet of the deceased to be worshipped with their ancestors.

After this, the deceased is worshipped in the house along with their ancestors. Every year on the date of their death anniversary the descendants organize an anniversary ceremony to remember them. Every month on the 1st and the 15th of the lunar calendar the descendants of the deceased burn incense and offer fresh flowers and fruit for them.

2.2.5. Paraphernalia used in contemporary funeral rituals

2.2.5.1 Soul Calling Staff

The Soul Calling Staff is made from a single piece of bamboo about 1.5 meters long. On top of the staff is a square or round bamboo frame that looks similar to a lantern and is decorated with five different colors of paper surrounded by four rectangular tassels also made from paper but with the mantra 南無阿彌陀佛 (*Namo Emitufo* in Chinese or *Nam mô a di đà phật* in Vietnamese) written on them in order to bring comfort to the soul of the

²⁰⁰ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 6.

deceased.²⁰¹ In the center of that frame, tied to tip of the staff, is a rectangular piece of paper with the name of the deceased written on it.

It is a commonly held belief among the Chinese Hoa that, at the moment a person has just passed away, his or her soul begins to wander aimlessly because it is disoriented and confused. Therefore, the bereaved will construct a “Soul Calling Staff” so that the soul of the deceased will be drawn to it and, by following the staff, can be guided on the journey to the next world.²⁰²

During all of the funeral rituals, the oldest son, or the presiding mourner, will hold the Soul Calling Staff and ensure that the incense placed on the tip of the staff remains constantly burning. When there are no rituals taking place, the staff is placed on the coffin because it is believed that the soul of the deceased will remain with the staff and, therefore, remain near their body.²⁰³ After the ceremony in which the coffin is lowered into the crypt, the Soul Calling Staff is burned while the mourners remain standing in front of the grave.

Although they share similar terminology, the Soul Calling Staff in Chinese Hoa contemporary death rituals and the Calling Back ceremony (*guai hun* 招魂 1.3.1.2) in traditional Chinese death rituals are quite different. The former uses a staff to lead the soul of the deceased while the latter is a ritual to call the soul of the deceased back to the body with the hope that the person may return to life. Although these rituals are different in form and function, they are both rooted in animist traditions.

²⁰¹“Na mo E mi tuofo” in Chinese or “Nam mô a di đà phật” in Vietnamese is a common mantra that Mahayana Buddhist often repeat many times to express respect and take refuge in the Buddha, who, it is believed will save and protect the soul of the dead in the afterlife. Đoàn Trung Còn, “Nam mô a di đà phật,” *Phật học từ điển (Buddhist Dictionary)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1997), 312.

²⁰² Trương Qua, Interview 2.

²⁰³ Ibid.



Picture 7: *Ming xing* and Soul Calling Staff

2.2.5.2 *Ming xing* (銘旌)

Ming xing is a red banner hung in the middle of the room where the deceased lies in state. The name of the deceased, their date of birth and their date of death are inscribed on the banner. When the person has just breathed his or her last breath, the bereaved will immediately begin making the *Ming xing*. They can purchase the materials to prepare the

Ming xing from the same merchant from whom they bought the coffin.²⁰⁴ This ritual is almost identical to the *Ming xing* ritual (1.3.1.5) practiced in traditional Chinese death rituals. When the coffin is removed and transported to the graveyard, the *Ming xing* will be carried in front of the funeral procession. When the coffin is lowered into the crypt, the *Ming xing* will cover the lid of the coffin and be buried with the deceased.

2.2.5.3 *Xiao deng* 小燈

Xiao deng translates from Chinese as *small lantern*. *Xiao deng* are also referred to as *filial lanterns* 孝燈 because the two characters *xiao* 小 and *xiao* 孝 are a homonym. On the front of the *xiao deng* the surname of the family of the bereaved is written in red Chinese characters. On the back side are two Chinese characters *xiao she* 孝舍 meaning that the family is in mourning. The character *xiao* 孝 is written in black and the character *she* 舍 is written in dark blue. During the funeral rituals, one of the deceased's sons or grandsons will hold the lantern. When no rituals are taking place, the lantern is placed on top of the coffin.²⁰⁵

2.2.5.4 *Da deng* 大燈

Da deng are a pair of large lanterns. The names and the age of the deceased are written on both sides of the lanterns. If the deceased is a male, his name will be written in red characters on one side of the lantern. If the deceased is a married woman, her husband's family surname will be written on the lanterns. For example, if the deceased's surname was *Wang* 王 and she was married into a family with the surname *Li*, the lantern would have *Li men wang shi* 李門王氏 written on it, meaning that the deceased surname was Wang and she was a daughter in-law of the Li family.²⁰⁶ Three years is added to the age of the deceased when it is written on the lantern. For example, if the deceased is 64 years old, the bereaved

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Trương Qua, Interview 3, March 16, 2000.

²⁰⁶ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 5.

will record the age of the deceased on the lantern as 67, and *shou liu shi you qi* 壽六十有七 will be written on the lantern. The word *you* 有 here signifies that 3 years has been added to the actual age of the deceased. According to my informants, this practice signifies the desire for longevity and shows respect for people who have lived a long life²⁰⁷. It seems this custom has been practiced in the Chinese Hoa community in Chợ Lớn for a long time because it was also recorded by J. M. de Kermadec in an ethnographic description he wrote in 1955.²⁰⁸ A similar custom is also found in the Chinese community in Singapore²⁰⁹.

During the time the deceased is lying in state in the family home, the bereaved will hang one lantern on each side of the front door and light them at night. When the coffin is removed and transported to the graveyard, the lanterns will be hung on each side of the *Ming xing* and they will be carried at the head of the funeral procession.

2.2.5.5 Votive items

Votive items are paper objects which emulate the belongings that the deceased used when he or she was alive. For example, a variety of elaborate mockups of useful everyday items are made from votive paper, these mockups are often made with great attention to detail and will often include such items as clothes, money, gold or even paper houses, cellphones, motorcycles, cars, and numerous other items used in everyday life. The paper items will be burned during offerings for the deceased and are intended to provide them with the necessities they will use in the afterlife. The Chinese Hoa who observe these rituals will burn numerous votive papers items during almost every ritual throughout the funeral. Producing these votive items has historically been a hereditary occupation bringing in immense profits for certain Chinese Hoa families engaged in the craft.²¹⁰ The practice of using paper to

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Kermadec, *Cholon ville Chinoise*, 98.

²⁰⁹ Tong Chee Kiong, *Chinese death rituals in Singapore* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 36.

²¹⁰ Trương Qua, Interview 3.

manufacture votive burial items for Chinese Hoa death rituals is a continuation of the traditional Chinese custom called *ming qi* 冥器, meaning the custom of burying the property and the most essential belongings the deceased commonly used when they were still alive. This customs dates back to the Song dynasty (960 to 1279) and is, therefore, not unique to the Chinese Hoa and is, in fact, extremely prevalent in other cultures in Southeast Asia.²¹¹²¹²

During the funeral, the bereaved will also place two large paper dummies on each side of the coffin. The male dummy holds a handkerchief; the female dummy carries a cup of tea. These are the servants who will accompany the deceased on their journey to the other world. In the funeral procession, these two dummies will be placed on *zeng yin* 僧引, which is the second car in the procession and carries the Buddhist monks. When the casket is lowered into the crypt, the dummies will be burned in front of the grave.²¹³

According to J.M. de Kermadec, in traditional Chinese Hoa funerals in Chợ Lớn during the early part of the 20th century, a giant dummy made from votive paper (usually about 3 or 4 meters tall) was placed at the head of the funeral procession. These dummies wore frightening and cruel facial expressions and carried a weapon, usually a sword or a spear and was clad in a military uniform similar in style to that worn by a singer playing the character of general in a traditional Chinese opera. These dummy were placed on a wheeled platform which was propelled along with the procession by several ritual assistants assigned with that task.²¹⁴ (See picture 9)

²¹¹ He Lian Kui, *A study of Chinese rituals and customs* (中國禮俗研究), 87.

²¹² Mai Ngọc Chừ, *Văn hóa Đông Nam Á (Southeast Asian Cultures)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội (National University Publishers, Hanoi), 1998), 177.

²¹³ Lý Tú Trắc, Interview 4.

²¹⁴ Kermadec, *Cholon ville Chinoise*, 100.



Picture 9: Giant warrior dummy with the face of *Jiao mian da shi*

In some Chinese Hoa funerals, the procession would include as many as 4 giant paper dummies. Other funerals included only 2 warrior dummies. One was tasked with clearing the road of evil spirits, while the other would protect the procession from wandering ghosts who might appear on the road. These warrior dummies were then burned in front of the grave of the deceased so that they could continue to protect them in the afterlife.²¹⁵

According to my informant, Mr. Lý Tú Trác, the dummies described in J. M. Kermadec's book symbolize *jiao mian da shi* (*Tiêu Diện Đại Sĩ* in Vietnamese 焦面大士), an incarnation of the Bodhisattva, *guan shi yin* (*Quan Thế Âm* 觀世音), that can appear during a funeral in order to protect the soul of the deceased.²¹⁶ In contemporary times, Chinese Hoa funeral dummies are placed on each side of the vehicle carrying the Buddhist monks. One dummy is male and the other is female. The male dummy is called *xian tong* (*Tiên Đồng*) 仙童, and the female dummy is called *yu nu* (*Ngọc Nữ*) 玉女. These dummies are the servants of the Bodhisattva *Quan Thế Âm*.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 5.

