The Soul and its Ceremonies: Funeral Practice in Modern Taiwan

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Li-ling Hsiao recounts the involved process of arranging for her father's burial following a fatal car accident in the spring of 2012. Its element of heartbreak aside, the six-week ordeal revealed much about the conjunction between Taiwan’s vestigial religious traditions and contemporary mores.

My father Shui-ping Hsiao 蕭水萍 (1937–2012), a puppet master, died in the wrong way, at the wrong time, and out of order, all of which had to be set right by various funeral rites and masses. He died at 10:35 p.m. on April 25, 2012, after forty-six days in the intensive care unit at Chang Bing Show Chwan Memorial Hospital 彰濱秀傳紀念醫院 in Changhua, Taiwan, following a car crash on March 10. When the doctor pronounced his prognosis grim after a month-long effort to keep him alive, my sister Li-ching Hsiao 蕭麗卿 and I began the search for a funeral home. While we were consulting and pricing various establishments, distant relatives plumped for funeral homes owned by their friends or relatives. The funeral business in Taiwan is quite competitive, and funeral homes drum up their business through such connections. With a rebellious nature inherited from our father, my sister and I decided on a funeral home in Changhua City called Quan Fushou 全福壽 (Full Fortune and Longevity), which has no family connection. This, of course, furrowed a few brows.

The Death

When the hospital called to inform us that my father’s heart rate had dropped below fifty beats per minute, we notified my brothers, Wen-cheng 蕭文正 and Wen-chang Hsiao 蕭文章, as well as the manager of the funeral home Huiling Peng 彭惠玲. My father was pronounced dead at 10:35 p.m. on April 25, while we were en route to the intensive care unit. Taiwanese hospitals strictly observe the custom of erasing all signs of illness and
injury. By the time we arrived, the nurses had removed my father’s bandages, cleansed him, and dressed him in the daily clothes we had provided. He looked rather like himself, with little indication that he had been hospitalized for forty-six days.

My father’s body was taken by ambulance to the Changhua City Morgue. The drivers told us that we must explain every step of the journey to my father (entering the elevator, exiting the elevator, etc.). By the time we arrived at the morgue, Peng and her assistants had arranged a shrine in a large room on an upper floor, which contained dozens of such shrines. Before my father’s body was refrigerated, Peng asked us to chant the names of the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (Guanshiyin pusa 觀世音菩薩) and Amitāba (Amituo Fo 阿彌陀佛) ten times each in the hope earning their blessing for my father. We were then led to the shrine. A female Buddhist layperson (shijie 師姐) named Wu Jinmei 吳金美 had already set up my father’s Spirit Tablet (Shenzhupai 神主牌), while Peng’s assistant prepared mourning headwear for us. The women’s headwear (pima daixiao 披麻戴孝) is a roughly triangular wimple; it’s made of rough white cloth, with a colored tip made of hemp. The men, meanwhile, wear a white band across the forehead. The tablet displayed my father’s name, birthday, and death-day. Shijie Wu asked us to kneel in front of the shrine as she summoned my father’s spirit. She asked my eldest brother to bow to the tablet and toss two coins onto the floor, a religious ritual called “tossing divination” (jiaobei 筊杯). It was not until the third try that a result of one head and one tail—a combination called shengbei 聖杯—was achieved, meaning that the spirit of my father had finally arrived at the shrine. Shijie Wu then chanted a Buddhist sutra to the accompaniment of an iron bell and a little wooden drum (muyu 木魚). The chanting, which lasted about an hour, is called jiaoweiying 腳尾經 (sūtra at the feet), a ritual required upon any death to settle the roaming spirit within the tablet. Spirits of the unburied dead require thrice-daily offerings. These were to be made by the personnel of the morgue, allowing us to go home for the night with a guiltless conscience.

