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## **Chinese Immigrants' Changing Values and Perceptions of Funeral Rites in the Context of Multicultural Australia**

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## Executive Summary

### 1. What is their desired preference for Burial or Cremation and why?

- i. Most participants prefer cremation to burial because it is relatively cheaper and also easier to organise for the family. Religious beliefs play a part for some: Buddhists do not see the value of keeping the physical body as they believe the soul would have left after death. Hence, the body itself would embody little meaning. Therefore, Buddhist participants do not see the value of ‘preserving’ the full body through burial.
- ii. Christians on the other hand are more concerned about ‘cleanliness’. They do not like the idea of the body being ‘bitten by insects’ and the soil is perceived as ‘dirt’ which is deemed to be ‘unclean’. The long-held Christian tradition of burial for future resurrection seems no longer broadly desired.
- iii. Non-religious participants generally preferred cremation because many came from the People’s Republic of China (mainland China) where for many decades there has been no other option. According to the funeral directors and stonemasons who were interviewed, this background ensured that full body burial was not a consideration.
- iv. However, according to stakeholders, those from Hong Kong (HK) were likely to prefer burial because this method was regarded as a previously unattainable privilege due to the high cost associated with the very limited availability of land in HK. While this view was expressed by the funeral directors and stonemasons, it was not affirmed by the individual participants from HK. A possible explanation could be that the ‘HK-originated Chinese’ participants were either Christian or Buddhist and they drew on their respective religious faith as the reason for cremation. In other words, it seems that Chinese with religious faith tended to prefer cremation to burial as cremation was perceived as ‘simple’ and ‘clean’.

## **2. Value and price – What do they value and how do those factors affect value perception?**

- i. The research participants generally recognised that the price of a grave or the cost of ‘disposal of the body’ (i.e., cremation), memorialisation after cremation or full body burial, tended to be more affordable and of lower cost than in Asia (HK and the PRC in particular). Therefore, many of those interviewed expressed the view that affordability was not an issue, but the question was whether or not it was ‘worth’ spending a ‘good amount’ of money on graves and cemetery costs. As noted in Question 1, many prefer cremation to burial. The common reason was not because they could not ‘afford’ the cost of burial, but they did not believe it was ‘worth’ spending ‘more money’ on the funeral.
- ii. The above perceptions were both affirmed and complicated during the participant observation of a cemetery tour. Participants generally recognised and appreciated the relatively ‘lower’ cost of Australian graves. Nevertheless, they tended to compare different types of graves and options in order to ascertain the most ‘valuable’ option – that is, they were seeking the most cost-effective choice. Thus, while cremation was a common and economical choice, a small proportion of the Chinese migrants maintained that the option of a burial was a privilege. They saw the choice of burial as a viable option in Australia’s ‘vast’ land, and looked for negotiating opportunities to reduce the cost of a grave plot.
- iii. Elements which determined their value perceptions included: the environment, the price, and location of the cemetery and grave. Environment included natural surroundings, environmental decorations, and infrastructural facilities that were available at the grave sites. By infrastructural facilities, participants generally referred to the maintenance, cleanliness and ease of access. For example, a stonemason indicated that Chinese people preferred grave sites with clean concrete pathways. Further, Chinese migrants disliked the idea of stepping on others’ graves or having other people and objects (including lawn mowers) walking over their own or loved ones’ graves. This was well reflected during the

cemetery tour; indeed, many participants raised this concern when they were introduced to the lawn graves.

- iv. Cost remained one of the fundamental and realistic considerations across all religious faiths. For example, Christian and Buddhist Chinese believed that expensive funeral and memorialisation services went against their respective religious faith. According to a stonemason, the expensive and spectacular grave designs tended to belong to non-religious Chinese. Whereas Chinese Christians tended to perceive extravagant funeral rites and memorialisation to be against their faith and the core value of Christianity. However, their beliefs may not have always translated into practice and this factor is open to further investigation.

### **3. What are the traditional values (preferences) that influence choices?**

- i. Family unity and harmony was an overwhelming concern and value that guided the decision making processes. Many of the older participants in particular expressed the idea of protecting the family unity and harmony as their rationales to pre-purchase and pre-arrange funeral services and graves. Many of them perceived the pre-arrangement as their duty to the family and their future generations. In other words, any disputes resulting from their unpreparedness would be deemed irresponsible to their family and children.
- ii. We can further determine that the traditional value of 'filial piety' is not a straight forward concept and that it is much more complex than commonly understood. Instead of considering filial piety as a one-way process of children to parents, it was shown to be more appropriate to understand that the parents would need to earn such honour from their children by relieving the family of burdens (financial, emotional and social) associated with their death. Therefore, filial piety was not a traditional value that determines the decision making when it comes to funeral and grave choices in Australia; instead, it was more important for parents and children to mutually enable and help each other to strive for their family. This indicates that filial piety based on Confucianism has gone through a change in the Australian context.