²¹⁷ Ibid.



Picture 10: Picture of the *ling tang* (or coffin room) with two servant dummies and *Xian tong*,

Yu Nu

2.2.5.6 The Funeral Orchestra

Particularly at funerals (but also at large gatherings more generally), the Chinese consider music an essential component of their rituals. The music employed for these rituals is intended to be suitable for the occasion. There are three kinds of music utilized for these

funerals. One type of music, called *scriptural music* (*kinh nhạc*), is played by Buddhist or Taoist monks or ritual specialists while they are chanting scriptures. Another style of music, called *ritual music* (*lễ nhạc*), is played by the funeral musicians during the performance of certain rituals. A third style of music is called *Đội Kèn Tây* (*brass band*) and employs western instruments such as drums, trumpets and flutes, is played at various times throughout the funeral.²¹⁸

The Chinese Hoa funeral orchestra is very similar to the Vietnamese funeral orchestra (*phường bát âm*). The music is intended to ameliorate the sorrow of the mourners and help say farewell to the deceased. Usually the funeral orchestras are invited by the bereaved, but they are sometimes hired by friends and relatives of the bereaved as a way offering condolence and sharing the financial burden of the funeral. Traditionally, in Chinese culture, if the deceased was very old, their death is considered to be less tragic, because the Chinese believe that death is a starting point for another life in the underworld so their life in this world is considered to have been long enough. However, their absence from the living world is still considered to be a heart-rending loss. Therefore, the orchestral music is aimed at helping release the sorrows of the bereaved and lifting their spirits so that they can endure the process of saying goodbye.²¹⁹

2.2.5.7 Chinese Hoa Funeral Banners (*dui lian*對聯 and *zhang zi*幛子)

In Chinese the word 對 *dui* has a meaning similar to *paired together* in English. *Dui lian* in Chinese Hoa funerals refers to a pair of sentences written vertically on banners placed beside each other, with one word on each banner matching its corresponding word on another banner and parallel to it. The subject matter of the *dui lian* is generally intended to express

²¹⁸ Trương Qua, Interview 3.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

the grief of the bereaved.²²⁰ The size of the *dui lian* is usually around 40 cm wide and 2 meters tall.



Picture 11: *Heng zhang* - horizontal banner



Picture 11: *Zong zhang* - Vertical banners

²²⁰ Trần Bảo Trung, Interview 2.

Zhang zi is also a type of banner with Chinese characters written on it intended to express the grief of the bereaved. There are two main categories of *Zhang zi*, one which is written vertically (*heng zhang* 橫 幛), and the other horizontally (*zong zhang* 縱 幛). *Heng zhang* is a large cloth banner usually brought to the funeral by an organization to which the deceased or the bereaved belong. *Zong zhang* are generally smaller in size and are brought to the funeral by individual friends or relatives.²²¹

Zhang zi brought to the funeral by family members of the deceased are called *hiếu trọc*.²²² *Hiếu trọc* are made from white cloth and have black characters written on them. For example, for a son who mourns the passing of his mother, the design and content of the *hiếu trọc* would be as follows:

- In the middle of the cloth are four large Chinese characters “*qu lao wei bao* 劬勞未報– *cù lao vị báo*, meaning that the labor of the mother, who has nourished the son, has not been reciprocated. On the bottom right corner of the cloth the sentence *Mẫu than phu nhân linh ai* 母親夫人靈右 is written indicating the maternal relationship of the deceased with the bereaved. On the bottom left corner of the cloth banner the sentence 孝子X X X泣血首 *Hiếu tử XXX khắp huyết khấu thủ* is written which translates from Chinese literally as “the filial son named XXX cries tears of blood and kowtows to the mother’s spirit.”²²³

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.



Picture 12: Banner offered by family members

2.2.5.8 Funeral wreaths

Over the past few hundred years, the Chinese Hoa have adopted many western customs. One such custom is the practice of bringing wreaths which are first placed around the coffin where the deceased lies in state. These wreaths are later placed on a vehicle in the funeral procession. Finally, at the end of the funeral they are arranged around the coffin for use in the ceremonies taking place while the coffin is being lowered into the crypt. This ritual did not exist as part of a traditional Chinese funeral.

2.2.6 Degrees of Mourning

2.2.6.1 Mourning Garments

In contemporary times, the Chinese Hoa no longer distinguish between the five levels of mourning garments in the same meticulous fashion they once did in traditional Chinese funerals.²²⁴ Contemporary Chinese Hoa mourning garments are generally as follows:

²²⁴ Trương Qua, Interview 3.

The inner layer is made from a coarse homespun fabric and consists of a matching shirt and pants. The fabric is un-hemmed, and, instead of buttons, the shirt and pants are equipped with ties also made from the same homespun fabric.

The second layer consists of a vest made from sackcloth. The bereaved responsible for the level of mourning requiring them to wear these garments are the son, daughter, daughter in-law and the first son of the oldest son of the deceased. In some funerals, the bereaved will only wear the inner garments made from coarse homespun fabric; in that case, they will sew a piece of sackcloth onto the back of their shirt in lieu of wearing a vest.

Usually the son of the deceased will wear a triangular shaped hat made from sackcloth. Daughters of the deceased will usually wear an A-framed hat made from a coarse home-spun fabric which is held in place with a sackcloth tie. Daughters-in-law of the deceased will usually wear an A-framed hat made from sackcloth which extends downward to cover her face. The Chinese Hoa believe that a daughter-in-law should cover her face because she is not biologically related to the deceased and thus her grief may not be sincere, and, therefore, it is feared that this could be a source of gossip among relatives, friends and neighbors. Because they are a blood relative of the deceased and their grief is believed to be more sincere, biological daughters are not required to cover their face²²⁵.

All of the bereaved wear white plastic flip-flops. These flip-flops should be plain and unadorned because the bereaved are not allowed to wear attractive clothes during the funeral. The sons of the deceased and the first son of their eldest son are required to carry a staff on which they will lean as they walk during the funeral procession. If the deceased is his mother, the staff will be made from bamboo. If the deceased is his father, the staff will be made from cedar. Each staff should be exactly 60cm long. The top of each staff is covered with three layers. One layer should be made from blue paper, one from red paper and one from

²²⁵ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 6.

sackcloth. If the bereaved is the husband of the deceased, he should carry a staff that is 30cm long. This staff is called *shou zhang* 手杖 meaning a staff that is carried in the hand but does not touch the ground.²²⁶

Another mourning garment is a tie woven from jute which is used as a belt. The people required to wear this belt are sons, daughters and daughters-in-law of the deceased. Three bags in three colors, blue, red and white, are attached to the belt containing a mixture of five different varieties of beans. The son-in-law will wear a long white robe made from a coarse homespun fabric which is un-hemmed, without buttons, and extends just below the knee. His hat should be square in shape and made from a white homespun fabric with a red dot on the front. His belt should be a tie made from coarse homespun fabric.

Paternal grandchildren should wear a white headband made from coarse homespun fabric with a blue dot on the front. Maternal grandchildren should wear a headband made from coarse homespun fabric with a red dot on the front.

With respect to their mourning garments, there is very little that distinguishes one group of Chinese Hoa from another. The most common types of mourning garments used by all five groups of Chinese Hoa are described above.²²⁷

While mourning, the bereaved are forbidden to wear any form of visible ornamentation. If a bereaved female were to wear a bracelet, she would be required to cover it with a white cloth.²²⁸ During the period of mourning the bereaved are forbidden from speaking in a loud or boisterous manner and should not participate in any form of entertainment. They should put aside their personal desires to focus on the funeral.²²⁹ In Chinese culture, the grief, the sorrow and the mourning of the bereaved are extremely

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Trương Qua, Interview 3.

²²⁸ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 4.

²²⁹ Ibid.

important and considered an essential way of expressing filial piety. Therefore, during the entire period of mourning, the attitude of the bereaved is discreetly observed and evaluated by the community. If the bereaved fail in the performance of their filial duties, they will be widely ridiculed and potentially be reprimanded by respected elderly members of the community.²³⁰

2.2.6.2 Degrees of Mourning

The contemporary degrees of mourning observed after the funeral have been greatly simplified. As I have already mentioned in section 2.4, the Chinese Hoa no longer wear mourning garments after the funeral, but instead will pin a piece of black cloth to the left breast of whatever clothing they normally wear. After the period of mourning has ended, the bereaved will remove the black cloth and burn it.²³¹ Every year on the death date of the deceased relative, the bereaved will prepare a large feast as an offering to remember the lost family member.

