Death and the regeneration of life

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6 Of flesh and bones: the management of death pollution in Cantonese society

JAMES L. WATSON

The ritual repertoire associated with death in Chinese society is so complex that it confounds those who would attempt to 'make sense of it all' as a uniform set of symbolic representations. This very challenge, no doubt, is precisely the reason why the subject has preoccupied three generations of sinological anthropologists. One of the most puzzling aspects of Chinese mortuary ritual is the extreme ambivalence shown toward the physical remains of the deceased. This seems to be particularly true for the rural Cantonese. Few who have witnessed a funeral among the Cantonese can fail to be impressed by the fear and apprehension that pervade the ritual. The general aversion to death, and anything associated with the corpse, is so overpowering that ordinary villagers hesitate to become involved, and yet the bones of the ancestors must be preserved at all costs as they are essential to the wellbeing of the descendants. The living gain some control over the natural environment by planting, as it were, the bones of their predecessors in auspicious locations. The bones then transmit the good geomantic influences of the cosmos to the living by means of a pig sacrifice ritual. These geomantic forces, known as 'wind and water' (feng shui in Chinese), can thus be harnessed for the benefit of descendants, provided the bones are located properly and preserved from decay.

For many centuries the Cantonese have followed a system of double burial whereby the corpse is first buried in a coffin and left for approximately seven years. The bones are then exhumed and stored in a ceramic urn. Finally, when an auspicious location has been acquired, the urn is reburied in an elaborate, horseshoe-shaped tomb. The final stage may not occur until decades or even generations after death, depending on family circumstances. The bones begin to function for the benefit of descendants only after the final stage in the burial sequence has been completed. Space does not permit a full discussion of the Chinese double burial system in this paper; it is a vastly complex topic (see for example Wilson, 1961; Freedman, 1966:118–54; Potter, 1970; Ahern, 1973; Pasternak, 1973).
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Before the living can use the bones of their ancestors the flesh of the corpse must disintegrate completely. This liminal phase is the most critical – and dangerous – in the whole sequence. My main concern in this essay is to explore the social implications of death pollution during the earliest phase of mortuary rites. An analysis of the ritual sequence helps us to unravel many aspects of Cantonese social organisation and shows that the pollution of death must be taken on, or managed in some way, by the descendants before the deceased can be transformed from a dangerous corpse into a settled ancestor. This taking on of pollution must be understood as the first transaction in a relationship of exchange between the living and dead that stretches over many generations – up to 30 and 40 in the cases described below. The ancestral cult is built on ideas of reciprocity but the balance of power in the relationship shifts gradually over time. During the early phase of mortuary ritual the deceased is extremely powerful and unpredictable. However, by the time the bones have been deposited in the final tomb, the ancestor is totally dependent on living descendants. This theme will be explored elsewhere. The following discussion covers the ritual sequence from the moment of death to the cessation of mourning, which normally occurs seven days after the initial burial.

In Cantonese society strict rules dictate those who are obligated to take on a portion of the pollution of death. These rules reveal a great deal about the Cantonese system of inheritance. From one point of view it can be argued that male mourners must earn the worldly goods they inherit by absorbing a major share of the deceased’s pollution. Following J. Goody’s (1962) lead in Death, property and the ancestors, an analysis which focuses on the inheritance of property helps us to make sense of male participation in Cantonese funerary ritual. For women, another approach seems more suitable and I shall argue that the ritual actions of women at Cantonese funerals are more directly related to the concerns of fertility and physical continuity than to the inheritance of property. Bloch (1971) has shown, in a number of passages, how in Merina society it is thought essential for women to handle the corpses of their predecessors in order to ensure the fertility of the living generation (Bloch, 1971:159ff). As outlined in this paper, a similar set of ritual actions is found in South China among Cantonese peasants.

It may not be a coincidence that this parallel between Merina and Cantonese mortuary rites should be so striking. Both Merina and Cantonese place great weight on the preservation of physical remains and they are both preoccupied with the construction and maintenance of elaborate tombs. The Merina and Cantonese, I would argue, stand near one end of a continuum of cultures that stress the preservation of physical remains. The Hindu tradition, described elsewhere in this volume by J. Parry would seem to occupy the opposite end of such a continuum. In Hindu culture the object of mortuary ritual is the total obliteration of the deceased in a physical sense. Nothing of the corpse is preserved and monuments are rarely erected. Among the Cantonese, on the other hand (as with the Merina), the world order and the social structure of the living have meaning only through the manipulation and preservation of the dead.

Although the Hindu and the Chinese systems could hardly be further removed in terms of treating the remains of the dead, there are some intriguing similarities in the management of death pollution in the two cultures. Both societies, for instance, have a hierarchy of funeral specialists based on relative exposure to the contaminating aspects of death (cf. Parry, 1980). Among the Cantonese, a proper funeral cannot take place unless the bereaved are willing to pay for the services of professionals who specialise in ‘white affairs’, pai shih, (white being the colour of mourning). A complex division of labour operates among funeral specialists and, not surprisingly, they are ranked according to the extent of physical contact with the corpse. Geomancers, whose tasks do not require attendance at the funeral, rank highest. Lowest in the hierarchy are menial labourers employed to handle the corpse and dispose of clothing, bedding, and other materials most directly associated with death. These corpse handlers are so contaminated by their work that villagers will not even speak to them; their very glance is thought to bring misfortune. Between the two extremes there is a whole range of professionals who earn all or most of their income from ‘white affairs’: priests, 仏師, musicians, coffin makers, fortune tellers, exhumation specialists and others. Many carry the pollution of death with them wherever they go; others are unaffected by regular attendance at funerals. Like the Hindus, therefore, the Cantonese draw a clear distinction between permanent and temporary pollution. (cf. Dumont and Pocock, 1959; on Hindu ideas regarding death pollution see especially Das, 1977:120–6).

Death pollution is not an easy topic to investigate in Chinese society. Among the more traditional of the Cantonese, including those who live in rural Hong Kong, it is considered bad luck even to mention the subject of death (see also Chen, 1939:175). What follows, therefore, is an account based largely on personal observation. I witnessed 16 funerals, in part or in full, during 29 months of field research in the Hong Kong New Territories. Most of the data were gathered while the funerals were actually in progress. Only on these occasions were
people prepared to offer opinions about the meaning of various rituals and the role of specialists.

Observations were made in the villages of San Tin and Ha Tsuen (see J. Watson, 1975b on San Tin and R. Watson 1982 on Ha Tsuen). These communities are inhabited by powerful lineages of the type that once dominated the agrarian economy of South-Eastern China. There are no significant differences in the funeral ritual as practised in the two villages. People from San Tin and Ha Tsuen have intermarried for centuries and speak the same sub-dialect of Pao An Cantonese. As the data are drawn from such a limited area, few claims can be made for the general applicability of the model presented in this paper. There are, of course, parallels in other parts of China (to which the reader's attention will be drawn) but it is not my intention to make a general survey of Chinese mortuary customs. Rather, this study deals with ideas concerning death pollution in one local system: the hinterland surrounding the market town of Yuen Long in the Hong Kong New Territories. Many of the funeral specialists live in Yuen Long and provide services to approximately 50 Cantonese villages in the town's catchment area.

'Killing airs': two aspects of death pollution

News of an imminent death spreads rapidly in Cantonese villages. Residents usually have enough warning to protect those who are most at risk. Pregnant women and children are advised to stay well away from the house in question; neighbours close their doors and find an excuse to be away for a few hours. Farmers make sure that sows with piglets are removed from sheds nearby and calves are taken out of the village. These precautions are necessary, it was explained, because newborn creatures of all types are extremely vulnerable to the 'killing airs', sat hei, that emanate from the corpse at the moment of death. The killing airs permeate the house of the deceased and cling to the mourners 'like an invisible cloud' (to quote one informant in Ha Tsuen). There is general agreement that the sat hei associated with untimely or inauspicious death are particularly virulent. Worst of all are the killing airs that accompany suicide. In San Tin and Ha Tsuen, houses that were once the sites of suicides are usually abandoned; no one dares live in them. Older villagers hesitate to visit hospitals because they fear the overpowering presence of multiple deaths (see Topley, 1952:151–2 on death houses among the Cantonese in Singapore).

