Chapter 4
Grieving Rituals and Beliefs of Chinese Families

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Introduction

Grief is an inevitable experience for each human being (Cowles & Rodgers, 1991). The suffering for anyone who loses a loved one could be chronic and traumatic. The grieving process, however, varies significantly across cultures. Under the influence of their sophisticated philosophical/religious foundation, the Chinese, as the largest population in the world, have their own unique way of dealing with death and dying spiritually, religiously, and practically. Funeral and other death-related rituals are considered to be the most important acts and expression of filial piety in Chinese culture (Watson & Rawski, 1988). On the other hand, Chinese are often hesitant to talk about death as this is considered bad luck (Wilson & Ryan, 1990). There is a necessity to explore this important and yet understudied phenomenon with respect to its cultural roots and traditions. This chapter will help unfold this mystery through reviewing findings from existing literature and a case study.

Origins of Traditional Chinese Beliefs on Death and Dying

Concepts of Death

The concept of death is defined differently from a cultural perspective compared to a medical point of view. To doctors, one is considered dead as her or his vital organs stop functioning. Medical professionals agree upon the following signs of death,

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such as a smooth brain wave, dilated pupils, no breath, no response to external stimulus (Wijdicks, Varelas, Gronseth, & Greer, 2010). Compared to the consensus reached in the medical field, the world is still much divided in terms of how each culture views or defines death. Fundamental questions remain to be answered. Is there a spiritual existence, called a soul, other than the physical body for each human being? If so, does death separate it from its body? Is death the end of the body only, or the end for both body and soul? Under the great influence of Christianity, it is a prevalent belief in the West that death is a separation of the soul from the body. The soul survives the body in the Christian view. It is a different story in China, however, with a long and continuous history, and mixed theological impacts of beliefs from Confucius, Daoism, and Buddhism (Hsu, O'Connor, & Lee, 2009).

Religion, contrary to what Westerners normally believe, is commonly practiced among many Chinese in various regions and ethnic groups (Jochim, 1986; Yang & Lang, 2011). However, it does not exist or function in the same way in Chinese society as it does in the rest of world, especially areas with deep Christian roots. Over centuries the Chinese value system has evolved, blending philosophical systems with religious beliefs and practices. Religion, either local (Daoism) or imported (Buddhism), merges with ancient Chinese philosophical systems, such as Confucianism, Mo Tzu, Legalism, and other philosophical schools (Penson, 2004; Picton & Hughes, 1998). Besides the philosophical and religious origins listed above, ancestor worship derived from primitive religious beliefs is also found to play an important role in shaping what Chinese believe regarding death and how they honor the deceased family members and express grief today.

Life and Death Through the Confucian Perspective

Life and death are considered two stages of one entity in Confucius theology (Chen, 2012; Chung, 2003; Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). Death is the flip side of life, or life in a different form. Life of all beings is connected and interchangeable. Life is continuous and external and keeps transforming. So one's end is another one's birth. Confucius suggested looking at the positive side of the story of life and death. Each individual is expected to make a good use of their time (Hsu et al., 2009). As a result, the afterlife will go smoothly. So does the continuity of life. Confucius once said people should be more concerned about life than death, worrying what you can do with your life for others and yourself. His teaching emphasized the teaching of positive thinking so that they would focus on things that would make the world better, and care less about uncertainty.

Confucianism has an ambiguous attitude toward ghosts or a spiritual existence in other forms (Chen, 2012). First, it doesn't deny their existence but seldom mentions these concepts, and urges people to stay a respectful distance away from involvement with these concepts that are closely associated with negative and uncertain connotations. Second, Confucians make clear distinction between these beings in

the afterlife and living beings, again trying to guide people's focus toward matters in their living reality. Although Confucianists seem more focused on the meaning of life, they don't avoid death completely. One belief is that death is honored by following a righteous path in life. This means that a person should die doing the right thing. Death on a good course puts a respectful ending to one's life, honoring his beliefs and deeds that he has done while alive.