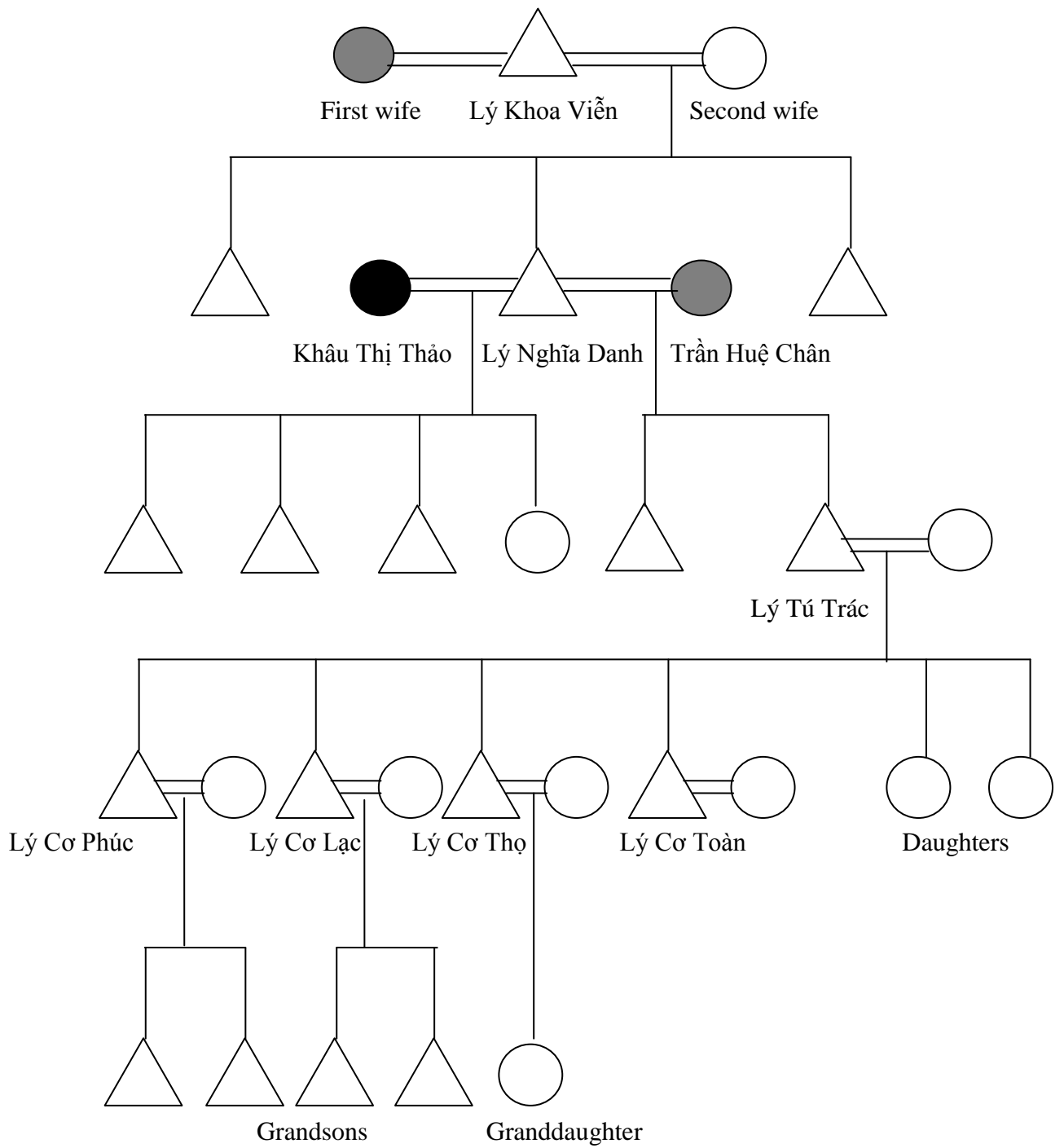
2.2.7 Case Study of a Contemporary Chinese Hoa Funeral

2.2.7.1 The Life History of Lý Family in Vietnam (the family depicted in the photos in this paper).

A family tree of the branch of the Lý family that immigrated to Vietnam is depicted in Chart 3:

²³⁰ Trương Qua, Interview 3.

²³¹ Trương Qua, Interview 2.



Key terms:

- == : Marital relationship
- : Fraternal relationship
- | : Parental relationship
- △ : Male
- : Female – Chinese in Vietnam
- : Female – Chinese in China
- : Female – Vietnamese

The first individual from the Lý family who immigrated to Vietnam was Lý Khoa Viễn. He was born in Liêu Dương village, Định Hải district, Quảng Đông province, China. Arriving in Vietnam either in 1870 or 1871, Lý Khoa Viễn settled in Long Xuyên province, in the Mekong Delta. Before immigrating to Vietnam, he had already married a woman from his home village but had not yet had any children. While in Long Xuyên province, he married another woman with the surname Vương who was also a Chinese Hoa immigrant to that area. Together they built a home in Long Xuyên and had three sons. One of them was named Lý Nghĩa Danh, who was born in 1896 and would become the father of Lý Tú Trác.

In this thesis, I will follow the familial line of Lý Nghĩa Danh. In 1899, when Lý Nghĩa Danh was three years old, he was sent to China to live with his father's first wife. When he was 16 years old, he married a woman named Trần Huệ Chân in Liêu Dương village in China. Later on, Lý Nghĩa Danh returned to Vietnam and married his second wife, Khâu Thị Thảo, a native of Châu Đốc, Việt Nam. In 1919, Danh returned to China and had a son with his first wife. After a few years, he returned to Vietnam where he lived with his second wife, Khâu Thị Thảo, who gave birth to three sons and one daughter. In 1929, he returned to China and fathered a son with his first wife, Trần Huệ Chân. This son was named Lý Tú Trác and was born in 1930. In 1937, Lý Nghĩa Danh and his first son returned to Vietnam. In 1948, Lý Tú Trác and his biological mother immigrated to Vietnam to reunite with his father.

Mr. Lý Tú Trác came from the third generation of this family to join the cycle of immigration and emigration to and from Vietnam. Mr. Lý married a Cantonese woman whose surname was Vương. Together they had six children, four sons and two daughters. The four sons are named Lý Cơ Phúc, Lý Cơ Lạc, Lý Cơ Thọ and Lý Cơ Toàn. Of this group, the fourth generation of the Lý family to live in Vietnam, the second, third and fourth son emigrated from Vietnam to the United States in 1979. Lý Cơ Phúc remained in Vietnam and

had two sons. The second son of Mr. Lý Tú Trác had two sons; the third had one daughter; and the fourth was just married when this research was being conducted and did not yet have any children.²³²

2.2.7.2 Description of Mrs. Vương's Funeral

Mrs. Vương's funeral lasted 9 days. She married into the Lý family, the Chinese Hoa family referenced above, which had lived in Vietnam for 5 generations. In this case, her husband, the presiding mourner, Mr. Lý Tú Trác, had also been a ritual specialist in many funerals. Therefore, the funeral would meticulously follow each individual step necessary to satisfy the requirements of a contemporary Chinese Hoa funeral. For that reason, this case study provides a good example of contemporary Chinese Hoa death rituals in Ho Chi Minh City.

On June 18, 1998 at 3 p.m. at Triều Châu hospital, Mrs. Vương passed away due to complications of diabetes.²³³ At the moment she passed away, her husband Mr. Lý Tú Trác, two of her sons and their wives, two daughters and their husbands, an unknown number of maternal and paternal grandchildren and an adopted daughter were present. Virtually the entire family in Vietnam was at her bedside to hear her last words and witness her final moments on earth. Immediately after Mrs. Vương's death, the family summoned her two sons living in the United States to return to Vietnam to mourn the death of their mother. The two sons who were present when Mrs. Vương passed away were the oldest son Lý Cơ Phúc and the youngest son Lý Cơ Toàn.

From June 18th until June 19th, 1998, Mrs. Vương's body lay in state in a mortuary in a funeral home, during that time the bereaved made phone calls to inform all of their relatives and friends. As with most Chinese Hoa families in Ho Chi Minh City, Mr. Lý Tú Trác had

²³² Lý Tú Trác, Interview 1, June 30, 1998.

²³³ Ibid.

close relationships with many Chinese Hoa organizations in the community. Immediately after being notified of the death of Mrs. Vương the organizations of which Mr. Lý Tú Trác and his family were members sent representatives to assist the family of the bereaved in preparing for the funeral and to attend to the funeral. The following organizations sent representatives to Mrs. Vương's funeral: *Nhà thờ họ Lý, Tịnh Xá Sư Trúc Hiền, Hội Phụ mẫu xóm Chiếu, Chùa Ông Phú Nhuận*. These representatives served as part of the funeral committee which handled many of the organizational details necessary to arrange the funeral.

The funeral committee was formed on June 19th, one day after the death of Mrs. Vương. The presiding mourner was Mr. Lý Tú Trác. Several ritual assistants were chosen from respected members of the organizations that they represented. The funeral committee delegated the following responsibilities to the friends and family members who offered their assistance:

- Fragrant water that had been mixed with herbs was used to clean the body of Mrs. Vương.
- She was then dressed in a new set of clothes.
- Several people were sent to purchase a coffin from a local coffin maker named Khang Thọ whose shop was located at 195 An Bình, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.
- At the coffin-maker's shop, they also purchased other burial items including *Ming xing*, a Soul Calling staff, longevity clothes, votive paper and various other items needed for the funeral.
- An obituary for Mrs. Vương was written and printed in a local newspaper.
- At the family home members of the bereaved family covered the ancestral altar with a red cloth. The body of the deceased Mrs. Vương lay in state at the funeral home while

awaiting the arrival of her two sons from the United States and an auspicious date for the laying out of the corpse ritual.

On June 20th 1998, after the bereaved family consulted with a fortune teller about an appropriate time for the laying out the corpse, the presiding mourner, Mr. Lý Tú Trác, decided it would take place at the funeral home at 1 p.m. on June 20th.

The laying out of the corpse consisted of the following rituals, *xiaolian* 小殮 (preliminary laying out), *maishui* 買水 (buying water), *mu yu* 沐浴 (washing the dust off the soul of the deceased), *sheng shi* 生食 (feeding the body of the deceased) and *da lian* 大殮 (the final laying out), *gai guan* 蓋棺 (placing the lid on the coffin). All of these rituals were meticulously carried out according contemporary traditions. During the course of these rituals, I noticed that the *ji guan* 祭棺 (offering to the coffin spirit ritual) was not practiced, when I asked about this ritual, I was told that they did not perform it. However, I know from observing other funerals, that this ritual is still practiced by others within the Chinese Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City.