- iii. It was surprising as well as expected that these traditional values were so fundamental that they were upheld by Chinese migrants irrespective of their religious or non-religious faiths. Indeed, many of the Chinese Christian participants expressed the same desires and opinions as the Buddhist, *Fa Lun Gong*<sup>1</sup> and non-religious Chinese in their regard to filial piety, family harmony and parental duty towards their children. There was little or no difference among different religious groups in the data. In other words, the traditional value of maintaining family harmony surpassed all boundaries of religious, social and regional cultural beliefs – as indicated in the current literature on Chinese funeral rites and practices.

#### **4. Who are the decision makers when it comes to planning the funeral?**

- i. Many of our older research participants overwhelmingly expressed the desire to organise their own funeral and make their own burial/cremation choices instead of leaving these decisions to the family or children. The most important reason indicated was that they did not want to place additional financial and emotional burden on their children, as mentioned earlier. Further, the older Chinese generally perceived that their children, who were either born or grew up in Australia, were least informed about organising a funeral. Many older participants assumed and were concerned that their children would not be able to understand parents' wishes and preferences. That is, 'they wouldn't know what to do' (Interview Participant).
- ii. Such perceptions amongst the older Chinese may have been influenced by stakeholders who play a role in introducing their views to the older population. For example, in the seminar about death, funeral and cemetery, the speakers (who were interviewed) mainly focused on the perception of self-empowerment and self-responsibility – which was consistent with the interview data which reflected community leaders' great passion to 'educate' (in their words) the community. Hence, it appears that funeral stakeholders and community leaders have played an

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<sup>1</sup> A spiritual meditation practice

important and active role in influencing individuals' perceptions and decision making processes, especially in the case of older participants.

- iii. Moreover, it is important to recognise the role of Australia's welfare system in empowering older individuals' decision making on preparing a funeral. For example, an older couple indicated that their pension provided them with not only enough money to prepare for their funerals and graves but the welfare support in general had also aided their current day-to-day lives – the lady had a disability and the government provided her with a professional home-carer. In other words, this financial assistance throughout their retirement period had enabled independency with decision making on funeral services and the purchase of a grave site for memorialisation.

This is not to say that 'the welfare money' covered the total cost of a funeral service and the purchase of a grave as the costs vary depending on the preferences of individuals and their families.

- iv. However, it was worth recognising the supportive role the state welfare has played in the lives of the older Chinese-Australians. Referring back to the older lady with a disability as an example, the home carer from the state welfare provided her with her 'everyday needs', thus negating her children's time and potential financial cost of supporting for their mother. Further, as one of the stonemasons states, because of the social welfare benefits, older Chinese migrants were able to have their own savings, which may partially be used for grave and funeral costs.
- v. Importantly, individuals (especially seniors) tended to make decisions about pre-purchasing graves in consultation with close friends – often those they met in the elderly association or religious community – rather than in consultation with children. This was confirmed by industry practitioners (stonemason, funeral directors) who observed that elderly Chinese tend to inform their friends about their new grave purchase before informing their children or other family members. Further, senior Chinese tend to choose a grave site near one chosen by

their friends, particularly a friend who spoke the same language (Mandarin or Cantonese) or shared the same religious belief (Christianity in particular).

Again, friendship played a significant role in developing attitudes towards preparing a will and openly discussing and planning preferred rituals for their funeral rites. Moreover, close friends participated together in the cemetery tour and pre-purchased their future grave plots in close proximity to each other, i.e., planning to be burial mates. This practice reflected a strong sense of community among the senior Chinese participants.

## **5. How/Where does this community source information about funerals?**

- i. Seminars and tours organised by cemeteries, funeral directors and other relevant community leaders and stakeholders (aged care, stonemason and social workers).
- ii. Advertisements in the free Chinese newspapers in Melbourne also provided information on funeral services and cemeteries in Australia.
- iii. However, the interview data reflected a general lack of knowledge about funerals and cemeteries among the Chinese community. Stakeholders generally complained that there was not enough systematic information and support available for the community to learn about these topics. This was further reinforced by most individuals' responses that they and their friends learned about funerals and cemeteries through 'experience', in particular, by attending someone else's funeral.
- iv. The church plays an important role in supporting the community when it came to funeral and death-related incidents. While the churches did not hold formal and regular information sessions about funeral and cemetery practices, they had a significant network to support members and their families at the time of death and 'final farewell'. Participants with Christian faith noted that they were not concerned about their funeral services because their respective church would help their family with planning the memorial service and funeral rites, and putting

them in touch with the cemetery, for example. Thus, it seems that while Chinese Christians might not have had specific knowledge and information about funerals and cemeteries, they were aware that their church and its networks were equipped with the knowledge and experience to assist them when in need.