Life and Death in the Taoist Perspective

Taoism was found by Lao-Tzu during the era of Chun-Qiu (the latter years of the East Zhou Dynasty, around 221 BC) (Sellmann, 2002). With its roots in native prehistoric belief, Taoism is believed to be one of the oldest religions that grew within Chinese culture. Initially recognized as a philosophical school, it had been developed into a nationwide religion by Lao-Tzu's followers and believers. As it evolved, philosophical or mystical beliefs were developed and inspired about the meaning of being and the nourishment of life and immortality, which placed significant impacts on how the traditional Chinese views of death and dying were established and shaped (Hansen, 2003). Tao, with the literal meaning of "path" or "way," sits in the center of the stage of ancient Chinese beliefs. Despite the wide variation of comprehension, it can be generally interpreted as, the essence of being is which way one chooses to live his life and in what fashion he puts it into lifelong practice. Taoists stressed balance in the universe, balance between the opposites, and balance among every being. They believed that the existence of all is based on the constant flux of production and destruction cyclically and evolutionarily, from which the philosophies of Yin-Yang and Wu-Xing were developed. These notions further fostered the foundation of other important concepts in Taoism, such as Feng-Shui, reversion, and meditation (Field, 2002). In the perspective of Taoism, elements of the universe depend on each other and restrain each other. For each individual, the right thing to do is finding the balance for his or her life.

Taoists regard death as a natural component of life, or another phase of life to be exact (Kleeman, 2003; Lo, 1999). At the same time, they do not view death as an achievement for life, and suggest people should do whatever they could to prolong their physical life, through nutrition, medicine, or other self-cultivation techniques. Due to their beliefs in an afterlife, upon death the relationship between the living and the deceased doesn't come to an end in the Taoists' point of view (Kemp & Chang, 2002). Life of the living is still subject to the impact from another world through various kinds of spiritual connections, or vice versa. Poor Feng-Shui, such as imbalance of elements, and degradation of harmony between humans and nature could lead to bad luck or misfortune, which might explain the causes of suffering, illness, or even death. It affects the dead as well as the living. Preserving good Feng-Shui is the key finding a benign spot for burial, which not only brings peace to the deceased but also helps secure the harmony for the deceased, the living, and nature

overall (Lai, 2006). Thanks to the prevalence of Daoism, either as a philosophy or religion, Chinese deeply believe good Feng-Shui blesses residents with peace and their descendants with wealth, health, and success. Retribution relates closely to the experiences of the current or even previous generations of a family, which could be due to their cursed or blessed relationship with others (Hsu et al., 2009). It is common for Chinese people to attribute it to one of these ascriptions when it comes to life-threatening illness or death in the family. To gain health or peace, the families with concerns normally seek for help from Taoist rituals performed by Tao-Shi (people who practice Taoism professionally and religiously, equivalent to the monk of Buddhism). These rituals are believed to help expel evil spirits or curses and invite protection from higher beings and their own ancestors, which eventually restore the balance of Yin-Yang and harmony among Wu-Xing.

Life and Death Through Buddhist Perspective

Buddhism is among the top three religions prevalent around the globe today; it is also the second religion in Chinese history in terms of length of existence only after Taoism and has had a significant influence on Chinese culture for almost two millennia (Hsieh, 2002; Hsu et al., 2009). China, at the time of Buddhism's arrival, had already developed its own highly sophisticated religious systems composed of ancestor worship, Taoism, and Confucianism (Hansen, 2003). Buddhism in China had undergone a long process of localization under the influences of several Chinese native beliefs, eventually becoming an essential part of this culture. Originally, Buddhism emphasized the seeking of spiritual enlightenment through self-devotion through monasticism, celibacy, and withdrawal from societal practices, while Confucianism focused on the virtues of filial piety, family values, and social responsibility, and the Taoists were interested in prolonging current life, self-preservation, and so on. In the enduring process of blending in Chinese society, Buddhists accepted the traditional Chinese value of filial piety and ancestor worship and evolved and modified into the Chinese Buddhism we see today, also known as Mahayana Buddhism. Thus, the beliefs on death and dying in Chinese Buddhism are developed from the combination of Chinese indigenous philosophies into the original Buddhist teaching. In Chinese Buddhist belief, the last thought during a person's last moments, whether good or evil, will influence the individual's next rebirth (Yin, 2006). Therefore, from the view of Chinese Buddhists, taking care of a dying person is to understand his or her state of mind at the moment of the person's death. When death is approaching, reciting Sutra around the dying person will help guide him or her on their Way to ultimate paradise after death with peace (Hsieh, 2002; Hsu et al., 2009). Sutra means a thread or line that holds things together in Buddhism and Hinduism, which can be further interpreted as unfinished business or the unsatisfied will of the dying.