The Planning of the Masses & the Funeral

On April 26, my family met Peng and her geomancer Zhang Longxiong 張隆雄 to set the date of the funeral and plan the related masses. The selection of the date was contingent on the zodiac signs of my father’s sons, daughters, and eldest grandson (who is traditionally seen as the deceased’s youngest son). In my father’s case, the date was also contingent on the practical consideration that my brother had to return to Vietnam and I had to return to the U.S. Factoring all these elements, the geomancer set the
funeral on May 3. As we had decided to have my father cremated, the geomancer also set the exact time (11:15 p.m. on May 2) his body was to be placed in the coffin and the rough hour (between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m. on May 3) his ashes were to be placed in the pagoda. The two steps of interment are called the *rulian* 入殮 and the *ruta* 入塔. The geomancer further stipulated that the unit housing my father’s ashes, which we had yet to select, should face east. Finally, the geomancer indicated those born in 1978—a particularly inauspicious Year of the Horse for our purposes—must absent themselves during the *rulian* and *ruta*, as they would be dangerously susceptible to “evil elements” (*zhengchong* 正衝). The only controversy stemmed from the fact that my father died at what is considered a ripe old age (seventy-seven) and therefore required a long wake period (*tingjiu* 停柩) before cremation or burial. The shorter wake, due to the travel plans of my elder brother and myself, further raised eyebrows within the extended family. The final detail was the printing of the death announcement (*fuwen* 訃聞). The funeral home printed one hundred slips on pink paper rather than white (the traditional funeral color). The bright paper celebrated my father’s longevity.

With the funeral date set, the religious masses had to be arranged. According to custom, a religious mass must be said every seven days for seven weeks to help the spirit of the deceased transcend the earthly realm. These masses are called Rites of the Sevens (*Zuoqi* 做七). In modern Taiwan, however, this seven-week procedure is rarely observed to the letter. Typically, the first mass (*Touqi* 頭七) is held on the seventh day after death. We decided to compress the second through the sixth masses into a single ceremony to be held the following night (May 1). The last mass (*Manqi* 滿七) was to be held on May 2, the day before the funeral, as customary.

Discussion then turned to whether the masses should be Buddhist or Daoist. Despite a puppeteering career spent reverencing both Buddhist and Daoist deities at temple festivals, my father maintained an aloof skepticism about religious matters. Several musicians in my father’s troupe had changed careers and become Daoist *fashi* 法師 (masters of the dharma), who preside over funeral masses. My father considered these musicians-turned-*fashi* mere amateurs and expressed a healthy skepticism about any rites in which such amateurs participate. In consequence, we were inclined to adopt the Buddhist ceremonial. There was, inevitably, a complicating factor: my father’s was the second death within the Hsiao family this year, my grandfather’s concubine having died in January. Only a Daoist priest could conduct the special mass to break the bad luck that might lead to a third death. Moreover, as my father died prematurely, a special ritual called Rescuing the Unjustly Damned (*Da Wangsicheng* 打枉死城) was all but
mandatory. Again, a Daoist priest was required. Under pressure from distant relatives, we thus agreed that the final mass should be Daoist.

The next day, the geomancer met us at the Pagoda of Benevolent Love (Ci’en Ta 慈恩塔), a facility in Changhua County that provides small boxes—rather like safety deposit boxes—that permanently house the remains of the deceased. The pagoda contains the remains of all my ancestors. After learning that my father’s box must face east, the manager immediately suggested the eighth floor of the pagoda. As the pronunciation of the number eight (ba 八) in both Mandarin and Taiwanese puns on the word of fa 發, which means “growing rich,” the eighth floor is especially desirable, meaning that we hired the right funeral home and that the funeral home hired the right geomancer. On my elder brother’s suggestion, we purchased an additional box for my mother next to my father’s. While purchasing the boxes, we decided to place my father’s shrine in the Temple of Benevolent Love (Ci’en Si 慈恩寺), which is affiliated with the pagoda and located next door. According to custom, the soul inhabits its shrine for a year and requires food offerings on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month. After a year, the soul is integrated into the family shrine. As my mother was injured in the car accident, we felt it would be easier to locate the shrine in the temple for a year and to pay the facility to provide the two monthly offerings. In a year, the geomancer will decide the best time for my father’s soul to be led to the family shrine, which my mother maintains at home. The funeral planning taught me that the soul and body of the deceased must be attended separately. Each requires its due ceremony in order to reach its final destination.