## **6. What are their perceptions about death and cemeteries?**

- i. Research participants generally were open-minded towards talking about death and cemeteries. However, we acknowledge a potential data bias as the participants who were willing to share their views indicated that they were ‘open’ to discussing these topics.
- ii. According to our participants, many people remained sensitive or unwilling to talk about death and cemeteries. Interestingly, our data seemed to indicate that men were generally less willing to talk about death and cemeteries than women. This was exemplified by the personal experiences of two individuals who were interviewed. Both women stated that their respective husbands (both couples were Christian) have refused to talk about pre-arranging their funerals and grave choices. This was further illustrated by the fact that females outnumbered males on the cemetery tour and seminar. Given only eight individuals attended a seminar, it seems that many older members of the Chinese community remain unwilling to talk about these topics. According to staff, seminars relating to other topics generally attracted 12 or more people. This observation was also supported by the experiences of funeral directors and stonemasons who had previously held seminars in the community.
- iii. As a note for further research, attending the death or cemetery-related seminars held in the Chinese Christian community might shed light on their funeral practices. Chinese Christian churches in Melbourne hold specific seminars for their older members. However, according to a Chinese Christian pastor who was interviewed, his church did not have gatherings with specific topics on funeral and cemetery but the issue of ‘death’ was frequently discussed in their general

services. Nevertheless, the pastor recognised the importance of cemetery tours as a form of informative community engagement.

## **7. What are the changing preferences of the next generation?**

- i. The research findings from this project did not provide a definite response to this question, as the study focused on older individuals who formed the first generation of Chinese migrants to Australia since the major flow of Asian migrants in the 1970s. However, it seems that there has been a subtle shift from mourning death to celebrating life. This was expressed with the perception that the notion of ‘celebration’ is ‘western’ and that becoming more western was perceived by research participants as a way to learn to live more ‘locally’ in Australia. While there is a subtle difference between ‘celebration’ and ‘honour’, the Chinese celebration seemed to entail a strong sense of honour.
- ii. The participants were generally the ‘(grand)parents’ of the next generations of Chinese migrants in Australia and they tended to believe that future generations would no longer hold the traditional Chinese knowledge and understanding of funeral rites and ritual practices. Nevertheless, this assumption remains speculative rather than the actual ‘preference’ of the younger generations of Chinese migrants.
- iii. The practices of individuals in this respect were also highly subjective. For example, a male participant in his 60s was a second generation migrant and had lived in Australia for more than 40 years. He strongly maintained the traditional Chinese culture and rituals. Thus, for this participant it was vital to observe the values of family and filial piety when it came to notions of cemetery and death. This particular case provided a contrast to the majority of views and reminds us of the need to be cautious about generalising the findings from a small and non-longitudinal sample.
- iv. There were no obvious differences between participants with different religious faiths or the non-religious in regard to Question 7. It was commonly agreed that

younger and future generations will no longer possess the same traditional knowledge or practise the Chinese rituals. Christians in particular state that most of their future generations convert to Christianity and they may have little ideas about, and desire to practise, traditional Chinese rituals.

#### **8. Does social status play a role in choice?**

- i. The answer is clearly ‘yes’. All participants argued that orthodox *Feng Shui* principles are exclusively for the wealthy. Moreover, as addressed in Question 1, individuals were still very conscious of cost-effective funeral services and graves. Although most indicated that they could afford a grave, not all were convinced it was worth the cost. This view reflects the high costs of purchasing a grave plot and receiving the services of funeral rites, which was considered to be a significant burden to individuals and families.
- ii. Further, many attributed the ‘open-mindedness’ to individual levels of education and socio-economic standing. Some stakeholders, such as stonemasons and aged care workers indicated that many of the recent (over the last two decades) older Chinese migrants were well-educated with professional status and that they were more open-minded towards talking about death and funerals. Indeed, as the other stonemason indicated, most of the Chinese migrants in Australia are not from the lowest socio-economic strata (both prior to and post-migration). They often had enough savings and purchasing power to prepare and afford their own funerals and burials/ memorialisation. The findings strongly suggest socio-economic status plays an important role in one’s willingness to think about and prepare their own funerals ahead of time.
- iii. The role of religion was subtle in regard to the response to this question. Participants with religious faith often emphasised that a ‘simple’ service (hence low cost) was at the core of their religious faith. As noted earlier, people with religious faith thought that the idea of having a grand, spectacular and expensive funeral and burial service went against the core principles of their religious faith, irrespective of being Buddhist or Christian. Interestingly, some Christians thought

that a Buddhist funeral was more expensive than a Christian funeral because of the cost to hire monks for chanting, although this was not confirmed in our data.