Grieving Rituals and Practices by Chinese Families

As described above, Chinese beliefs are generated from three philosophical origins: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (Eerdmans, 1994). In the theoretical framework of Confucianism, ancestry worship is one of the key elements, which first requires that the body of dead should be preserved properly in honor of his or her parents, since it is an invaluable gift from them. Taoism emphasizes living healthy to live longer. It focuses on teaching people how to eat a healthy diet and maintain a good lifestyle. One is rewarded for treating himself seriously. In Buddhists' perspective, one should do good deeds while living in order to be reincarnated at a higher level in the next life cycle. If one fails to comply, she or he might be reborn as animals or lower life forms in return. The punishment might not come out immediately to the person who deserves it; however, it might be passed on to whoever relates to him or her, like siblings, children, or even grandchildren. Chinese believe one gets what he or she does to others and themselves one way or another. There is always a payback for one's action. As influenced by all three philosophies, Chinese believe one has to treat others nicely, especially the older generation. One needs to show great respect to their parents and take care of them in their older age and even afterlife. Only by doing that, one expects to be treated nicely when she or he gets old. Even Chinese who practice Christianity and other religions admit that they are heavily influenced by these traditional ideas and behave closely to that standard.

Ancestor worship or veneration is a critically important concept of Chinese culture, which is deeply embedded in the Chinese spiritual system (Ryan, 1986). Providing excellent end-of-life care to the deceased elder is the best way for the younger generations to show their ultimate respect. The dead individual needs to be buried properly with adherence to strict traditional rituals; otherwise, he or she will return as an angry ghost or spirit plaguing the living who have failed in their responsibilities. Choosing the right day and location for burial is one of the most important rituals showing respect to the deceased person, especially the elderly. Burning symbolic paper money and lighting up candles at the ceremony is a good way to send them on their way to another world (Braun & Nichols, 1997). Similar rituals are also performed during annual visits to the tomb, showing respect and indicating how the dead person is missed. The Chinese are normally reluctant about organ donation due to the belief in the sacredness of keeping the body intact in the grave (Wheeler, O'Friel, & Cheung, 1994).

Strictly speaking, the mourning ceremony and the burial ceremony are two different ceremonies. Mourning ceremonies are the activities that people who are alive carry out to mourn the dead. The mourning ceremony understood by Confucianism prior to the Qin Dynasty (the period before the year of 221 BCE) is different from what is practiced today. Confucius once said, "The grieving ceremony is to hold a memorial ceremony in the central room in the early morning or at night. On the first day and the fifteenth day of the lunar calendar, people will hold a memorial ceremony in the burial site."

Funerals, the end game of life, are considered the most important moment of one's cycle in Chinese culture, in contrast to the Christian belief that the starting point, the birth ceremony, is very holy and crucial (Chen, 2012; Kemp & Chang, 2002). The burial rituals need to be well planned and carried out. All attendants traditionally must wear white or black. However, there could be an exception if the deceased one lived a long and happy life, which deserves celebrating by wearing colorful cloth, especially red. Actually, the funeral of a long-lived elder is considered as lucky and joyful as a wedding. In tradition, they are called the double happiness of white and red. Now, more and more Chinese, like Westerners, wear black to funerals.