In the area under study there appear to be two aspects of death pollution: one associated with the release of the spirit and the other relating to the decay of the flesh. This distinction is not made in everyday speech; villagers use the Cantonese term sat hei (Mandarin sha chi) to describe any adverse effect caused by exposure to death. Nonetheless, the dual nature of pollution is very evident when one pays close attention to the actions of mourners, spectators, and specialists during critical transitions in the funeral ritual. These are marked by what I call aversion points which occur when the corpse is physically moved and the spirit is thought to be undergoing a transition. At such points most people in the assemblage avert their eyes because, as informants explained, 'we do not want to offend the spirit'. To look on the corpse during these transitions invites terrible retribution - described as sat hei - from the disembodied, and hence, unpredictable spirit. Funeral specialists, as demonstrated in the following account, are relatively immune to this aspect of death pollution.

The sat hei associated with decaying flesh is quite another matter. Everyone, including the specialist, is in danger when she or he handles anything that has been in direct contact with the corpse. This aspect of pollution is thus passive; it has no volition and affects everyone equally. The aspect associated with the spirit, however, is active and extremely unpredictable. In effect, the lowest ranks of funeral specialists are paid to manage the passive pollution of the flesh. Higher ranking professionals, especially priests, are hired to cope with the spirit but they are rarely affected by the active sat hei of death (assuming, of course, that they perform the rituals correctly and do not offend the spirit).

The ritual sequence, 1: From death to burial

Before proceeding with the discussion of inheritance and fertility it seems appropriate to provide some background information on Cantonese funeral ritual. The sequence outlined below covers the main elements of the ritual from the moment of death to the formal cessation of mourning. It is during this liminal period (cf. Hertz, 1960) prior to the settling of the soul that the pollution of death is most virulent. The ritual sequence has been distilled, as it were, from 16 funerals. Some were more elaborate than others, depending largely on the age of the deceased and the wealth of the bereaved, but, in general, all funerals share a basic structure. Furthermore, every funeral must be serviced by a minimal set of specialists which includes at least two corpse handlers, a priest, and a musician. The ritual cannot proceed without these men in attendance. Wealthy families sometimes hire
up to a dozen additional specialists to complement the minimal set. The following account puts special emphasis on the problem of death pollution which means that other aspects of the ritual have been deleted.

The early stages of ritual have the effect of warning the community that a death has occurred and that members of the household in question have entered a mandatory period of mourning. The moment of death (and, hence, the release of killing airs) is formally announced by women of the household who burst into high-pitched, stereotyped wailing. The wailing is sometimes accompanied by funeral laments that women learn when they are young, often while living in maiden houses prior to marriage (see laments by Blake, 1978). Women of the household continue wailing in shifts until the corpse has been encoffined; this usually takes place on the day of death or, in the event of death during the evening, on the following afternoon. The wailing is soon augmented by the sound of a reed instrument (akin to an oboe or shawm) renowned for its haunting, lyrical melodies. The message conveyed by this pipe is unmistakable – on hearing it strangers turn in their tracks, workmen disappear, villagers drop whatever they are doing and take children indoors. The sounds associated with death are marked by a clear sexual division: women wail, men play musical instruments. The pipers who perform at funerals are always male. I have never seen a Cantonese village woman play a musical instrument (nuns sometimes do but they are not part of the community and villagers do not perceive them as ‘women’). Conversely, men never wail or use their voices to express grief in public (chanting, however, is a different matter – see below).

The house of the deceased is physically marked off from all others in the community. A blue mourning lantern is hung from the eaves and the red door charms, put up every New Year festival for good luck, are covered with white paper. Members of the household change into white mourning garb made of sack cloth, hemp, and coarse cotton. As in other parts of China (see particularly Wolf, 1970), mourners dress according to a complex code that symbolises their relationship to the deceased.

Unless the death is completely unexpected this initial phase of the ritual, which signals the onset of mourning, is accomplished in a matter of hours. The stage is then set for the funeral ceremony itself which takes place in a public arena reserved for this purpose. In most cases the coffin has already been ordered from a shop in the nearby market town. It is brought to the village by a contingent of corpse handlers and placed, lid open, on stools in the designated arena. The sight of an open coffin near the entrance of a village is enough to discourage the most determined of intruders. (One elder said that this ploy was once used to ward off bandits in the 1920s.)

The arrival of the coffin is also the cue for those who are not members of the deceased’s household to prepare themselves for their part in the ritual. As noted above, Cantonese villagers are reluctant to become involved in funerals; they participate only to the extent that obligation defines. In some close-knit communities, such as the hamlet of Shek Gong Wai in Ha Tsuen, every household is expected to send at least one representative to each funeral. Failure to comply is punished by ostracism and a poor turn-out when someone dies in the offending household. In Fan Tin, San Tin’s largest hamlet, a number of ‘old people societies’ (lao jen hui) have been formed to ensure a large attendance at funerals. Organised much like rotating credit associations, these funeral societies charge an entrance fee and pay benefits upon death (cf. Wong, 1939; Gallin, 1966:121–2; Pasternak, 1972:64–6).

According to villagers, however, an equally important feature of these societies is the obligation of surviving members to participate in the funerals of their less fortunate peers. The obligation passes to members’ descendants and, in fact, doubles upon death: when a member dies she or he is replaced by two representatives. During my most recent field trip one sprightly woman of 96 who had survived to be the last member of a particularly large society in Fan Tin took sardonic pleasure in reminding fellow villagers of their obligation. As she put it, I have beaten them all [the other members] and now their children and grandchildren will have to be there when I go.

The public ceremony begins with a procession from the house of the deceased to a stream or well outside the village. Led by a priest and musicians, the chief mourner (ordinarily the senior son or nearest agnatic equivalent) pays homage to the guardian spirits of the stream and ‘buys water’ (mai shui) by leaving a few copper coins. This water is taken back to the house and used to bathe the corpse, the last act before encoffining. The water-buying procession is the point at which the focus of the ritual begins to shift from the household to the public arena. As soon as the procession has returned to the house, members of the community begin to assemble near the coffin. One of the most critical aversion points in the ritual occurs soon after; at a time chosen by a fortune teller, the corpse handlers wrap the body in a reed mat and carry it with deliberate speed to the coffin. Their approach is announced with a particularly loud burst of piping. This is the cue for people in the assemblage to avert their eyes. Most women turn to the
nearest wall and hold both hands over their faces; men generally turn their heads and look at their feet. Meanwhile the corpse handlers adjust the deceased and pack the coffin with stacks of funeral paper. They work rapidly under the watchful eyes of the priest and the chief mourner. The assemblage does not turn until the priest raps on a table, signalling that the corpse is settled in the coffin. After making offerings to the spirit of the deceased and checking to see that all is well the priest orders the handlers to place the lid on the coffin. Again all except the chief mourner and the specialists avert their eyes and do not look on the proceedings until the lid is firmly hammered into position. The chief mourner, or a representative of the family, sets the first nail with a few taps and the handlers finish the job. The most critical transition is complete at this point. The corpse is safely encoffined and the community phase of the ritual begins in earnest.