The First & Second Masses

The first and second masses, held in the morgue, adhered to Buddhist ceremony. During the first mass, shijie Wu again asked my elder brother to summon my father’s spirit by means of the coin-tossing ritual. This time my father’s spirit answered the invitation on the first try. Shijie Wu and two other shijies chanted the Bhaisajyaguru Sūtra or The Healing Sūtra (Yaoshi jing 藥師經). As my father died of injuries and illness, it was for obvious reasons imperative to chant this sutra. Many of my family members chanted the sūtra with the shijies, and a sense of unity diminished the melancholy atmosphere. The second mass, which combined the second through sixth masses, was overseen by my father’s daughters, granddaughters, and married nieces, as per custom. Shijie Wu asked my elder sister to summon my father’s spirit through the coin-tossing ritual, and my father’s spirit again answered the invitation on the first try. Shijie Wu then chanted the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra or Diamond Sūtra (Jingang jing 金剛經) to cleanse whatever sin my father had accumulated in
his lifetime. The family again chanted with shijie Wu. In both masses, the shijies chanted the sūtras in Taiwanese with extreme fluency. My siblings and I attempted to keep up in Taiwanese, while the younger generations, who speak Taiwanese only haltingly, chanted in Mandarin. The more who chant the sutra, the more powerful it becomes. Both masses involved burning large quantities of paper money in order to provide for my father after his death. The paper money was burnt in an outdoor courtyard specifically designed for the purpose. During the paper burning, the family held a red string that encircled the area to keep the trans-substantiated money from drifting about the other world. Meanwhile, we chanted my father’s name and called on him to accept the money: “Father/Grandfather, Hsiao Shui-ping, this paper money is burnt for you. Please receive it at the Changua City Morgue.” These words were repeated until all of the paper money was burnt.

The Mass of the “Meritorious Platform”

The last mass is called “The Meritorious Platform” (Gong-detan 功德壇). It derives its unusual name from the Platform Sutra (Tanjing 壇經), which, counter-intuitively, is not included in the ceremony. The “platform,” in this case, refers to the perch from which the Buddhist master preaches the Dharma. While the first two masses ran about three hours each, this mass can run either three or eight hours, depending on one’s money and piety. My relatives had raised several eyebrows already, and my father’s youngest brother ruled that we must have a full program for this most important mass. The mass was duly held from 1 p.m. to 10 p.m. While the first two masses were held in the room containing my father’s shrine, this mass was held in a rented hall, also inside the morgue. On the morning of May 2, Ms. Peng and her assistants created

FIGURE 1 The funeral hall, May 2, 2012. Photo by Wen-cheng Hsiao.
a wall of fresh flowers that surrounded my father’s picture (fig. 1).

Seven Daoist *fashis* (法師) from a Changhua-based company called Yuanfatan 元法壇 (Platform of the Original Dharma), owned by our geomancer, presided over the mass. The seven *fashis* double as musicians; our *fashis* were equipped with electric keyboard, *suonas* (small Chinese trumpets), a soprano saxophone, and a percussion set consisting of a small drum, a gong, and cymbals. In the Daoist mass, the family silently holds incense sticks while the *fashis* perform the necessary rites. Before the mass began, one of the assistant *fashis* led my family as he conveyed my father’s Spirit Tablet from the shrine to the hall. My elder brother again summoned my father’s spirit by the coin-tossing ritual, and for a third time in a row my father’s spirit answered the invitation on the first try. The mass began with the chief *fashi* and two assistants summoning various Buddhist deities. This summoning was followed by the ritual cleansing of my father’s tablet. The tablet was then set on a table outside the hall together with the Tablet of the Hsiao Ancestors and an offering of food and incense. Next, an assistant *fashi* chanted the *Ksitigarbha’s Ten Kings Sutra* (*Dizang Shiwan Baojuan* 地藏十王寶卷), a *sutra* intended to release the soul from purgatory.