Picture 13: *Xiao lian* - preliminary laying out



Picture 14: *Mai shui* - buying water



Picture 15: *Mu yu*- washing the dust off the soul of the deceased



Picture 16: *Sheng shi* - feeding the body of the deceased



Picture 17: *Da lian* - the final laying out



Picture 18: *Gai guan* - placing the lid on the coffin

Mr. Lý and Mrs. Vương had two Cantonese daughters-in-law. According to Cantonese custom, the biological parents of daughters-in-law whose mother-in-law has passed away should each send two large rectangular pieces of white cloth with a red rectangle in the center as an offering for the soul of the deceased. These four pieces of cloth are used to cover the body of the deceased during *Gai guan* (*placing the lid on the coffin*) ritual.²³⁴

On the 20th of June, the Lý family conducted the *Shang xiao* 上孝 *putting on the mourning garments* ritual for the bereaved. Because the second and third son were too far away to arrive in time for this ritual the youngest son was required to hold three staves signifying that he was also mourning on behalf of his two absent siblings.²³⁵ During this ritual, Mrs. Vương's adopted daughter wore a white headband with a blue dot, identical to that worn by Mrs. Vương's paternal grandchildren.



Picture 19: *Shang xiao* - putting on the mourning garments

²³⁴ Trương Qua, Interview 1.

²³⁵ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 3, July 4, 1998.

After the *Shang xiao* ritual, a Buddhist monk chanted from Buddhist scripture to pray for the salvation of the soul of the deceased. This ritual lasted until late in the evening.

On June 21st 1998, from 8:00a.m. until 10:00a.m., Buddhist monks from Chùa Ông Phú Nhuận stood in front of an altar and chanted Buddhist scriptures to ask for the salvation of the soul of the deceased. After that, they stood in front of the coffin and chanted scriptures to comfort the soul of the deceased.

As has already been described in the introduction, at 10 a.m. that day, Mrs. Vương's second son, Mr. Lý Cơ Lạc, arrived at the funeral home from the United States. At the funeral, he wore white flip-flops and a white shirt and pants that were un-hemmed, unbuttoned and made from a coarse homespun fabric. His head was bare. Mr. Lý Cơ Lạc crawled from the gate of the funeral home to the altar which had been set up for his mother. Once he had reached his mother's altar, he was dressed (while still on his knees) by his mother's brother in mourning garments including a long triangular shaped sackcloth hat, a sackcloth vest, and a sackcloth belt. After he was dressed, he was given a staff. According to my informant, this ritual is called *thiên lý bồn tang* 千里奔喪 and is applied when a person passes away, and the children of the deceased are required to make a long journey to return for the funeral.

Because the child has had to rush for a long distance and is expected to wail and cry on the way home, their hair and clothing should be disheveled and they should be exhausted to the point where they are unable to walk and would have to crawl the distance from the gate of the funeral home to the altar of the deceased parent.²³⁶ This custom was described in a chapter Ben zang 奔喪 *Bôn tang* which means *Rules on hurrying to the mourning rites* in the Confucian manual *Classic Book of rites Li ji Lễ ký*, written by Confucius over 2500 years ago

²³⁶ Ibid.

and was still being practiced by a Chinese Hoa family which had been living in Vietnam for five generations (approximately 130 to 140 years).²³⁷



Picture 20: Mr. Lý Cơ Lạc crawled to his mother's coffin from the front gate of the funeral home

²³⁷More details about this ritual can be found at James Legge, tran., "Ben Sang - 奔喪," *Chinese Text Project*, July 16, 2014, <http://ctext.org/liji/ben-sang>.



Picture 21: Dressed in traditional mourning garments

On the afternoon of June 21st, Buddhist monks from Tịnh xá Sư Trúc Hiền came to the funeral home to chant Buddhist scriptures and pray for the salvation of the soul of the deceased from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. During the evening of the same day, relatives and friends came to offer condolences to the bereaved and to visit the soul of the deceased.

The bereaved chose the 22nd of June as the primary occasion to receive condolences. Many friends and family members came to offer their sympathies. The bereaved prepared food and beverages for the condolers. That day some of Mr. Lý's close friends arrived with a

group of Buddhist monks who chanted from Buddhist scriptures and prayed for the salvation of the soul of the deceased. These monks were hired by Mr. Lý's friends as a way of comforting the bereaved and to provide a Buddhist requiem for the soul of the deceased.

During the evening the bereaved conducted a ritual called *Kim son ngũ cung*, the purpose of which is to reduce the amount of bad karma that has been accumulated by the soul of the deceased. This ritual originates from a Buddhist story about the Bodhisattva Mực Kiền Liên Mu jian lian (目犍連).²³⁸ According to the Buddhist legend, Mực Kiền Liên's mother had accumulated a lot of bad karma from actions she had taken while she was alive. Therefore, after she died, her soul was punished by being sent to the ninth level of Buddhist Hell where she suffered agonizing torments for her misdeeds and was condemned to suffer the life of a hungry ghost 餓鬼 *e gui nga quỷ*.²³⁹ Because Mực Kiền Liên was a dutiful son who couldn't bear to allow his mother to go on suffering, he decided to ask the Buddha how to save her. The Buddha replied that, despite his miraculous powers, Mực Kiền Liên alone would not be able to save his mother. Therefore, he should ask for help from all the monks and Bodhisattva on earth, who, working together could save his mother's soul allowing her to be reincarnated into a better life in the land of the living. Mực Kiền Liên followed the instructions of the Buddha, and his mother's soul was saved.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 2.

²³⁹ *E gui* 餓鬼 *nga quỷ* translates as "the hungry ghosts." People who lived a cruel, parsimonious and angry life are expected to become a hungry ghost after they die. These hungry ghosts are usually extremely skinny, ugly and freakish in appearance with a belly as big as a drum but a mouth that is as tiny as a needle and thus they are not able to eat. They often wander in the forests, in the fields, under bushes or lurking around ponds or lakes. People call these hungry ghost forsaken spirits. Đoàn Trung Còn, "Nga quỷ," *Phật học từ điển (Buddhist Dictionary)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1997), 350.

²⁴⁰ Đoàn Trung Còn, "Mực Kiền Liên," *Phật học từ điển (Buddhist Dictionary)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1997), 306.



Picture 22: *Kim son ngũ cung* ceremony

For the ritual *Kim son ngũ cung* there are nine ritual specialists whose sole job is to perform this ceremony. The ritual is meant to be a reenactment of the story of Mực Kiền Liên. In order to perform the ritual, the nine ritual specialists will move around the room in a line, starting with an altar dedicated to Mực Kiền Liên and then moving to two other altars set up to represent all of the Bodhisattva's Mực Kiền Liên had visited when requesting their help in saving his mother's soul from Hell. As they made their way around the room, the ritual specialists chanted from Buddhist scriptures. The first and last ritual specialists in the line wore a red silk cloth resembling a cape that is wrapped around one shoulder. Both of these ritual specialists held in their hands large paper dummies about 1-½ meters tall. One dummy represented Tiên Đồng, and the other Ngọc Nữ, the servants of the Bodhisattva Quan Thế Âm who comes to earth to save the souls of the deceased. After finishing the ceremony, the dummies were placed on each side of Mrs. Vương's coffin. This ceremony lasted for one-and-half hours.

On the morning of June 23rd, 1998, a group of Buddhist monks, hired by a son-in-law of Mrs. Vương, arrived to chant Buddhist scriptures and prayed for the salvation of Mrs. Vương's soul. In the afternoon, a group of ritual specialists from Tịnh xá Sư Trúc Hiền arrived to perform the “Đại Mông Sơn thí thực 大蒙山施食” ceremony.²⁴¹ During this ceremony, the bereaved offered food and beverages for *chu sheng* 畜生 súc sanh, *e gui* 餓鬼 ngạ quỷ which is intended to create good karma for the deceased.²⁴² Before the ceremony, the bereaved set up an altar for the Bodhisattva Địa Tạng Vương 地藏王.²⁴³ Offerings for the ceremony included a bowl of boiled morning glory topped with slices of tofu and a bowl containing broth from boiled morning glory, a bowl of green tea, a bowl of fresh water, a bowl of plain rice porridge, a large tray of popular and inexpensive fruits and vegetables, including sweet potatoes, jicama (Mexican jam), cassava (monioc) hog plum or tahitian apple, longon, apples and an assortment of other local fruits, vegetables and vegetarian dumplings. Fresh flowers and candles were also arranged on the altar.

²⁴¹ Quán Nguyệt, “Giải thích Nghi Mông Sơn Thí Thực,” trans. by Thích Khánh Anh, *Nhị Khóa Hiệp Giải*, July 16, 2014, <http://tuvienquangduc.com.au/kinhdiem/241nhikhoahg09.html>.

²⁴² *Chusheng* - 畜生 súc sanh can be narrowly defined as meaning the animals people raise for meat or for domestic use, more generally it can mean animals such as birds, fishes, snakes, insects and all of the other living creatures on earth. It is believed that people who have accumulated too much bad karma will reincarnate into animals which are lacking in intelligence and live in unsanitary conditions. People who had lived greedy or stingy lives will reincarnate into a dog or a snake. People who were indebted to others might reincarnate into a buffalo or donkey or a horse belonging to the person to whom they are indebted because they are expected to work to pay their debts. Đoàn Trung Còn, “Súc sanh,” *Phật học từ điển (Buddhist Dictionary)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1997), 750.