Representatives of every household obligated to attend step forward and make offerings to the spirit. They pour out cups of wine, in sets of three, according to their relationship to the deceased: three cups for ordinary neighbours, nine cups for close agnates (shu pai hsiung ti, descendants of common grandfather), and on up to 33 cups for the chief mourner. Significantly it is usually a woman from each household who fulfills this obligation, often pouring out cups for her husband or son. Women ordinarily outnumber men at funerals by three to one. Informants claimed that the sexual imbalance was unavoidable because ‘our men are too busy to attend’. This seems unlikely, however, considering the fact that the teashops and gambling houses in both villages were crowded with local men on most funeral days. Men usually attend only important funerals in the village, namely those for leaders and popular old people. It is, as I shall show, women rather than men who are expected to intercede for their families in ‘white affairs’ and thus assume the burdens associated with death pollution.

When everyone in the assemblage has offered wine to the spirit, the priest calls for another phase of the ritual to begin. Members of the group gather at the head of the coffin and bow three times; they are then led in a large circle three times, clockwise, around the coffin. Meanwhile the younger women of the deceased’s family (daughters-in-law and married daughters) kneel in the centre of the circle and sing funeral laments while rubbing their unbraided hair against the coffin.

In San Tin the circling of the coffin is sometimes followed by a cord-cutting ceremony, especially if the deceased has many descend-
all the way to the grave. Village women stay behind as do most members of the assemblage. If nuns are in attendance they follow the procession and chant Buddhist sutras next to the coffin right up to the moment of burial; this is thought to have a calming influence on the spirit. The priest does not join the march to the grave. His role ends as soon as the coffin leaves the village.

At the grave only the closest agnates, together with the nuns and bearers, gather to witness the actual burial. Other men fall back just before reaching the site and wait, out of sight, for the mourners to reappear. As the coffin is settled into its final resting place the chief mourner and the specialists who dug the grave watch carefully – all others avert their eyes. For the descendants this is a particularly critical point in the proceedings. The prosperity of the living depends, according to local views, on the physical condition of the ancestors. A ‘peaceful burial’ (an tsang) is essential if the spirit is to rest properly and be transformed into a benevolent ancestor.

As soon as the chief mourner is satisfied that the coffin is properly aligned (this can take up to an hour) a final offering is made to the spirit and the grave is quickly filled in by the specialists. The procession of mourners then winds its way back to the village by a different route ‘so the spirit will not be able to follow us’, according to most informants. The nuns and other specialists return to their homes in yet another direction. They are not allowed to re-enter the village until they are summoned for a funeral. Specialists are instructed to arrive from the east and leave in a westerly direction whenever possible, thus completing a circle ‘to take the sat hei out with them.’ The east-west dichotomy corresponds to yang (life, light, sunrise) and yin (death, dark, sunset); similarly the land of the dead is called the Western Paradise. Members of the community and guests do not have to make this circle but they are careful not to bring any bad influences of death with them back into the village. Upon leaving the vicinity of the grave everyone steps over a small fire (except the handlers and nuns who do not bother). As the villagers approach the gates of the community they wash their hands, necks, and faces in bowls of fresh water containing pomelo leaves, a purificatory agent. Older women prepare water and watch carefully to make certain that each man who has accompanied the coffin is thoroughly cleaned before he proceeds into the village (on occasion I have seen these women halt men and order them to scrub with more vigour). When all have washed the community returns to normal: doors are flung open, children run through the narrow lanes once again, and farmers retrieve their livestock. The danger has passed.

The ritual sequence, II: The cessation of mourning

After the burial, the descendants of the deceased begin a seven-day period of mourning during which, ideally, they do not emerge from their houses or do any work. Except for the wealthy, however, a total retreat is rarely possible. Most mourners in San Tin and Ha Tsuen compromise by withdrawing from non-essential activities. They do not attend weddings or banquets and do not enter temples or ancestral halls. Their presence, in fact, would not be welcomed because they are thought to carry the aura of death with them until they have been purified at the cessation of mourning ceremony (see below). Mourning is reckoned in multiples of seven days with the full ‘seven sevens’ (49 days) marked by a meal to honour the dead. At this point mourning is officially ended and members of the household are free to participate in community activities. For most families, however, the period of mourning is effectively terminated after only seven days. Those who continue to wear mourning garb and withdraw from normal activities beyond the first week consciously set themselves apart from their neighbours. Prior to World War Two, wealthy families of the landlord–merchant class in San Tin and Ha Tsuen were expected to withdraw for 21 days upon the death of a senior member. I have not encountered any cases in the New Territories that can match the full 49-day mourning period reported for some of China’s urban elite (see for example Doolittle, 1865:183ff).

For most villagers, therefore, the completion of the first cycle of seven days (t’ou chi’i) marks their re-entry into society. Their liminal state has ended and they are no longer considered a threat to the community (cf. Hertz, 1960). The termination of mourning is accomplished during a dramatic ceremony known as ‘putting on the red’ (ch’uan hung). Led by the same priest who presided over the funeral, this involves the exchange of white clothing for red: white, the colour of death and misfortune, is superseded by red, the colour of life and luck. The ritual commences in the same public arena where the funeral was held. The ceremony concerns only those descendants of the deceased who are contaminated by the ‘killing airs’ associated with death; others rarely bother to attend. First, a white paper tablet endorsed with the deceased’s name is taken from the family altar and placed in a paper sedan chair. When the tablet is moved by the chief mourner those in attendance avert their eyes for the last time. The sedan chair, along with a paper house for the spirit, is then dispatched to the underworld by flame. As the fire burns the priest leads the small procession of mourners (all dressed in full mourning garb) three
times round the fire in a counter-clockwise direction (during the funeral the assembly moves in a clockwise direction). Cups of wine are offered to the spirit, again in sets of three using the left hand. When the offerings are complete the priest chants to the spirit in what he describes as 'spirit talk' (shen hua), a ritual language he learns as part of his training. The chants are designed, in the words of San Tin's priest, 'to settle the spirit' and send it forthwith from the land of the living to the underworld, 'so that it will no longer bother the villagers'. This part of the ritual, executed in a low drone, is probably responsible for the priest's title which is Naam Maou Lo, a colloquial Cantonese term which is impossible to translate but is usually rendered in English as 'chanting fellow'.

With the spirit safely dispatched, the active aspect of death pollution ceases to be a threat to those outside the deceased's immediate household. This accomplished, the passive aspect of pollution is extinguished in a most dramatic way. At a signal from the priest the mourners strip off their white garments to reveal a layer of new clothing, preferably in bright colours. Sackcloth hoods and hempen shawls are thrown on the fire; white cotton shirts and trousers are carefully waved through the fire three times 'to clean out everything bad'. White tennis shoes, worn as part of the mourning garb, are cleansed in a similar fashion and exchanged for wooden dogs painted bright red. Women produce their jewellery, and, as a precaution, wave it through the fire before wearing it again. Gold jewellery in particular is banned during the mourning period as it is thought to absorb death pollution. Infants undergo a complete change of clothing as well and some, particularly males, are themselves held high over the fire for a brief moment. Mourning 'flowers', knitted from white yarn and worn in women's hair, are burned and replaced with bits of red yarn or ribbon. One set of new red cloths is dispatched to every household that participated in the funeral. This final act is a public notification that the family is no longer in seclusion. As mourners disperse the priest continues chanting until the last spark of fire dies out. When he removes his own protective red robe, and saunters back to the village teashop, the community phase of mortuary ritual is over.

Precaution and purification

The sequence outlined above does not begin to exhaust the wealth of detail and the multiplicity of symbolism evident at even the simplest of Chinese funerals. De Groot covers the ritual sequence from death to the cessation of mourning in 1425 pages, and apologises to the reader for being too selective (De Groot, 1892–1910). My own account has been selective in the extreme. Death pollution has been emphasised since it is the subject of this paper while other, equally important, features of the ritual have been ignored.