We then presented the Hsiao family ancestors with an offering: a ten-dish feast catered by a vegetarian restaurant. This was followed by an important ritual called “begging for rice” (*qifan* 乞飯), which was to ameliorate my father’s inauspicious time of death. As custom has it, the best time to die is in the morning so the journey to the other world is well lit and free of danger. When my father’s condition became critical, the ICU doctor asked us if we would like him to extend his life till morning, but we decided to let my father follow the natural course rather than worrying about his time of death. He ended up dying during the worst possible hours, which falls between dinner and 11 p.m., before the two-hour period (*zishi* 子時) from 11:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. that signals the start of the next day. The after-dinner hours are so inauspicious because the deceased has eaten all three meals of the day, which symbolically suggests that he has left no bounty for his offspring. In order to correct this bad omen, the ritual of “begging for rice” must be performed. In preparation for this ritual, my elder sister-in-law had to cook a pot of rice and bring three sets of bowls and chopsticks—one for my elder brother, one for my younger brother, and one for my father’s eldest grandson. The chief *fashi* instructed my two brothers and nephew to eat some of the rice, which was garnished with sprigs of artificial flowers. The remaining rice and the sprigs were divided between them. The rice was to be taken home and eaten, while the flowers were to be placed in the household rice containers, to symbolize the family’s bountifulness.
At dinnertime, we ate the ten-course vegetarian meal, which had served its purpose as an offering. There followed another important ritual, already mentioned, called “Rescuing the Unjustly Damned” (fig. 2). As my father had died inadvertently and prematurely, his soul was presumably trapped in the limbo reserved for those whose deaths are in some sense wrongful or mistaken. A paper model of a traditional walled city with a gate on each of its four sides was set in the middle of the hall. The city represents the hell from which the monk Mahamaudgalyayana (Mulian 目連) rescued his mother. The chief fashi asked my elder brother to place my father’s Spirit Tablet inside the walled city. In the dress of Mahamaudgalyayana, the chief fashi led my father’s offspring around the walled city in a search for my father’s soul. His attempts to rescue my father were repeatedly blocked by various ghostly gatekeepers, whose parts were played by the assistant fashis. The chief fashi had to engage in a pantomimic fight in order to open each gate. After the same rescue operation was performed at all four gates, the chief fashi finally succeeded in rescuing my father’s soul, and my father’s Spirit Tablet was presented to my elder brother. The chief fashi, still in the role of Mahamaudgalyayana, knelt and wept bitterly before my father’s tablet. From the theatrical perspective, the fashis of the Yuanfatan proved to be good actors, and the accompanying music conveyed the intensity of the fights.

After my father’s soul had been rescued, the fashis lit seven candles inside a rainbow-colored box and performed the ritual of Opening the Bright Path (Kai Guangminglu 開光明路) to show my father’s soul the route to the Western Paradise (Xifang jingtú 西方淨土). The fashis then paid respect to the Bhaisajyaguru Buddha or the Healing Buddha (Yaoshi Fo 藥師佛) on our behalf and represented our wish that the Buddha would remedy my father’s injuries and allow him to reincarnate as a higher life form. On a table next to the box with the seven candles, an assistant fashi laid seven eggs in a semi-circle. Each egg was inscribed with a legend (from left to right): “animal path” (chudao 畜道), “ghostly path” (guidao 鬼道), “immortal path” (xiandao 僑道), “Healing Buddha,” “heavenly path” (tiandao 靂道), “earthly path” (didao 墨道), and “human path” (rendao 人道).
The eggs symbolized rebirth, while the inscriptions indicated the different forms into which the deceased might reincarnate in the next life. Under the protection of the Healing Buddha, my father would hopefully obtain a better future life than the one he had just departed. After the eggs were arranged, an assistant fashi chanted the Bhaisajyaguru Sūtra, which contains the Healing Buddha’s twelve vows to assist reincarnation.

The mass concluded with the burning of more paper money. This time, an assistant fashi had my siblings and I stamp a single paper note with our thumb prints. The thumb-printed note was burnt with the rest of the money, establishing my father’s claim to this money and fending off any greedy ghosts.

Following the long mass of Meritorious Platform, a shorter Daoist mass, called “Mass for the Strawman” (Jicaoren 祭草人), had to be performed. As mentioned above, my father’s death was the second death of the year in my family, and a special ritual was required to break the string of bad luck. The funeral home prepared an effigy dressed in my father’s clothes. A funeral mass was performed for the effigy, representing a third death within the family and completing the cycle of bad luck. While the chief fashi conducted this ceremony, my family had to leave the hall because this third death was not supposed to predate our own deaths and the mis-ordering might generate “evil elements.” We were told to return upon hearing firecrackers. The mass lasted less than ten minutes. After the firecrackers sounded, the effigy was removed, to be buried on a nearby mountain that very night. Certain legends tell of workers who were too lazy to bury the effigy and wound up being haunted by it.