²⁴³ Ksitigartha, Lord of the world of underworld Đoàn Trung Còn, “Địa tạng bồ tát,” *Phật học từ điển (Buddhist Dictionary)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1997), 558.



Picture 23: *Đại Mông sơn thí thực* ceremony

On June 24, friends and relatives continued to arrive to express condolences to the bereaved. For this day of the funeral, the bereaved hired a group of ritual specialists who arrived that evening to perform the *Lian zhi* 禮蓮池 *Liên trì* ceremony which was intended to liberate the soul of the deceased from imprisonment.²⁴⁴ In this ceremony, a tower made from paper with a locked door on the front, also made from paper, was placed in the middle of a room. The tower was intended to symbolize a prison where the soul of the deceased was detained. Each of the deceased's bereaved relatives held a single stick of incense and walked in a single file line around the tower while they prayed that the soul of the deceased would be released from its imprisonment. The ritual specialist walked at the head of the line and rang a bell while chanting Buddhist scriptures as he and his assistants made their way around the

²⁴⁴ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 2.

tower. After completing this phase of the ritual, the ritual specialist smote the tower with his fist, breaking it open and symbolically liberating the soul of the deceased.



Picture 24: Liên trì ceremony

On June 25, the bereaved held a *phụ táng* 附葬 ceremony to worship their ancestors. It is a commonly held belief among the Chinese that their deceased relatives will make a journey that will unite them with their ancestors in another world. Hence, the bereaved prepare items made from votive paper as offerings for the deceased to bring to the other world for their ancestors.²⁴⁵ During the *phụ táng* ceremony for Mrs. Vương's funeral, the bereaved removed their mourning garments because this ceremony is intended to venerate their ancestors. Therefore, for this ceremony the bereaved set up an altar with the ancestral tablets placed on it. The offerings included the standard types of food and beverages that are

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

usually offered during an annual death anniversary. The bereaved burned incense and votive paper items and kowtowed before the altar.

On the evening of June 25th, the bereaved conducted a funeral ritual called *Xue fu* 血腹- *Huyết phúc*. This particular ceremony is only practiced when a mother passes away and is intended to honor a mother's dedication and hard work during the nine months of her pregnancy and the first three years of raising her children.²⁴⁶ For this ceremony the bereaved set up an incense bowl surrounded on three sides by a straw mat in the center of a room. In front of the incense bowl were placed ten bowls of water dyed red symbolizing the blood and the flesh the mother gives to her children and the nine months which the mother carried her children in her womb. Mrs. Vương's five children knelt on either side of the incense bowl, her sons kneeling on the left side of the bowl and her daughters on the right. A ritual specialist then recited a Buddhist chant to show gratitude to the mother and remind her children of her merit. Then each child of the deceased drank a bowl of the red water as a demonstration of filial duty to their mother.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.



Picture 25: *Xue fu* ceremony



Picture 26: *Xue fu* ceremony

On the evening of June 26th, the bereaved conducted the *crossing the nai he qiao* 奈河橋 ceremony. *Nại hà nai he* 奈河 is a large river in Hell which the soul of the deceased must cross. The river has three waterfalls where the soul can cross, but fast moving waters can make this very difficult. When the soul of the deceased arrives at one of these waterfalls, it is believed he or she will say out loud “*nai he?* 奈何” which translates as “*how can*” (*I cross the river?*)” The river derives its name from this phrase.²⁴⁷ Because crossing the river is such a large obstacle for the soul of the deceased on the journey to the afterworld, on the last night of the funeral, the bereaved conduct the *crossing the nai he qiao* ceremony.

For this ceremony, the bereaved set up a model of a wooden bridge about 4 meters long. At each end of the bridge were locked doors. On one door there was a picture of the *God of Earth* (土地 *tu di*). On the other door there was a picture of two monsters whose images derive from Mahayana Buddhist traditions. One creature had a buffalo head and a human body, and the other had a horse head and a human body.²⁴⁸ These two creatures are believed to be the guardians of the gate to Hell. The bereaved knelt on both sides of the bridge. At the base of the bridge offerings were placed including eggs, meat, pork, shrimp, fresh fruit and flowers and a large amount of joss paper. According to Phan Thị Yến Tuyết, eggs, pork and shrimp are the three sacrifices that are most commonly offered to the deities in order to thank them or request a favor from them.²⁴⁹ The ritual specialist then chanted Buddhist scripture, and ritual music and scriptural music were played. After a few cycles of chanting from the same scriptures, the oldest son, Lý Cơ Phúc knelt down at one end of the bridge, kowtowed and asked the God of the Earth and the deities to open the gate.

²⁴⁷ Đoàn Trung Còn, “*Nại hà*,” *Phật học từ điển (Buddhist Dictionary)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hà Nội, 1997), 311.

²⁴⁸ This creature is called *ma tou lou sha* - 馬頭羅刹 - Mã đầu la sát, a monstrous creature with a horse’s head and human’s body. This creature is believed to be the guardian of the entrance to Hell. Đoàn Trung Còn, “*Mã đầu la sát*,” *Phật học từ điển (Buddhist Dictionary)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Thành phố Hà Nội, 1997), 279.

²⁴⁹ Phan Thị Yến Tuyết, *Nhà ở - Trang phục - Ăn uống của các dân tộc vùng đồng bằng sông Cửu Long (Housing, Clothing and Cuisine of the Ethnic Groups in the Mekong Delta)* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội (Social Sciences Publishers), 1993), 223.

After that, a ritual specialist holding the Soul Calling staff led the bereaved across the bridge. While walking across the bridge, the bereaved dropped money into a container which was placed below it, this was to signify that they were paying bribes for wandering ghosts so that the soul of the deceased would be able to cross the bridge without difficulty.²⁵⁰



Picture 27: Crossing the *nai he qiao* ceremony

²⁵⁰ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 2.



Picture 28: Crossing the *nai he qiao* ceremony

Early in the morning on June 27, the bereaved transported the coffin to a graveyard. There were four funeral orchestras accompanying the funeral procession, the group called Ánh Sáng and the group called Tân Hoa Viên played modern music and the group called Triều Quân and group called Hội Phụ mẫu Sư Trúc Hiên played traditional music. At 7:45 a.m., the funeral procession began moving on its route to the graveyard.



Picture 29: Leading the funeral procession: *da deng*, *ming xing*, *hiếu trực*, *zhang zi*, offerings



Picture 30: *zeng yin* – the car with Buddhist monks



Picture 31: *ling che* – the hearse transporting the coffin



Picture 32: *xiao chun* – the bereaved follow directly behind the coffin



Picture 33: *qi you* - Friends and relatives

On the way to the burial site, the procession stopped at a corner on the street where friends and relatives of the bereaved set up a temporary altar and arranged offerings to ask the permission of the deities and the wandering spirits on the road to pass so that the procession might continue on its way without being obstructed.²⁵¹ The procession then continued on to the graveyard. This ritual is similar to the *Lu ji* (3.1.24) practiced in traditional Chinese funerals.

After arriving at the gravesite, the bereaved held a ceremony before lowering the coffin into the crypt to ask permission of the local earth deity to bury the deceased on the piece of land they had selected.²⁵² This ritual is similar to the traditional death ritual described

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

in *Ji hou tu* (3.1.26). However, in this case, it took place before the coffin was lowered into the crypt.



Picture 34: Offering on the road to the burial sites



Picture 35: The bereaved riding on the hearse on their way to the gravesite



Picture 36: Offering for the god of the earth asking permission to bury the deceased



Picture 37: lowering the coffin



Picture 38: Offering performed in front of the crypt

Mrs. Vuong's funeral ended at 2 p.m. that day after having lasted for nine days. According to my sources in the Chinese Hoa community, Mrs. Vuong's funeral was one of the largest in the Chinese Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City during that time period.

2.2.8. The Variations in Funeral Rites that Occur Among the Groups of Chinese Hoa People in Ho Chi Minh City Who Speak Different Dialects

Generally speaking, the funeral rites of the five different groups of Chinese Hoa in Ho Chi Minh City appear very similar and are carried out using the same procedures, funeral offerings and degrees of mourning. However, upon close examination it becomes apparent that many small differences exist among the different groups.