The Cantonese villagers protect themselves against the lingering effects of death pollution in a number of ways. First, there are clear restrictions on the disposition of the corpse. Should a resident be unfortunate enough to die outside the boundaries of his or her own community, the ritual (including those aspects normally confined to the household) must be held on the outskirts of the village. Under no circumstances is a corpse allowed to enter the village gates: 'This would bring bad luck to everyone who lives there', one elder explained. In the past, corpses and funeral processions were also banned from entering many of China's walled cities (see for example Doolittle, 1865:33). The people of San Tin and Ha Tsuen observe other restrictions as well. For instance, ancestral tablets and the images of deities must be shielded from the sight of coffins or corpses. Similarly, the small shrines dedicated to the local 'earth gods' (t'u ti) are always screened prior to a funeral. In most villages these shrines are located in the same public arenas used for funerals; the residents of San Tin solved the problem by building corrugated iron shields to cover the shrines. The appearance of these shields is a sure sign that a funeral will take place that day. Villagers also make certain that the doors and windows of their own houses are closed if the procession is to pass nearby.

Other precautions will have become apparent from the account of the ritual. Villagers always use the left hand when touching anything associated with death so that all ritual acts at funerals, including the pouring of wine and the acceptance of white cord, are performed with the left hand. Although villagers would not, or could not, explain why the left hand is preferred ('we always do it this way') many scholars have argued that left in Chinese society is associated with yin, while right corresponds to yang (see for example Granet, 1973). It is significant that the right hand is used for 'lucky' rituals in the villages under study (i.e. weddings, temple festivals, and sacrifices to gods or lineage ancestors). Often, as a mark of respect, both hands are used, but this is not possible if the worshipper has participated in a funeral during the previous seven days. Left and right must never be confused, just as white and red affairs (funerals and weddings) are not to be held on the same day.

The prophylactic qualities of the colour red have been elucidated by Arthur Wolf in an important article on mourning dress in Chinese
society (Wolf, 1970). In San Tin and Ha Tsuen, people wear small patches of red to protect themselves when they attend funerals. 'The killing airs (sat hei) will not cling to us if we put on a little red', one man explained after I noticed a strip of red cloth pinned to his shirt. This concurs with the view held by Wolf's Taiwanese informants: red, as the colour associated with luck and life, is thought to have prophylactic powers in its own right and thus can be used to neutralise the bad effects of death. This is true in the New Territories as well, with but one proviso: red is effective only against the passive aspect of pollution, that associated with physical decay. Behaviour during the ritual itself makes it clear that red patches have little to do with warding off the unpredictable spirit of the deceased (i.e. the active aspect of death pollution). That can be done only by showing proper respect to the spirit at critical transitions in the ritual.

Fire and water both have purificatory powers but they must be handled with care. Water is used to wash the corpse and to cleanse members of the community when they return from the grave. The greatest possible care is taken in disposing of this spent water once it has been exposed to death pollution. The most dangerous is that used to wash the corpse. It is usually carried far from the village (by corpse handlers) and thrown in a stream that flows directly into the sea. Fire is even more of a problem. As highlighted in the ritual sequence outlined above, sackcloth and other disposable signs of mourning are burned seven days after burial. Items most directly associated with the actual process of death, such as the clothing and bedding of the deceased, may also be burned on the day of burial. Nothing used during the funeral ritual can be kept. Tables, stools, pots, bowls – everything – must be discarded because they are contaminated by the 'killing airs' of death. Again, it is the corpse handlers who dispose of these polluted items. The preferred method of disposal is by flame but there are risks involved. First, villagers pointed out, the 'killing airs' are released and may settle over the village if the wind is not right. Breathing the fumes from such a fire is thought to be a sure way to catch tuberculosis. Second, the smoke of polluted items burned by the corpse handlers could mingle with the ritual paraphernalia (e.g. mock money, charms, and supplies) dispatched by flame to the spirit of the deceased for use in the underworld. According to informants this would contaminate the offerings and render them useless.

Rather than risking a fire the corpse handlers are often instructed to dump the polluted items in a secluded spot outside the village boundaries. The major hamlets of San Tin and Ha Tsuen have special dumping sites reserved specifically for this purpose. Children are warned to stay away from these areas and, whenever adults are forced to walk past, they turn their faces in disgust (some take a deep breath as they approach and hold it as they rush by). In other parts of China the clothing of the deceased is pawned by the funeral specialists (De Groot, 1892:1:68–9) but this is rarely done in the New Territories. Self-respecting villagers would never dream of buying second-hand clothing. The risks of acquiring someone else's contaminated goods are too great.

Inheritance and the distribution of pollution

Certain members of the community are not allowed to participate in funerals. Unless they are direct descendants of the deceased, children under the age of fourteen are excluded. In San Tin, funerals are often held in a plaza directly in front of the main ancestral hall. Until the mid-1970s this hall was used as a kindergarten for village children. On funeral days the school was closed early and the children were sent running home (shading their eyes as they passed the open coffin) just before the water-buying ceremony. It is also considered dangerous for people of certain ages to attend the funeral. These unlucky ages, usually three, are divined in advance by a fortune teller who matches them with the deceased's horoscope. A slip of paper listing the restricted ages is posted near the open coffin and word soon gets around the village. Other restrictions are placed on pregnant women and their husbands. Similarly, households with an infant who is not yet one month old (man yueh, 'full month') are not expected to send representatives for fear of carrying the pollution of death with them back home. A neighbour or a kinswoman is usually delegated to stand in for them.

Barring these restrictions every household that has an obligation to attend must send at least one representative to the funeral. The burden of pollution is thus shared with members of the community. Those who participate in the ritual take upon themselves a portion of the 'killing airs' according to their relationship with the deceased. The distribution of contaminated coins to participants is one way of parcelling out the pollution of death. Another is the pouring of wine and the cutting of white cord: one assumes pollution in direct proportion to the number of cups emptied and bits of cord accepted. It will be noted that these distribution mechanisms deal with the passive pollution of death. A large turn-out is thus not only a sign of respect to the deceased but also a way of helping the bereaved cope with the problem of contamination.
Male mourners (i.e. direct descendants of the deceased) take on pollution in descending order of seniority. The most polluted of all is the chief mourner – the senior son or designated heir. Not surprisingly the chief mourner benefits most from the estate of the deceased (during the ritual he is referred to as ch'eng chi, 'heir' or 'inheritor'). Partible inheritance of land and commercial properties, with sons receiving more or less equal shares, is the norm among Cantonese peasants. But this does not apply to houses and domestic goods. In the New Territories region, housing has always been in short supply (see Nelson, 1969) and brothers never live in the same house together after the death of their parents. The senior sons, in descending order, inherit the dwellings of the deceased, with the eldest taking the 'ancestral home' (tsu wu) which contains the domestic ancestral tablets. Ordinary peasants rarely own more than one house no matter how many sons they produce. In effect, therefore, a form of de facto primogeniture exists with respect to housing in Cantonese villages.

The water-buying ceremony makes this system of inheritance clear. Whoever buys water for the deceased inherits the ancestral home and assumes primary responsibility for the worship of domestic ancestors. Younger brothers, if there are any, must have the inheritor's permission before making copies of the domestic tablets for their own houses. The privilege of inheriting the ancestral home is not automatic; it has to be earned. The essence of the water-buying ceremony is a ritual bathing of the corpse. This task is reserved for the inheritor who, by wiping the face of the deceased with a wet cloth, takes a major portion of the killing airs upon himself. In fact, the ritual bathing is just that, a perfunctory touch on the forehead or cheek. The actual bathing is then accomplished by the corpse handlers who set about their work with professional detachment. When finished, the handlers dress the corpse and make it ready for encoffining.

Although the professionals do the actual labour (and are thereby heavily contaminated), the inheritor is deemed to be the one most affected by this chore. By exposing himself in this way, the inheritor is polluted more seriously than any other mourner. Villagers maintain that one never completely recovers from this exposure to death. The dangers of touching too many corpses are well known. A priest told me that after a male handles seven corpses he is permanently polluted and can never be clean again (this restriction may not apply to women). This is why the priests are always careful never to touch the corpse during the ritual. It also explains why the professional corpse handlers are ostracised so thoroughly. Stories are sometimes told of greedy men who buy water for a whole line of childless agnates, only to contract leprosy in the bargain.