The Body at Rest

After the two masses ended at 10 p.m., the fashis departed. Now it was time to turn our attention from my father’s soul to his body. While the workers of the funeral home placed the body in the coffin, the family members were asked to leave the room, to avoid contamination by “evil elements.” Before the coffin was nailed shut, we were given a last chance to see my father, but warned that we must not touch the coffin. The rulian master placed about US$700 real currency in my father’s hands. This cash, which is called “cash in hand” (shouweiqian 手尾錢), symbolized my father’s patrimony. Each family member received a portion of this cash after the rulian, with specific instructions not to spend it for at least a year, the period of funereal bad luck. In a year’s time, we are supposed to spend the money in ways that will enrich us and our offspring, economically, culturally, or spiritually. My younger brother, who owns a coffee shop, was instructed to tape the cash to the cash register, which will presumably bring good fortune. The rulian master then proceeded to the ritual of nailing shut the coffin. The master
pantomimed the action of pounding six nails, all the while reciting auspicious words to bless my father’s offspring. We answered each remark in unison with a loud “yes.” He left the last nail for the Nailing Ritual (Fengding Yishi 封釘儀式) included in the funeral ceremony on the following day. As the eldest surviving member of the family, my father’s younger brother was to mimic the pounding of this nail.

My siblings and I wore traditional mourning outfits during the various masses, but the funeral itself brought out the rebellious streak we inherited from our father. We decided to wear black clothes in the Western style (coat and tie for the men) during the funeral. We were afraid that our distant relatives would disapprove, but made the choice anyhow. During the funeral, family members, relatives, and friends took turns offering incense, libations, flowers, and fruits. Shijie Wu performed the myriad rituals of the funeral ceremony. Each step—the cremation at the Taichung City Morgue, the journey to the pagoda, the first offering to the Bodhisattva and to my father at the pagoda, the interment of my father’s ashes, and the transference of my father’s soul from his Spirit Tablet to the temple shrine—required its own ritual. Finally, my father’s body had found its rightful and permanent resting place and his soul a temporary home.

Aftermath

After the ritual of “Rescuing the Unjustly Damned,” my elder brother was furious. He objected to the elaborate performance, stating that “my father’s barely cold body must be spinning in its grave.” As stated above, my father was a puppet master whose work was largely devoted to honoring the deities of the Buddhist and Daoist pantheon. Nonetheless—perhaps because he had seen the business of religion up close—he rejected the specifics of Daoist rituals. During a Daoist mass at my grandmother’s funeral, he refused to participate. Given my father’s clear objection, we hesitated to hold a Daoist mass, and my brother was particular adamant in his objections, sharing something of my father’s skepticism. I favored the elaborate masses not for my father’s sake, but for my mother’s. She is a pious believer who has maintained a vegetarian diet from midnight to noon for decades out of her sincere devotion to all the Buddhist and Daoist deities and the souls of the Hsiao ancestors. My elder sister and younger brother are themselves believers and naturally desired an orthodox funeral; in the end, my elder brother was out-voted.

While waiting at the morgue for my father’s body to be cremated, my sister and I expressed amazement that the shengbei was achieved on the first try three times running. This providential omen seemed to justify the various masses and a total funeral expense of more than NT$300,000 (US$10,000). Overhearing our conversation, my elder brother disputed our
view. He confessed that he had rigged, or at least tried to rig, the first shengbei by turning the coins to one head and one tail in his hands. My sister was unconvinced and took comfort in her own successful shengbei. She said she, like my father, disliked the Daoist mass, although the fashis we hired were very good, and that she would have only Buddhist masses performed at her own funeral. My elder brother, a stubborn non-believer like my father, said he would have no religious ritual at his funeral. To our surprise, my younger brother, a bit of a black sheep and unlikely font of piety, announced that he planned to arrange in advance and purchase a funeral service with all the necessary masses. The real dispute, of course, has not even begun. My mother’s funeral hopefully lies in the far future, but certain battle lines are already being drawn. Thus the mores of modern Taiwan are being hashed out, family by family.