Unlike the other groups of Chinese Hoa in Ho Chi Minh City, during the second stage of the funeral, when the corpse of the deceased is placed inside the coffin, the Teochew Chinese do *not* make an offering to the coffin. The Teochew also practice the "Bridge Crossing Ceremony" described in 2.7 which is a custom unique to this particular group.²⁵³

Another example occurs within the Cantonese community which does not practice the "Feeding the Soul of the Deceased" ritual. Instead, when placing the corpse of a deceased relative in a coffin Cantonese people will use two large white cloths to cover the coffin. One piece of cloth rests on top of the other and each white cloth has a red stripe that runs lengthwise along coffin. When Cantonese families have close friends or relatives who have passed away, they will generally send two of these cloths to be used during the "Final Laying Out" ritual as a way of offering condolences to the deceased's family. The cloth covering the coffin is intended to represent that the deceased is enfolded in the warmth and the love of their relatives and friends. After the lid of the coffin has been put in place, a ritual assistant will tear off a corner of one the red stripes and save it. After the funeral is over the bereaved

²⁵³ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 5.

will place it on a tray with an envelope and bring it to the condolers to thank them for sending the cloth and sharing in their grief. The envelope will contain a small amount of money which is intended to bring good luck to the condoler.²⁵⁴

If the deceased is more than 80 years old, the Fukien community consider the funeral to be a less tragic occasion, therefore, the bereaved are allowed to walk in front of the hearse carrying the deceased in the funeral procession. If the deceased is below 80 years old, the funeral is considered a sadder occasion and the bereaved must walk behind the hearse. In times past the son of the deceased would usually grow their hair and beard long while the funeral is taking place, but this custom is no longer practiced.²⁵⁵

According to Trần Bảo Trung, the following funeral customs were formerly practiced during the traditional funerals of Chinese Hoa who immigrated to Vietnam from Hainan, but are currently no longer practiced. From the time a person is close to death, until the preliminary laying out ritual, the family of the ailing relative would gather around the dying family member. During meal times, the family would eat from a bamboo tray using their fingers. The food was generally very plain and often includes rice shaped into squares and sesame salt. Soup and wine is forbidden during this period, and water was to be abstained from after the meal (the Chinese usually do not drink liquids while eating). After the final laying out of the corpse of the deceased the bereaved would once again be allowed to using eating utensils and plates and bowls, however, their meals should be simple and without flavor and should refrain from consuming alcohol. These customs originate from the Confucian manual *Lễ ký*.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ Trương Qua, Interview 1.

²⁵⁵ Nguyễn Duy Bình, *Hôn nhân và gia đình của người Hoa ở Nam Bộ (Marriage and Family of the Chinese in Southern Vietnam)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia (Ho Chi Minh City National University Publishers), 2005), 89–90.

²⁵⁶ Trần Bảo Trung, Interview 1.

I have learned from my interviews that many Cantonese and Teochew people serve as ritual specialists for the other three groups of Chinese Hoa in Ho Chi Minh City. According to my informant, however, a feud has existed for a long time between the Teochew and the Fukien, and, as a result, Teochew ritual specialists rarely participate in funerals for members of the Fukien community.²⁵⁷



Picture 39: The tomb of a Teochew

²⁵⁷ Lý Tú Trác, Interview 5.



Picture 40: The tomb of a Hainanese

Above is an example of two tombs from different dialect-groups. Each group has its own preferred design style which could be the subject of further research.

2.2.9. Catholic Chinese Hoa Funerals

According to recent statistics compiled by Professor Phan An, there are approximately 5000 Catholics of Chinese descent living in Ho Chi Minh City and at least three Catholic Churches constructed by the Chinese Hoa. Most Chinese Hoa Catholics attend services held at these churches. These churches are Cha Tam Church at 25 Học Lạc street, District 5, Đức Bà Hòa Bình Church at 26A Nguyễn Thái Bình street and Giuse An Bình church at 4 An Bình, District 5.²⁵⁸²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Phan An, *Người Hoa ở Nam Bộ (Chinese Hoa in Southern Vietnam)*, 238.

²⁵⁹ “Cha Tam Church,” *St Francis Xavier Parish*, August 15, 1014, <http://www.chatamvn.com/>.

“Đức Bà Hòa Bình Church,” *Giáo xứ giáo họ Việt Nam*, August 15, 1014, <http://www.giaoxugiaohovietnam.com/SaiGon/01-Giao-Phan-SaiGon-DucBaHoaBinh.htm>.

“Giuse An Bình Church,” *Giáo xứ giáo họ Việt Nam*, August 15, 1014, <http://www.giaoxugiaohovietnam.com/SaiGon/01-Giao-Phan-SaiGon-AnBinh.htm>.

The Hoa Protestants population in Ho Chi Minh City is approximately 1500. These Protestants attend services at 8 different churches in the Ho Chi Minh City area. Both the Catholic and Protestants Hoa communities attend churches that provide services for both the Chinese Hoa and Vietnamese Christians.²⁶⁰ Although Chinese Hoa Catholic funeral rituals are deeply rooted in and guided by Christian traditions and practices, in Ho Chi Minh City they have been developed to exist in harmony with certain other long-held and deeply ingrained religious and philosophical traditions.

Below is a description of the contemporary funeral customs and practices of Chinese Hoa Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City. The precise order of events and other specific details may vary somewhat depending on the circumstances and the desires of the participants. My intention is not to describe in detail Catholic funeral rites, but rather, to illuminate some of the areas where Catholic traditions and Chinese traditions have become intertwined. The following description is derived from interviews with two Catholic priests, one a Chinese Hoa priest in Ho Chi Minh City and the other a Vietnamese Catholic priest in Hue.²⁶¹ I also relied upon a manual published in Vietnam describing Catholic death rituals. For translations of the terminology used in Catholic funeral rituals from Vietnamese to English, I utilized a website called a Supplementary Text for Rite of Funeral.²⁶²

Similar to Catholics all around the world, at the time when a Chinese Hoa Catholic family believes their relative is about to breathe their last breath, the children of the individual whose health is failing will go to a Catholic Church and ask a priest to come and take their ailing parent's final confession. At this time, the dying relative will say their last words to their family members. After that, a priest will perform the Anointing of the Sick Sacrament which is intended to strengthen the faith of the dying relative and ask for

²⁶⁰ Phan An, *Người Hoa ở Nam Bộ (Chinese Hoa in Southern Vietnam)*, 243.

²⁶¹ Preist Huỳnh Trụ, head of Cha Tam Church, 25 Học Lạc, Ward 14, District 5, Hồ Chí Minh City

²⁶² "Rite of Funerals," August 14, 2014, <http://www.op.org.au/texts/funerals.pdf>.

forgiveness of the sins he or she committed while they were alive. Chinese Hoa Catholics believe that death is an aspect of God's providence. The lifetime of a human being is a transitory period. If a person is baptized, it signifies that they have accepted God and they have already begun their eternal life while still on earth. When life on earth has come to an end, the soul of the deceased will be received into the kingdom of God and will enjoy an eternal life in heaven. Therefore, death is not considered to be an ending, but rather, a gateway to eternal life. The Catholic saying "I believe in the resurrection of the body and everlasting life" is repeated during the Anointing of the Sick Sacrament. This belief originates from the New Testament bible scripture *Timothy Chapter 2:11* which states "if we die with Christ we shall also live with him."²⁶³

2.2.9.1 The Vigil for the Deceased

After a Catholic dies, in addition to the family of the bereaved, a pastoral administrator, a funeral director and friends and relatives from the congregation will attend to help the presiding mourner to organize the vigil. The corpse of the deceased will be washed and dressed in a new set of clothes. This step is not performed as a ritual in the same way as preliminary laying out ritual practiced by Buddhist and Taoist Chinese. A cross and a bracelet of Catholic rosary beads are placed in the hand of the deceased. If the deceased is over 60 years old, Chinese Hoa Catholics will dress the deceased in longevity clothes. This costume is practiced because it is a commonly held belief among Chinese Hoa Catholic community that the death of an individual over 60 years old is less tragic than the death of a younger person.

The body of the deceased is then placed on a bed. The officiating priest will speak some words to comfort the bereaved, and a choir will sing a hymn. The officiating priest says

²⁶³ Priest Huỳnh Trữ, Interview 2, April 15, 2000.

a prayer, after which, a member of the congregation reads passages from the bible. The officiating priest and members of the congregation then take turns praying. The subject matter of the prayers reaffirms their belief that life only transitions and that eternal soul will never perish. The supplicants also ask God to forgive the sins of the deceased by granting them a plenary indulgence. While these prayers are being read, the officiating priest sprinkles holy water on the corpse of the deceased. At this point, the officiating priest asks God to bless the coffin so that the body of the deceased can use it as a temporary residence while waiting for the soul of the deceased to ascend to heaven, while sprinkling holy water on coffin. The body of the deceased is placed into the coffin while the choir sings a hymn.²⁶⁴

2.2.9.2 Viewing of the Deceased Catholic

After the corpse has been placed in the coffin, it lies in state for one day, providing friends and relatives an opportunity to give condolences to the bereaved and to view the body of the deceased for the last time. Members of the deceased's congregation usually say a prayer to ask God to accept the soul of the deceased into heaven.²⁶⁵

2.2.9.3 Transporting the Coffin to the Church

While the body of the deceased is still lying in state, the officiating priest makes some final remarks and a choir sings a hymn. After the officiating priest says a prayer he will then signal for the funeral procession to begin making its way to the church. A member of the congregation will stand at the head of the funeral procession carrying a large cross. This person will be flanked on each side by members of the congregation carrying lighted candles. The officiating priest will walk just behind them in them at the head of the procession. Next in line in the procession are members of the congregation carrying wreaths and banners with

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

Chinese characters written on them. The Chinese characters praise God and contain phrases intended to comfort the bereaved and the soul of deceased. The presiding mourner walk behind the banners carrying an incensory contain three burning incense. This particular ritual is unique to the Chinese Hoa Catholic community. The oldest son as presiding mourner is symbolical of the importance placed in Chinese culture on having children to continue the family line and filial duty of a child to their parents. In this way the use of incense in Catholic funeral rites has been adapted by Chinese Hoa Catholics in Vietnam to incorporate aspects of traditional Chinese death rituals. The coffin will be carried by the pallbearers in such a way that the feet of the corpse will face towards the head of the procession because it is believed that when the body enters the church in this manner the deceased should be facing the church. The bereaved follow directly after the coffin and behind them at the end of the procession are relatives and friends of the deceased.²⁶⁶