The inheritor always plays the role of chief mourner and, as such, he is ritually isolated in other ways as well. For instance, at the funeral he is the only person in the assemblage (save the corpse handlers and the nuns) who does not wear at least one patch of prophylactic red on his mourning garb. Furthermore, the inheritor watches every act in the entire proceedings from death to burial. He does not avert his eyes at any time and, thus, risks incurring the wrath of the deceased’s spirit more than any other mourner. His younger brothers, sisters, sisters-in-law, wives, and children all avert their eyes at the most critical transition points — and they all wear bits of red to protect themselves as best they can from the passive pollution of death.

Although the designated heir is expected to assume the role of chief mourner, this is not always possible, especially when the inheritor is an emigrant working abroad. In such cases the man’s wife, or eldest son, normally stands in for him. Under no circumstances is a married-out daughter of the deceased allowed to buy water, even as a stand-in for her brother. The inheritor, or his representative, buys water for both parents, and sometimes even for his father’s secondary wives as well. This is considered a duty owed not necessarily to the women concerned but to their husband, the primary benefactor. Wealthy men, it was pointed out to me, usually have secondary wives which means that the chief mourner must buy extra water to earn his inheritance. People who have no sons, and no property to pass on to a designated heir, face the dire prospect of being buried without the water-buying ceremony. This is an unbearable fate because an unwatched corpse is thought to offend the guardians of hell who condemn the spirit to wander as a ghost. Furthermore, an unwatched corpse (i.e. one without heirs to nurture it) can never make the conversion into an ancestor.

People without heirs try to save enough money to cover their own funeral expenses, with several hundred dollars set aside to compensate any agnate willing to buy water. Destitute villagers are given an abbreviated funeral and are buried at community expense. I witnessed one such funeral for an old woman in San Tin. It was a brief, tension-ridden affair with few people in attendance. The village guard, an indigenous security force, acted as pallbearers but no one was willing to buy water for the deceased. The priest, musician, and two corpse handlers (the minimal ritual set) were paid by the estate of San Tin’s central ancestral hall. Members of the community heaved a collective sigh of relief when the guardsmen carried the (very cheap) coffin out to the hills. As no one had stood in to play the role of mourners for the deceased, the seventh day after death passed without the usual cessation of mourning ceremony.
Most people in San Tin and Ha Tsuen leave at least a house which is reason enough for some member of the community to assume the role of chief mourner. In fact, propertied men who do not have sons of their own can expect to be courted by their non-inheriting nephews or grandnephews. The system of de facto primogeniture (with respect to housing) also helps explain why younger sons play such a minor role in the funerals of their own parents. Unlike the inheritor, they wear patches of red to protect themselves and avert their eyes at critical transition points. Younger sons do not even accompany the chief mourner when he buys water for the deceased and — most significantly — they are not required to touch the corpse or the coffin. Given the patterns of land ownership in the area under study, these younger sons seldom inherit anything at all from their father's estate, not even a table or a chair (domestic property remains attached to the ancestral home). All legitimate sons inherit an equal share of their father's land but few peasants have much landed property of their own. For centuries the best agricultural land in this region has been tied up in ancestral estates which are owned by corporations of agnates and not by individuals (J. Watson, 1977). It is not surprising, therefore, that younger sons should play such a minor role in the funerary ritual. In real terms they receive very little from the parental estate and, as the ritual makes clear, their obligation to the deceased is slight.

Pollution, fertility and the role of women

By placing so much emphasis on the inheritance of property it might be argued that the approach outlined above ignores other, equally revealing aspects of the ritual. An analysis of inheritance patterns does not, for instance, explain the role of women at funerals. Surviving wives do not attend the funerals of their husbands even though they are supported by the family estate until their own deaths (they do not inherit their husband's property but have rights of maintenance). The trauma of attending one's husband's funeral is thought to be so severe that it is never permitted in San Tin or Ha Tsuen. Neither do husbands participate in the funerals of their wives, but for a different reason: it is considered unfilial, and unlucky, for a wife to leave this life before her husband and, hence, he should not dignify the proceedings by his presence.

Other women do however play a leading role in funerary ritual. Married daughters and daughters-in-law of the deceased must be present if at all possible. They wail and sing laments to appease the spirit until the time of encoffining. Their most important ritual act, however, takes place during the final phase of the funeral ceremony. As noted above, these women are expected to rub their unbound hair against the coffin just prior to its removal from the village. Under normal circumstances a married woman's hair is kept in a tight bun at the back of her head; it is unbound only to be washed. Women do not wash their hair without first consulting an almanac to see if the day is a 'lucky' one. In addition they never wash their hair during menstruation. Hair must be treated carefully because, in the local view, it absorbs unclean essences of all kinds. Thus, by rubbing their hair against the coffin, married women purposely expose themselves to the pollution of death. They do not wash their hair until the cessation of mourning seven days later (similarly men do not wash, or shave, during this liminal period).

The level of contamination to which these women subject themselves is second only to that affecting the chief mourner. When I asked why women rub their hair on the coffin most informants replied that 'daughters should show respect to their parents'. This demonstration of respect is expected of all married-out daughters and daughters-in-law; no distinctions of status are drawn among them. In contrast with male mourners, therefore, women do not play roles that correspond to their material obligation to the deceased. It might be argued that married women 'repay' the dowries they receive from their parents by taking on a share of death pollution, in much the same way that the chief mourner may be said to 'pay' for his inheritance. This explanation is not satisfactory, however, for the simple reason that dowry in the area under study is not a form of pre-mortem inheritance. Parents rarely use their own money to endow daughters. As Rubie Watson (1981) has demonstrated, Cantonese peasants have what amounts to an indirect dowry system (cf. Goody & Tambiah, 1973) whereby the wife-takers actually pay the expenses of the bride's dowry, through the mechanism of a cash brideprice.

There is no reason to assume that both sexes expose themselves to death pollution for the same reason. In fact, women mourners may be engaged in ritual behaviour that has little to do with the actions of their husbands and brothers. Although most informants would not discuss this matter at all, I am convinced that the roles women play at funerals have more to do with fertility and continuity than with the inheritance of property. The actions of daughters-in-law are particularly instructive. As surname exogamy (and, hence, lineage exogamy) is strictly enforced in the New Territories region, these women are all 'outsiders' (wai lai jen, lit. = 'those who come from outside'). Outsider women, even aged wives, are never completely trusted in Chinese lineages (see
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Daughters and the pretation of pigs

Daughters are another matter. When married women return to their natal villages to participate in their parents' funerals they do not, of course, wear any trace of green on their mourning garb. (The only exceptions might be daughters who remain in their fathers' homes and marry uxorilocally, but no cases of uxorilocal marriage exist in either San Tin or Ha Tsuen.) Daughters attend primarily because they are, after all, offspring of the deceased. According to villagers 'it is natural that they should be here to show respect for their parents'.

There is, however, an important distinction drawn between married and unmarried daughters. Unmarried daughters do not rub their hair on the coffin or play a very prominent role in the proceedings. Their actions, in fact, closely parallel those of the deceased's younger sons. No explanation was offered for this obvious distinction except to say that 'it is too dangerous' for unmarried daughters to be near the coffin. Again, in the absence of informant testimony it is difficult to pursue this point except to note the obvious connection between death pollution and fertility. It may be 'too dangerous' for unmarried daughters to expose themselves to the full power of death pollution precisely because they are not yet ready for childbearing. Age is not the critical factor. In fact, at several funerals the women (daughters-in-law) who rubbed their hair on the coffin were younger than the deceased's own unmarried daughters - in all cases the latter stayed well away from the corpse and the coffin.