Chinese also believe in sacrifice to dead (Braun & Nichols, 1997). The deceased one is always buried with something that connects the dead and the living and things that symbolizes fortune. The former represents the love and respect from the family members, while the latter is the way they express their good wishes for taking care of the deceased one on the other side. In the old days, the rich were buried with real jewelry or expensive metal, like gold and silver. The poor, on contrast, ended up with stuff carrying more symbolic than actual value. Now, there is less difference in between, despite variety of social status and wealth that one could come from. Paper-made objects are widely used, symbolizing daily necessities and valuable assets, particular those one wished to have while he or she was alive. Things that one used to own or use on a daily basis are common choices for sacrifice, since nobody else will use them probably, and it is a good way to remember the deceased by. Being buried in his or her hometown is also crucial to finish the deceased's journey as a circle (Braun & Nichols, 1997; Kemp & Chang, 2002). If someone dies elsewhere, the responsibility falls on their family members or close ones to take them back to where his or her life started. Being buried other places, except for particular reasons, is always considered as a compromise instead of best practice. The spirits don't get to relax and let go of things that are unfinished while she or he is alive. It is never late to take the travelers home and the effort of doing so is always appreciated by the spirit and his or her family members. Burial is the preferred way, traditionally. For some Chinese, the body should not be moved within 8 h after the death since they believe that is how much time for the spirit to leave the body completely (Watson & Rawski, 1988). Burning the body in those periods of time would be very offensive to the dead as well as the living. However, cremation is the most common approach now, which is mandated by law due to the so-called limited land resources and environmental protection.

The room that the deceased used to live in needs to be rearranged and renovated; things that he or she used need to be removed if they are still of value (Braun & Nichols, 1997; Penson, 2004; Picton & Hughes, 1998). By doing this, family members make a statement that they are ready to move on with the deceased one just living in their heart. It is always bad to speak ill about the deceased, even though they are the ones to blame. Once dead, he or she should not be held accountable for anything that happened in the past. The living should and must leave them in peace by letting things go. Being dead is the most important thing, above everything else. Mourning is conducted at different points in time: 3 days, 100 days, 1 year, and even

the 3-year anniversary in some areas. The Chinese believe that the deceased will return to visit their family, so the family should be ready spiritually for the brief reunion 3 days after the funeral. Within the first 100 days, any entertainment is not considered appropriate. So at the end of the period, there is rationale to celebrate the phase. The one-year or three-year anniversary is widely celebrated across the country, demonstrating long-lasting love and respect.

In China a traditional holiday called Qingming is the most appropriate moment for annual grieving for the deceased (Braun & Nichols, 1997). This falls during the first few days of April, according to the Chinese lunar calendar. Most Chinese families visit their parents or someone they care about on this day, mostly in a group. Visiting the graveyard in a casual fashion is not considered normal and respectful, unless you are coming from far away and time is limited. Mourners usually come to honor their loved ones with flowers, candles, and paper money. Younger generations pray to the dead for their blessing from another world by making secret wishes or talking to them silently, hoping they could bring them extra luck for school, health, and fortune. Renovation of the tombstone when necessary is also done on the holiday, which demonstrates family members' consistent love and honor.

In general, simplified rituals are preferred today compared to the full, lengthy version from the past, due to the emphasis on efficiency in modern society and less rigid understanding of traditions and beliefs passed down generation by generation (Hsu et al., 2009). Younger participants, especially those exposed earlier to the Western world, tend to move away from the rituals performed traditionally. Gender, geography, and education also play influential roles in shaping one's beliefs and practice.

Grieving Beliefs and Coping Among Chinese Families

Yang and Chen report that death is considered to be *taboo* in Taiwanese society (2002). People avoid topics involving any death-related connotations as much as they can, although this passive avoidance doesn't really secure them from the dark side of life, but only "deepens anxiety and fear of death" (p. 144). As a result of avoiding the subject, death is portrayed as uncertainty and a horrifying mystery, leaving people exposed potentially to more confusion and longer trauma when it inevitably comes; this is especially the case for minors. There is a lack of life and death lessons in early child education in traditional Chinese culture (Wass & Shaak, 1976). Chinese parents try to keep the frightening part of life hidden by changing the subject when their children have questions about death. When tragic news comes in the family, parents often choose to conceal it from the young children "for their own good," rather than revealing the truth. When dealing with death, talking about it openly within the family is still not a popular choice, even for Chinese today, not to mention seeking therapy. When traumatized by losing a relative or close friends, Chinese people try to keep themselves occupied or channel emotions through group events.