2.2.9.4 The Farewell Ritual

Upon arriving at the church a priest dressed in a special robe will begin the Farewell Ritual. The priest will stand adjacent to the coffin of deceased and facing towards the congregation. Two altar boys, one holding a bowl of holy water and the other holding a thurible containing burning incense will walk just behind the officiating priest. At this point the entire congregation will sing a hymn, followed by some opening words from the officiating priest. The altar boys will then pass the bowl of holy water and the thurible to the officiating priest, who sprinkles the water on the coffin and places the thurible on top of the coffin. After this has been completed the congregation will sing another hymn. The general contents of these hymns and prayers for this ritual are intended to ask God to have mercy on the soul of the deceased and to accept their soul into the kingdom of heaven and to strengthen the faith of the bereaved so that they can overcome the loss of their loved one. At the end of

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

the ritual the officiating priest will say some final words. The coffin is then placed inside a hearse and transported to a graveyard.²⁶⁷

2.2.9.5 Rite of Committal at the Gravesite

At the gravesite the whole congregation will sing a hymn under the supervision of the funeral director. The officiating priest will then bless the crypt where the deceased will be buried. (Catholics believe that after the a person has been buried for three days the tomb of deceased will have been sanctified by the Lord and their soul will be resurrected) At this point, the officiating priest will say a prayer and sprinkle holy water on the crypt. While this is taking place a thurible of burning incense is placed on top of the crypt. All the participants in the funeral will say the Lord's Prayer. At this point, the coffin is lowered into the crypt and the coffin is buried. The entire congregation will then sing a hymn after which the funeral will come to an end.²⁶⁸

Based on my research, I would argue that, despite their conversion to Catholicism, the Chinese Hoa Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City have preserved and adapted many of the traditional habits and customs practiced by their ancestors and families in their home area of China to create their own distinct set of death rituals uniquely suited to their particular cultural background. Some examples of this adaptation and use of traditional Chinese rituals within a Catholic setting, not previously mentioned, include:

1. In addition to burning candles during Catholic rituals, Chinese Hoa Catholics in Ho Chi Minh City often use incense because they believe that incense can help bridge the

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

gap between past and present and between the world of the living and the afterlife so that the souls of the living can open a dialogue with the souls of the deceased.²⁶⁹

2. Kowtowing and *pai* towards the soul of the deceased by family, friends and condolers during funerals.²⁷⁰
3. If the deceased is over 60 years old, Chinese Hoa Catholics dress them in longevity clothes signifying that their funeral is not a tragic event. The death of an elderly person is considered a serene departure to another world. Similar to the Chinese custom of adding three years to the age of the deceased, this custom is rooted in a desire for longevity and a belief in an eternal life after death.²⁷¹
4. After a parent has passed away, their children will have a new ancestral tablet made with name and surname of the deceased parent inscribed on it. However, this tradition is somewhat different than that practiced by non-Catholic Chinese, in that it will not have the word *shen* (神thần) meaning *deity* in *shen zhu* (神主thần chủ). This is because these words indicate that the children worship their parents in a manner similar to the way they worship god, which cannot be reconciled with the Catholic belief that there is only one god.²⁷²
5. Catholic Chinese Hoa in Ho Chi Minh City set up an altar for their parents below an altar for God. Every day, when they kneel and pray before these altars, they pray that the soul of their parents will live an eternal life in heaven with God.²⁷³

Over time, the Catholic Church has played an important role in the adaptation of its own rituals and practices in order to better fit into the cultural context in which it sought, and

²⁶⁹ Priest Huỳnh Trữ, Interview 1, April 10, 2000.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Ibid.

still seeks, to gain adherents and influence. For example, the core values governing the rituals and practices of Chinese death rituals are rooted in traditions related to filial duty and ancestor worship. Through the incorporation of some of these traditions into their rituals, Chinese Hoa Catholics are able to sidestep a conflict between their religion and deeply ingrained Chinese traditions and values. By choosing to emphasize particular passages in the Bible that focus on filial duty and respect for ones ancestors, the Catholic Church is able to justify its integration of elements of widely accepted Chinese customs and practices and thereby make their religion more palatable to a wider range of people. Thus, Chinese Hoa Catholics have been allowed to preserve their traditions of ancestor worship and have continued to observe their families death anniversaries.

Conclusion

In their funerals, the Chinese Hoa people in Ho Chi Minh City have often used local Vietnamese materials to practice their rituals. This includes the ingredients used to prepare food for the feasts in offerings, the varieties of fruits and flowers arranged on the deceased's altar, the type of wood used to make the coffin, the mourning garments worn by the bereaved and the joss paper and other objects used to create ritual paraphernalia. These are usually native products that can commonly be found everywhere in Saigon and Mekong Delta. The Vietnamese, and the Cham and the Khmer inhabiting in the same region, also use these products in funeral rituals but according to their own customs and traditions. Based on my analysis of the ethnographic data I have collected, I would argue that Chinese Hoa death rituals are a phenomenon which demonstrates strong tendencies towards both cultural resilience and cultural adaptivity. Of these two tendencies, however, it is the cultural resilience of Chinese funeral customs and practices across spacial and temporal boundaries far from their place of origin that is most apparent.

In Chapter One, I have analyzed and recorded a number of traditional Chinese death rituals as they may have been practiced under ideal conditions. Chapter 2, by contrast, is an analysis and an ethnographic description of Chinese Hoa death rituals as they are practiced in real world conditions which currently exist in Ho Chi Minh City. Before embarking on a comparison of traditional and contemporary death rituals one might expect that the traditional funeral would be more complex, while modern funeral rituals would be simplified versions of traditional rituals adapted to a modern Vietnamese setting. However, it is evident from the traditional and contemporary rituals analyzed in this thesis that contemporary death rituals are in many ways more complex (albeit less onerous) than their traditional predecessors. Rather than adopting Vietnamese traditions and incorporating them into their own death rituals, the

Chinese Hoa people in Ho Chi Minh City have instead modified and re-invented old rituals and situated them within a new modern context in order to help maintain their Chineseness.

Below is a chart comparing traditional Chinese death rituals in China (using knowledge compiled from textual sources) to contemporary death rituals, currently practiced in Ho Chi Minh City by the Chinese Hoa people. The chart is divided into three categories, the first category derives from traditional rituals that have been recorded in manuals, the second category consists of rituals with roots that can be traced back to their origins in traditional Chinese death rituals, and the third category is a list of rituals and customs that I have observed are currently still being practiced in Ho Chi Minh City. Because of a proliferation of rituals, many of which are not mentioned in the textual sources, this chart only tracks the progression of specific death rituals which I was able to trace back from their earlier forms in China to their contemporary practice in modern day Vietnam as well as those rituals that I could establish are widely practiced within the Chinese Hoa community today.

Chart 4

A Comparison of Traditional Death Rituals in China with Contemporary Death Rituals in Ho Chi Minh City

The sequence of rituals	Traditional Death Rituals in China	Contemporary Death Rituals in Ho Chi Minh City	
		Rituals that are Still Being Practiced	Miscellaneous Rituals and Customs
Rituals practiced immediately after death	When a person has breathed their last breath: the last farewell moment, placing the body of the deceased on the floor, hanging the curtain around the bed, lighting an oil lamp and placing it under the feet of the deceased, laying the body on a bed or a	The last farewell, place a light under the bottom of the dead feet.	The bereaved cover the ancestral altar with a red cloth already prepared for this moment

	platform		
	Calling- back ceremony	No longer practiced	Soul calling staff
	Announcing the death to the relatives and friends	Printing an obituary in the newspaper or announcing the death through other media	Displaying an obituary for the deceased on the front door of the home of the deceased
	Washing the corpse and placing gems and broken rice into the mouth of the deceased	Washing the body and putting gems in the mouth of the deceased	
	Placing a banner with the name of the deceased written on it in front of the coffin	The bereaved will purchase a cloth banner from a coffin seller	
	Placing a tablet with name of the deceased written on it on an altar set up for the deceased	Preparing a picture and a new ancestral tablet with the name of the deceased	
Rituals practiced during the period of time the body is being laid out and laying in state	N/A		Offerings to the coffin spirit
	Preliminary Laying Out	Preliminary Laying out of the deceased	Taboos to avoid bad omens or specific consequences
	N/A		Buying water
	N/A		Washing the dust off of the soul of the deceased
	N/A		Symbolic feeding of the body of the deceased
	Final Laying Out	The final laying out	

	N/A		The ritual of placing the lid on the coffin
	Relatives and friends come to pay their last respects to the deceased	Friends and relatives arrive to offer condolences to the d bereaved (after the bereaved have put on their mourning garments)	
	Each member of the bereaved is assigned a mourning garment based on their consanguinity with the deceased in accordance with regulations laid out in the Five Grades of Mourning	The bereaved dress themselves in mourning garments	
	The funeral director officially writes an announcement to inform friends and relatives of the deceased the date of the memorial.	No longer practiced	
	In the morning or in the afternoon, the bereaved will offer sacrifices for the deceased.	Before every meal, the bereaved will offer food for the soul of the deceased	
	Every three days, the bereaved hold a large ceremony	No longer practiced	
	Every seven days, the bereaved prepare a vegetarian offering for the deceased	No longer practiced	During the time when the coffin has been sealed but remains in the home; the bereaved may hold a

			variety of rituals based on Buddhist and Taoist traditions. See Mrs. Wang's funeral description p.
	Inscribing the name of the deceased on an ancestral tablet.	No longer practiced	
	A geomancer will assisted the bereaved in finding the appropriate piece of land for the burial of the deceased.	Choose and buy a piece of land for the graveyard	Building a crypt using concrete
	Preparing the outer coffin and belongings that will be buried with the deceased	No longer practiced	Preparing many kinds of votive paper items and belongings for the deceased
	Choosing an auspicious date and time to bury the deceased	A fortune teller will assist the bereaved choose an appropriate time to bury the deceased	
Rituals practice from the beginning of the funeral procession until the end of the mourning period	The bereaved hold a memorial ceremony for the deceased	Friends and relatives take turns burning incense, worshiping and praying the deceased for the last time	
	The bereaved hold a ceremony in front of the ancestral hall and inform the ancestor that it is the time for the deceased to join their ancestors in the afterworld	The bereaved hold ceremony to inform their ancestor that it is time to bury the deceased	
	<i>Ling tie</i>	No longer practiced	