Married daughters perform one ritual act that sets them apart from the other women mourners. They bring a (raw) pig's head and tail to the funeral of each parent. This offering - head and tail - is presented at many ritual occasions and it symbolises, in the words of my informants; a good beginning and a good end'. At funerals the auspicious connotations relate to the life of the deceased, a good ending in this case implying that the spirit will be transformed into a benevolent ancestor. The pig's head and tail are placed on the 'spirit table' (shen t'ai) immediately in front of the coffin and are not removed until the proceedings are over. All offerings placed on this table are, according to the priests, for the benefit of the deceased's spirit. On the evening of burial the mourners assemble in the deceased's home where they consume the head and tail in a specially prepared meal. Only direct descendants of the deceased, and daughters-in-law, may eat the sacrificial pig - this excludes the husband or wives of the deceased should they survive. In one sense the meal is a communion with the dead. It is believed, for instance, that the spirit has already consumed
the ‘essence’ (cheng ch’i) of the offering and, by eating the residue, the living are somehow assisting the spirit. The meal must be totally consumed; every scrap of pig’s meat must disappear before the mourners can leave (it would be a ‘bad ending’ not to finish everything). The symbolic implications of this meal are not lost on the more sophisticated participants. Just as the pig’s flesh is consumed, so too must the ancestor’s own flesh disappear in order to attain a ‘good ending’.

It is highly significant that raw pigs are used for the funeral prestation. A complex code – hinging on whether the pigs are raw, roasted, or boiled – underlies the offerings made in the Cantonese ancestral cult. This topic will be explored in detail elsewhere. Suffice it to note here that raw offerings are neutral and do not convey contamination. Had the pig’s head and tail been roasted, as is the case for offerings made at weddings and at certain lineage ceremonies (see below), the meat would have absorbed the ‘killing airs’ of death. No one, not even the chief mourner would dare eat such a meal. As soon as a raw offering is cooked, however, it is susceptible to contamination and could be affected by the residual pollution that permeates the home of the deceased. This, according to my informants, is the reason why the post-funeral meal is not shared by those outside the immediate circle of mourners.

In order to understand the funeral prestation one must look, first, at the position of daughters in the Chinese kinship system and, second, at the rules of pig sacrifice in Cantonese society. Daughters, although highly valued and loved by their parents, are raised only to be sent out in marriage. They become, as we have seen, outsiders responsible for the reproduction of other lineages. Parents refer to their unmarried daughters affectionately as ‘my excess baggage’ (i.e. someone to be raised but not kept in the family, unlike a son). When asking about the daughter of a friend it is considered polite to refer to her as ‘your precious gold’ (ch’ien chin, lit. = ‘thousand gold’), a reference to her value not only as a filial child but also as a potential bride. At marriage, daughters are transformed into wives through the exchange of marriage payments, the largest being an impressive brideprice. Daughters are essential for the creation of affinal ties that extend beyond their father’s own lineage.

Looked at from one perspective the prestation of a pig’s head and tail could be construed as the repayment owed to the deceased by affines. The debt, in this case, is for providing women who became daughters-in-law. If one analyses the ritual repertoire associated with the prestation of pigs in Cantonese society the relation between wife givers and wife takers becomes evident. Pigs are always presented by suppliants, usually in payment of a debt. In most cases, the object of a pig prestation is a god or direct lineal ancestor. The funeral offering is thus special for it is made to the spirit of a person who is not yet a god (see Wolf, 1974) and is outside the debtor’s own lineage (i.e. neither god nor ancestor). It would appear that, by sending a pig’s head and tail, the wife takers are acknowledging their ritual inferiority vis-à-vis the wife giver (i.e. the deceased). This is not entirely correct, however, because at an earlier stage in the cycle of prestation the relationship between affines was reversed. As part of the marriage exchange the wife givers always send a (roast) pig’s head and tail to the wife takers. This exchange parallels the system of indirect dowry characteristic of Cantonese peasants: the pig involved is, in fact, provided by the wife takers who end up receiving the head and tail – just as they pay a brideprice which is spent largely on dowry. The appearance of a pig’s head and tail at the funeral (often many years later) thereby strikes a balance between givers and takers. The prestation pays off the last debt owed to the deceased by affines. One might argue that the pig’s head and tail among other things symbolise a ‘good beginning and a good end’ to the relationship between affines. When this final debt is paid, all ties to affines are terminated and the deceased becomes totally dependent on male descendants (or patrilineal heirs) for sustenance in the afterlife. Affinity ends at death.

It should be emphasised that only one pig’s head and tail are presented irrespective of the number of married daughters involved. In contrast to the rules that dictate the ritual behaviour of male mourners, therefore, no distinctions are drawn among daughters. They all pay an equal share of the cost of the offering and they all perform the same acts (unmarried daughters, of course, are not involved). Male affines rarely attend funerals in San Tin or Ha Tsuen and, should they appear, they do not bring pigs. For reasons too complex to outline here, affinal ties among Cantonese peasants are normally kept alive by women, not men (see R. Watson, 1981). Given the structure of affinal relations, therefore, it is logical that women, in this case daughters of the deceased, should be employed as the agents for this final prestation. It would be altogether too humiliating for a male affine to present a pig’s head and tail in person.

The collective nature of the funeral offering deserves further consideration. Daughters rarely marry into the same lineage and their husbands (or fathers-in-law) may even be enemies. The fact that only one pig’s head and tail are used is thus an important key to the ritual: it is not particular sets of affines who are represented by the offering but
the idea of affinity itself. The emic view of pig prestations fits this interpretation. When daughters make an offering at the funerals of their parents, villagers take it as a public statement that the deceased has had a full and complete life, which includes balanced relationships with affines. Daughters thus play a key role in determining whether a person has had ‘a good beginning and a good end’. This is one reason why Cantonese villagers feel it is so important to have children of both sexes. As one elderly woman put it to me ‘you can’t leave this life properly without a daughter to bring the pig’s head and tail’.

Conclusions

I would like to conclude on two general points, one concerning the role of women and the other the nature of death pollution in China. First, women: if the interpretations of the mortuary ritual presented above are accepted as adequate, the role of women at funerals highlights the ultimate androcentrism of traditional Cantonese society. Women are responsible not only for the continuity of the agnatic line but also for striking a proper balance between affines. Men subject themselves to death pollution only when they are required to do so, usually as inheritors of the deceased’s domestic property. Women, on the other hand, are expected to take on pollution irrespective of any material obligations owed to the deceased.

The ritual actions of a Cantonese married woman reflect her dual role as daughter and daughter-in-law. In one role, that of daughter-in-law, her exposure to the corpse is ultimately related to biological reproduction and fertility as embodied in the flesh of the deceased. In her other role as daughter, she takes on a portion of the pollution of death as a representative of her husband’s family – the deceased’s affines. In both cases she exposes herself to pollution for the benefit of others, primarily men.

In Bloch’s terms, therefore, Cantonese women are indeed ‘left holding the corpse’ (see chapter 8) but their ritual subordination does not end here. They do not even survive, as individual entities, beyond the first three or four generations after death. Women do not become ancestors (at least in the context of the larger lineages). Their personal names never appear in lineage records and, unless they marry, their existence is not even noted in written genealogies. Women are not commemorated by individual tablets in ancestral halls and they disappear from the domestic altar after three or four generations. The nameless and, hence, ancestorless qualities of the Cantonese woman are highlighted by the fact that she only appears in these formal contexts (genealogies, tablets, etc.) under the surname of her father – an outsider (on names see R. Watson, n.d.) Furthermore, in the Cantonese conception a woman’s bones are thought to be the products of an alien lineage, deriving (like her name) from her father. This is why it is inconceivable, from my informants’ point of view, to expect benefits from a tomb that contains only the bones of a woman.