A case study was conducted for the purpose of understanding Chinese beliefs on death and how they cope with the loss of family members. Below is the story of a mother and her 11-year-old daughter. Her and her daughter's experiences reflect aforementioned Chinese beliefs and practices when there is a death in the family.

Linlin was 11 years old when she lost her father to cancer at the age of 46. Before that, she was a happy girl living a blessed life. She was born to a middle-class family in Shanghai, China. Both of her parents received higher education and worked for a local university. Her father was a well-respected scholar and professor. Linlin was very close to her parents, especially to her dad. He treated her like a princess. Even with a tight schedule, he always found time to be with his daughter. His students also enjoyed playing with her. She was living a happy life until the day her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer of terminal stage.

Actually it was not entirely correct; her "normal" life lasted a little longer than that, at least to her knowledge, because her parents decided not to let her know about the shocking news that her dad was severely ill and dying. This is a common practice in Chinese families. Three months after the diagnosis, he passed away. Her mother almost collapsed. Family members gathering at the hospital helped her with the aftermath. Two students of her father kindly picked up Linlin and took her from school to the hospital. The students said that they were taking her to see her father, without mentioning her dad being gone forever. She had smile on her face.

She saw her dad lying on the bed stiffly, pale with no sign of life. She quickly realized something was wrong before her mom burst into tears. Contrary to her mother, she did not cry at that moment. Looking as pale as her dad, she stood frozen and refused a hug from anyone, including her mom. Three days later, his funeral was crowded by the members from his extended family, his friends, colleagues, and students. There she said nothing but cried. She has shut herself down ever since.

The aftermath for the mother and the little girl was almost endless with pain. Extended family members tried to help by visiting, bringing gifts and dishes; former students also tried to babysit or tutor Linlin and give her mother time to heal. However, no one would talk to mother and daughter about the deceased husband and father, for fearing that mentioning him would bring more pain. The mother worked hard to get back on her feet; she also tried to comfort her daughter, but she could not fully open up since she was afraid of losing control of herself. As a result, they were emotionally cut off and did not talk to each other as much as before. After losing her dad and somewhat her mom, the loneliness, emptiness and fear Linlin experienced was simply overwhelming. In some way, she refused to accept the fact of losing her dad and was hoping some day he would come back to her. To many other Chinese, counseling is not an option. Chinese believe that "Time cures everything."

This case offers one glance at how the loss of a loved one affects family members and how they grieve and cope in Chinese culture. Most Chinese tend not to talk about death unless absolutely necessary (Braun & Nichols, 1997; Hsu et al., 2009). Chinese children are often kept in the dark when it comes to death and illness. With the taboo, children are left no alternative but to establish their own perceptions of death through tales from peers or the media, and without proper guidance (Yang &

Chen, 2002). These misperceptions or lack of comprehension could potentially expose them to greater risk of confusion and trauma when losing a family member or friend.

Pauline Boss, well-known for her groundbreaking Theory of Ambiguous Loss (TAL), has revealed that one who suffers from ambiguous loss, a loss linked to a lack of closure, might experience tremendous stress and potentially carry a severe psychological burden for a prolonged period of time (1991 & 2009). People who experience and live with ambiguous losses find it difficult to understand and cope, and almost impossible to move forward with their lives. She defined two basic types of ambiguous losses: (1) *physical ambiguous loss* (physical absence with psychological presence); and (2) *psychological ambiguous loss* (psychological absence with physical presence). The first type describes situations where one is physically missing but keeps psychological presence to his or her family and friends due to no proof of death. Physical ambiguous loss is often caused by natural disaster, kidnapping, missing in war, or other tragic events with loose ends. The second type, psychological ambiguous loss, is mostly caused by mental illness, in which those with depression, dementia, or Alzheimer's disease are cognitively and emotionally cut off from their loved ones, even though the loved ones are still around physically.