	Arranging belongings of the deceased for burial with the deceased	Arranging the offerings	
	Moving the coffin and departing from the home of the deceased to the place of burial.	Removal and transport of the coffin to the graveyard	Sprinkling joss paper along the way to the burial ground in order to bribe the evil spirits along the way to remain docile
	On the way to burial site, friends of the deceased arrange an offering along the side of the road as an oblation for the path of the deceased	Offering on the road to the burial sites (see Mrs. Vương's funeral photo)	
	The coffin is lowered into a grave and then the grave is filled with soil	Lowering the coffin into the crypt	Taking off the mourning garments and burning them beside the grave of the deceased
	Asking the god of the earth for permission to bury the deceased at the chosen location	Offering to ask the god of the earth for permission to bury the deceased at the chosen location (in Mrs. Wang's funeral)	
	<i>Hui ling</i>	No longer practiced	Bereaved will pin a black patch on their left breast area of their clothes to signify they are in mourning
	Choosing a date to place a	Building the tomb	

	mound of soil on top of the gravesite	from concrete	
	One hundred days after the death date of the deceased relative the bereaved finish the period in which they should cry for the deceased	Offering prepared 100 days after the death date	
	The deceased's ancestral tablet is bought to their ancestral hall	Removing the temporary altar and inviting the soul of the deceased to go to the ancestral altar	
	This ritual takes place 13 months after the death date	Offering prepared on the 13 th month after the death date	
	This ritual takes place on the 25 th month after the death date	Offering prepared on the 25 th month after the death date	
	The Final Offering prepared during the mourning period and burning the mourning garments	No longer practiced	
	Children of the deceased celebrate the birthday of the deceased.	No longer practiced	

From examining this chart, we can see that during the period immediately after a person died, traditional Chinese death rituals required six rituals as prescribed in Confucian manuals and other texts. Contemporary death rituals, as practiced today by the Hoa in Ho Chi Minh City, include five rituals which are simplified versions of their predecessors, as well as several other customs and practices, most of which are derived from animistic beliefs and

folklore. In the past, during the period in which a person had just died and their body was lying in state, traditional Chinese death rituals required 12 rituals as prescribed in the texts. Contemporary death rituals practiced by the Hoa include six rituals whose origins can be identified as simplified versions of the 12 traditional Chinese death rituals. Surprisingly, the Chinese Hoa people have added additional complexity to the remaining prescribed rituals. I have identified an additional 7 rituals and several additional customs that have been added deriving from animism, Buddhism, Taoism and folklore.

During the period in which the deceased person's coffin is transported to the gravesite until the end of the final period of mourning, traditional Chinese death rituals include 16 different rituals. Contemporary Chinese Hoa funerals include at least 12 simplified rituals that can be identified as having predecessors practiced in traditional Chinese death rituals.

In modern times, the actual number of rituals practiced by a particular family will vary depending on the economic status of the bereaved and the level of commitment they feel to these traditions. Wealthy Chinese families tend to have more complex funerals, while middle class and poorer are limited by their available resources. In Vietnam, there is an old adage which states *phú quý sinh lễ nghĩa* meaning the wealthy will tend practice more rituals. As Linda Sun Crowder has pointed out the “public displays of funeral processions create opportunities to show honor, respect, status and prestige.”²⁷⁴ Thus, wealthy Chinese Hoa families are able accrue status and prestige in their communities through these public demonstrations of filial piety and respect for tradition. Middle class and poor families who make a noticeable effort to respect funeral traditions will also gain the esteem of other members of their communities. At the same time these events contribute to the reaffirmation

²⁷⁴ Linda Sun Crowder, “The Chinese Mortuary Tradition in San Francisco Chinatown,” in *Chinese American Death Rituals - Respecting the Ancestors* (UK: AltaMira Press, 2005), 201.

or “reinscription” of the Chineseness of the deceased, their family and the other participants in the funeral.

While the continual reinscription of Chineseness through the preservation and adaptation of traditional Chinese customs and rituals plays an important role in the enduring strength of Chinese Hoa cultural resilience, this is by no means the sole contributing factor that has maintained the ethnic boundaries between Chinese and Vietnamese in Ho Chi Minh City. Other Chinese diaspora communities in Southeast Asia, such as the Chinese Thai community, (for a variety of reasons) have been more receptive to cultural assimilation and hybridization.²⁷⁵ This has resulted in Thailand in less clearly defined cultural and ethnic boundaries separating Chinese immigrants from the communities in which they live. Similarly, Chinese communities in Malaysia have also (generally speaking) assumed a more localized identity.²⁷⁶

In the Việt kingdom and in modern day Vietnam, the number of Chinese immigrants relative to the size of the overall population has been and remains much smaller than in Thailand or Malaysia. For centuries the ability of Chinese merchants to do business in the Việt kingdom was greatly impeded by regulations (primarily intended to target Chinese) that forbid trading with foreigners. Moreover, the numbers of Chinese immigrants allowed into Việt controlled areas and the locations in which they settled has always been strictly controlled. As a result, Vietnam today has far fewer ethnic Chinese than either Thailand or Malaysia, despite being much closer to China culturally, linguistically and geographically, and despite a longstanding affinity among Việt people for Chinese culture.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ Chan Kwok Bun and Tong Chee Kiong, “Introduction: Positionality and Alternation: Identity of the Chinese in Contemporary Thailand,” in *Alternate Identities: The Chinese in Contemporary Thailand* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 2001), 1–8.

²⁷⁶ Tan, “Chinese Identities in Malaysia,” 94–99.

²⁷⁷ Ethnic Chinese make up about 28% of the Malaysian population and 14% of the population of Thailand. By contrast the ethnic Chinese make up about 2% of the Vietnamese population.

Thus, the disparity in the number of Chinese immigrants to Việt controlled areas versus those too countries like Malaysia and Thailand, and the relative strength of these immigrants determination to maintain their ethnic boundaries has its roots in in a long history of ethnic relations and government policies. Ironically, it is Vietnam's very proximity to China that has led to a more circumspect attitude among Vietnamese towards Chinese immigration. China's long history of dominating its neighbors has resulted in a deeply ingrained fear and distrust of Chinese influence in Vietnam.

Since the communist takeover of Ho Chi Minh City in 1975, the Vietnamese government has made a number of attempts to reform and “modernize” the practice of rituals in order to make them better conform with socialist ideals. For example, on January 12th of 1998 the party's Central Executive Committee of the Politburo issued a directive (#27-CT/TW) requiring the implementation of a new set of regulations governing the practice of rituals that take place during weddings, funerals and festivals in Vietnam.²⁷⁸ These regulations were intended to promote a more modern lifestyle and discourage superstitious beliefs.

In order to help effect this change, on July 11th 1998, the Ministry of Culture and Information published a memorandum on the implementation of these new policies. According to this memo, the wearing of mourning garments should be limited to a headband and white or black mourning clothes. The use of votive paper, staves and other ritual paraphernalia should be restricted and gradually eliminated from usage during ceremonies. Additionally, the memo states that many of the standard rituals practiced by both Vietnamese and Chinese should be considered culturally backward and superstitious. Therefore, according to the new policy, the period between a person's death and the final laying out of

²⁷⁸ “Chỉ thị về việc thực hiện nếp sống văn minh trong việc cưới, việc tang, lễ hội. (Directive to Promote a Civilized Lifestyle in Weddings, Funerals and Festivals),” *Bộ Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism*, August 15, 1998, <http://bvhttdl.gov.vn/vn/vb-qly-nn/4/981/index.html>.

their corpse should be no more than 8-10 hours and bodies should be buried within 48 hours of their time of death and cremation, instead of burial, should be encouraged. Banners, food and wreaths should no longer be brought to funerals by condolers in order to limit the expenditure of resources at the funeral.²⁷⁹ These directives were issued during the time I was conducting much of my fieldwork in the Hoa community in Ho Chi Minh City. Despite these efforts at reform, in the course of my research I observed no attempts by members of the Hoa community to implement these changes, and there seems to have been little (if any) lasting effect on the practice of death rituals by the Hoa people in Ho Chi Minh City.

²⁷⁹ “Thông tư Ngày 11 tháng 7 năm 1998 hướng dẫn thực hiện nếp sống văn minh trong việc cưới, việc tang, lễ hội (Memorandum July 11, 1998 Implementing the Directive to Promote a Civilized Lifestyle in Weddings, Funerals and Festivals.),” *Hệ thống văn bản pháp luật (System for Official Legal Documents)*, August 15, 1014, http://www.moj.gov.vn/vbpq/Lists/Vn%20bn%20php%20lut/View_Detail.aspx?ItemID=7588.

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