Women, it should be noted, are subjected to the same double burial procedures as men and their bone urns are entombed along with their husbands, but they do not become the object of ancestral rites. There is a puzzle here: why should women’s bones, as the products of another lineage, be preserved at all? According to (male) elders, women – as mothers – deserve to be treated with respect for helping to create the line of descent. The exhumation and preservation of women’s bones does not, however, imply that they are involved in the transmission of ‘wind and water’ to the living. As in life, women in the tomb exist as nebulous appendages of their husbands; they have no identity of their own and their personal names are forgotten. The male ancestor’s bone urn is buried in the centre of the tomb (where the geomantic forces are concentrated) while his wives’ urns are placed on either side. Male and female bones are never mixed. In this sense, therefore, the exogamous Cantonese are very different from the endogamous Merina; the latter make no distinctions between predecessors’ bones in their collective tombs (Bloch, 1971).

The people of San Tin and Ha Tsuen maintain that human flesh, in the absence of life, represents a particularly dangerous combination of yin (female) forces. Bones, when charged with auspicious ‘wind and water’ are primarily yang – the male element (on similar dichotomies in other societies see Lévi-Strauss, 1969:373–5; Huntington and Metcalf, 1979:100ff). Women, as demonstrated above, deal exclusively with the yin remains of the corpse (i.e. the rotting flesh), thereby performing an essential service for their husbands’ lineages. Men avoid the corpse whenever possible but commune freely and enthusiastically with the yang remains. The ancestral rites are performed by men for men, in the total absence of women.

The realm of the ancestors is thus pure (flesh-free) and exclusively male (yang). In order to maintain this pure realm, however, males must reproduce themselves through the flesh of women they take from alien lineages. After death a prospective ancestor must be cleansed of every particle of flesh he inherits from his mother. Women, as the very embodiment of yin, are transient beings. They do not survive beyond the living memory (which itself is dependent on the flesh) of their immediate descendants. Men, on the other hand, not only gain a kind
of immortality for themselves but they also attain continuity with their ancestors – both at the expense of women.

The second issue that concerns me in this concluding section is the general problem of pollution: what exactly is death pollution? Chinese mortuary customs are, by their nature, so complex and contradictory that it may never be possible to arrive at a satisfactory answer. In the present essay I have found it useful to distinguish between two aspects of death pollution: active, as represented by the release of the spirit upon death, and passive which derives from the rotting flesh. Does the notion of active pollution among the Cantonese correspond to the release of sin, as Parry (1980) indicates is the case in Hindu society? This seems unlikely because sin, as such, is not a highly developed concept in traditional Chinese culture (see Eberhard, 1967). I would suggest that the active aspect of Cantonese death pollution is more directly related to the release of a disembodied spirit which, by definition, is ‘out of place’ and thereby dangerous. A spirit that no longer inhabits a living body and has not yet been settled in some way is disrupting the natural order of the cosmos. This condition is described by many informants as luan, a Chinese term which means ‘chaos’ or ‘disorder’. Luan is a central theme in the Confucian classics that deal with social relations and political affairs; the spectre of disorder is often cited as a reason for maintaining the status quo.

The spirit of the deceased must be controlled like any other entity in the cosmos. In the view of my informants a disembodied spirit loses its strength, or ‘essence’ (cheng chi) over time. It is most active, and unpredictable, during the first seven days after death and then gradually settles. There is thus a shift from terrible, awe-inspiring power during the early phase of mortuary ritual to total dependence on the part of the spirit by the time the final entombment takes place, years after death. The seven aversion points in the ritual are a recognition of the power of the active spirit. Fear of the corpse and respect for the spirit are taught at a very early age (men usually speak in terms of respect while women admit to a deep fear, p'a, of the deceased). Children learn from their parents and grandparents to dread the appearance of a coffin or anything associated with death (see also Anderson, 1970:181ff).

Fear of the corpse is, however, confined to the initial phase of mortuary ritual. It corresponds, I would argue, to the settling of the spirit and the concurrent disintegration of the flesh. The spirit continues to be powerful and unpredictable as long as the flesh exists; its ‘essence’ weakens as the flesh gradually disappears. The fear and dread evident at Cantonese funerals contrasts sharply with the matter-of-fact, instrumental attitudes exhibited by descendants later in the mortuary sequence. The bones, once they are free of flesh, are treated in a cool, calm manner as they are manipulated for worldly benefits. As noted above, in order to be effective, the bones must be cleaned of every minute scrap of flesh. The people of San Tin and Ha Tsuen usually employ exhumation specialists to undertake this final chore. These men, who rank somewhat higher in status than corpse handlers, polish the bones and arrange them in ceramic pots (chin t’a, ‘golden pagodas’) for final reburial. Once the bones have been so treated they become, in the words of my informants, ‘neutralised’ or ‘digested’ (hsiao hua) and ready to transmit geomantic influences to the living.

The transmission of ‘wind and water’ (feng shui) is accomplished through a pig sacrifice ritual held annually at the grave of the ancestor. The good influences of the environment flow through the bones into a series of roasted pigs which are displayed in front of the tomb. These pigs are then carried back to the village where they are divided among the living (male) descendants. Note that roasted pigs are used in this particular ritual and not raw pigs as at the funeral. Roasted offerings, it will be recalled, absorb essences while raw offerings are unaffected. Note also that flesh, in this case pig’s meat, is essential to tap the beneficence offered by the ancestor’s bones. The bits of sacrificial pig meat, once exposed to the bones, are thought to be influenced in some way by the ancestor. The offerings must not come into contact with any other spiritual essence or contaminating substance, and they are consumed in the privacy of descendants’ homes.

In order to be effective, therefore, the bones must be free of the ancestor’s own flesh but they cannot function without activating the flesh of sacrificial animals. The bones can safely transmit geomantic influences because they are neutral and no longer carry the passive pollution of the human corpse. It would be considered the most revolting of sacrileges to eat bits of roast pork which have been exposed to the decaying flesh of a predecessor.

Passive pollution is the most revealing aspect of Chinese funerary ritual. It is, in my informants’ conception, the immediate consequence of disorder, namely uncontrolled death. The proper products of death are bones, not rotting flesh. It is not death as such that is objectionable but, rather, disorderly decay. Like the disembodied spirit, the lifeless corpse is out of place; it is an offence to the proper order of the cosmos. Living males and settled ancestors are, equally, members of the lineage. They maintain relationships of exchange and share in property (ancestral estates). But a newly-dead corpse, in the flesh, is not
yet a proper ancestor and, if not settled, may cease to be a member of the lineage. The unbroken line of descent can be recognised only when a reciprocal relationship develops between living and dead – and this, of course, depends on establishing the ancestor in his final, flesh-free tomb.

The decomposing flesh of a human is the ultimate form of disorder (lium). The people of San Tin and Ha Tsuen believe that it interferes with the smooth transition from a proper state of life to a proper state of death. The object of funerary ritual is, in their view, to pass safely through the initial, polluting stage of decomposition to the point where the bones can be manipulated. What is interesting about the passive pollution of death in Cantonese society is that it has to be managed. It cannot just be left to pollute the cosmos, either in the world of the living or in the realm of the ancestors. Death pollution has to be taken on, or incorporated, into the flesh of the living. It is essential for biological reproduction. Ritual actions of women at funerals indicate that passive pollution is directly related to the release of the deceased’s life essence or fertility. This must be managed and transferred to the next generation.

The fact that death pollution has to be absorbed in some way by the living implies that the decomposition of a person’s flesh releases the accumulated disorder caused by all the previous deaths to which that person, and his or her predecessors, have been exposed. The passive pollution of the flesh must be taken on by men who inherit the worldly goods of the deceased and by women who are responsible for reproducing the line of descent. Only in this way can the proper order of the cosmos be maintained.

NOTES

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1 In one case a founding ancestor of the Teng lineage migrated to the Hong Kong region from central China in the fourteenth century. He brought with him the bone urns of his grandparents and great-grandparents which he ‘planted’ in auspicious locations. Descendants believe this action is largely responsible for the economic success of their lineage (see R. Watson, 1982:737).

2 A ‘proper’ funeral follows the ritual sequence outlined in this paper. It assists the spirit to pass through hell but does not ensure elevation to ancestral status (this depends on economic factors). Slaves (hsì min) were buried ‘improperly’, without coffins or elaborate ritual (J. Watson, 1980:317), as were vagabonds and strangers. There is always a danger that improperly buried spirits might return as wandering ghosts and, hence, many lineages sponsor large-scale expiation rituals every ten years which are, in effect, collective funerals (this, at least, is how most villagers perceive the rituals).

3 This raises the intriguing point that the spirit of the deceased is adversely affected by the decay of its own earthly remains.

4 Households with newborn are affected by pollution of another kind. Among Cantonese, birth pollution is referred to as hsì (‘poison’) and its effects are categorised along with illnesses that involve incubation, purging, or eruption – such as smallpox and measles (Topley, 1974:234). In the villages under study the term sat hei (‘killing airs’) is never used in the context of birth. The pollution of death is of a different order and is much more dangerous than birth pollution. Villagers in Taiwan also make a clear distinction between the two types of pollution (Ahern, 1975:195ff).

5 Older women sometimes make a practice of assisting their neighbours during funerals and may even help bathe the corpse (particularly if the professional corpse handlers are delayed). It is notable that such women are always well beyond childbearing age and are – invariably – widows. The same women are also responsible for making certain that the specialists, including the priest, perform their tasks properly. As a consequence, older women are usually the community’s experts on funerary ritual. Men, by contrast, often know very little about this domain of ritual and concentrate on later phases of the mortuary sequence. Women who take on this role are treated with great respect – even awe – by other villagers. In one sense, therefore, women may gain status by controlled contact with death while men can only lose. According to a local priest, a man’s male essence (yang) is thought to be depleted every time he touches a corpse while women, as the embodiment of yin, are not so affected.

6 The relationship between hair and pollution is, of course, the subject of much discussion in anthropological circles (see for example Leach, 1958; Hallpike, 1969; Hershman, 1974). The Chinese data are particularly interesting on this matter. Ideally Cantonese women leave their hair unwashed for 100 days after birth (Topley, 1974:237; on birth pollution see note 4 above). Raw pigs used during the funeral must have their bristles removed prior to the ritual – otherwise the prestation would absorb death pollution. There is also an obvious connection between animal hair and danger. In San Tin, for instance, domestic cats are physically restrained (tied to doors) until the coffin leaves the village. This custom is no doubt related to the symbolic equation between cats and tigers. Some domestic cats are thought to have inherited the magical hair of tigers and, should such an animal leap over the coffin, it is feared that the corpse would be transformed into a terrible monster (see De Groot, 1992:1:43–4).

7 Henry Dore, in his encyclopaedic survey of Chinese mortuary customs,
notes (1914:1:47-8) that in some circles a copper coin is placed in the mouth of the corpse. The eldest son then keeps this coin and wears it around his neck (on a red string). Dore offers no explanation. In San Tin and Ha Tsuen coins are thought to absorb and distribute the pollution of death. 8 After death, Chinese Buddhist monks are sometimes preserved from decay and kept on display, as evidence of their spiritual power (see for example Stevens, 1976). Although the flesh remains on these corpses they are not polluting in the usual sense because the spirit is thought to inhabit the remains (cf. Pina-Cabral, 1980). Buddhist mummies do not, therefore, disrupt the proper order of the cosmos. These ‘flesh bodies’, as they are called, cannot become ancestors because their bones are unusable and they are devoid of kin (men who become monks are normally expelled from their lineages of birth).

9 The seven aversion points are: 1) the moment of death, 2) moving the corpse from house to coffin, 3) fixing the coffin lid, 4) lifting the coffin onto the carrying frame, 5) lowering the coffin into the grave, 6) burning a red lantern at the grave after interment, and 7) transferring the temporary tablet from the domestic altar to a paper sedan chair, seven days after burial. Points 1 and 6 are not discussed in this paper. The red lantern leads the spirit to the grave; its destruction by fire is said to deprive the spirit of a means of returning to the village.

In Taiwan this task is usually performed by the descendants themselves (Thompson, 1981). Ahern (1973:204f) describes this practice in her study of Taiwanese mortuary rites and notes that the flesh must decay naturally. As one of her informants put it: ‘cutting off the flesh would be just like killing the ancestor’ (Ahern, 1973:205). Ahern argues that the flesh represents the ancestors’ control over the living, manifested in the bequest of property (cf. Goody, 1962), whereas the retention of bones symbolises the residual authority of the ancestors (Ahern, 1973:209).

Chinese terms

Chinese terms are in Mandarin, standard Wade-Giles romanisation, except for sat hei and Nahm Mou Lo which are in colloquial Cantonese, Yale romanisation. The numbers in the following glossary correspond to those in Mathews’ Chinese-English Dictionary, 1963, Harvard University Press; an tsang 26, 6702; cheng chi 362, 554; ch’eng chi 386, 452; ch’ien chin 906, 1057; chin t’a 1057, 5978; ch’uan hung 1442, 2383; feng shui 1890, 5922; hao bao 2607a, 2211; hsi min 2467, 4508; lao jen hui 3833, 3097, 2345; lian 4220, mai shui 1890, 5922; man yueng 4326, 7666; Nahm Mou Lo 4620, 7180, 3657; radical 9, p’a 4890; pai shih 4975, 5787; sat hei (sha chi) 5615, 554; shen hsia 5716, 2215; shen t’ai 5716, 6016; shui pai hsii 5881, 4977, 2807, 6201; t’ou chi 6489, 579; tsu wu 6815, 7212; tu 6509; t’u tzu 6532, 6198; wai lai jen 7001, 3768, 3097; yang 7265; yin 7444.

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7 Social dimensions of death in four African hunting and gathering societies

JAMES WOODBURN

In this chapter I discuss beliefs and practices associated with death in four African hunting and gathering societies – the Hadza of Northern Tanzania, the net-hunting Mbuti Pygmies of Zaire, the Baka Pygmies of Cameroon and the !Kung Bushmen of Botswana and Namibia.1 Hunters and gatherers form a tiny minority of sub-Saharan African societies and their total population is substantially less than 1% of the whole sub-Saharan population. All of these societies are hunting and gathering in a world of agriculturalists and pastoralists and although each has enough space to be able to retreat for periods of the year from contact with these neighbouring farmers, all are profoundly aware of the similarities and differences between their custom and the custom of their neighbours and of the fact that certain of their customary practices – not least those associated with death – are regarded by their neighbours as curious, even abhorrent. Two of these societies, the two Pygmy ones, are forest-dwelling and two, the Hadza and the !Kung Bushmen, live on the dry open savanna, the !Kung habitat being rather drier than that of the Hadza. These societies are not merely geographically widely separated but are culturally and linguistically quite distinct: if they share any historical connections they are certainly extremely distant ones.

I should start by stressing that members of all these societies are constantly dealing in death, in the death of the game animals they hunt. Death is for them a way of life. Killing animals is a real focus for the daily life of men: every man has constantly at hand the weapons needed for killing, and most men frequently do kill at least small animals. For pastoralists, or for agricultural peoples who keep domestic animals, killing animals is a special activity which stands in marked contrast to the daily care and attention devoted to them; but for hunters and gatherers death is the routine focus for their interaction with animals, and dead animals are a focus for their interaction with each other. Animal death and the procedures leading up to and following it appear, at least in some of these societies, to be ideologically