The case shared above does not fit into either of the two typical scenarios, though Boss' theory may still apply. Linlin, the little girl in the story, did not have an understanding of the concept of death before her father passed away and did not comprehend its meaning afterward, at least for a very long time. His death remained as a mystery or uncertainty to her, which put her in a similar situation described in physical ambiguous loss. Her father is gone but remains psychologically present for her. This ambiguity could cause her great suffering, at the same time giving her room for hope. With limited knowledge of death, she was buried by fear, loneliness, and wishful thinking. What made it worse is that her mother who was occupied or simply overwhelmed by life and her own grief became somehow emotionally unavailable to the daughter. Therefore, Linlin experienced double ambiguous losses.

Wass and Shaak (1976) suggest that it is natural that children have curiosity and doubts about death, and it is part of the process in which they discover the meaning of life. Parents, instead of avoiding it, should help them understand the concept better by providing proper guidance. Talking in words children can understand will reduce their death anxiety and traumatic stress when losing a loved one.

Family Coping

Having family members or loved ones die is a very painful, personal event. As mentioned above, the Chinese are reluctant to open up and talk about death with others, especially strangers. Going for mental health services or counseling is not among the traditional options, even when families are experiencing an extremely traumatic process of grief, and not feeling they can cope with it in a healthy manner by themselves. Not addressing the matter directly does not mean Chinese don't deal with

death, however. The Chinese way of coping with death and dying often-time involves two key components, family and rituals.

The research and clinical literature reveal that, in Chinese culture, the rituals are more for the living than the deceased (Braun & Nichols, 1997; Yick & Gupta, 2002). This finding is also supported by phenomenological study. *Ritual* here has a very broad definition, including any activities caused by death within the range of an extended family, either death-related activities like the mourning ceremony or funeral, or any family gathering/reunion in the aftermath. By having these events together with extended family members, Chinese express their pain and condolences in a group and share that emotion with others who are related.

One who wishes to live a peaceful and wealthy life needs to make great efforts to restore things back to where they should be, which is called *balance* in Taoism. In that sense, if for some reason you owe an apology or appreciation to someone who died, you need to make it up one way or another, even though it can no longer been done face-to-face. These rituals not only function as a continuous expression of love and care for the lost loved one, but also provide opportunities for making up what they missed or failed to accomplish while they had the chance. So, it is a way to say "sorry" or "thank you" to the deceased. As discussed earlier in the philosophy section, Chinese believe life in general comes out even, and one gets what he or she offers. So, in a way, death rituals among family members are a Chinese version of coping strategies, which help with emotional expression and moral justification for those who live on.

These rituals and family events not only connect the dead and the living, they also support the connections among the existing family members. It is very common that after losing someone they love, Chinese families get together more often than before. In a strange sense, death brings Chinese families closer and tighter. The tragedy reminds them how important they are to each other, and how strong they can be when bonding together. They take the chance to review what they have done for the family, and rebuild a loose relationship due to neglect or misunderstanding in the past. Death of one brings the attention of the whole family to how important it is to cherish what they have now, the existing family members and the legacy left behind by the deceased. The Chinese family gathering can reunite them through trauma, from which they all suffer.

In the past four millennia, Chinese culture has developed a very unique set of grieving beliefs and practices linked to the philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The combination of these diverse origins has significantly influenced how Chinese people view and deal with death and dying throughout almost the entirety Chinese history.

The Chinese cope with death in the unit of the family, not by the individual. Performing death-related rituals with family members helps significantly channel emotions, lower stress, and re-strengthen family bonds. These rituals directly reflect Chinese beliefs in death and dying, through a combined perspective of the three main philosophical origins.

It is important for health practitioners to understand their client's traditional beliefs and culture. Understanding the value of family, filial piety, and ancestor

worship is a crucial step in helping the Chinese in a culturally sensitive and effective way. Mental health practitioners also need to be fully aware of the Chinese way of thinking and emotional expression related to death and dying.

The philosophical/religious basis is an evolving process, which integrates new beliefs and practices over time. The way Chinese perceive and honor death shifts as they add new practices of grieving or mourning over time. For example, cremation instead of burial is widely used now, due to governmental policy requirements. Both white and black colors are considered appropriate at today's funeral in China, in comparison with white only in the past, especially in ancient China. Guests are even allowed to wear red to the funeral of someone who dies at a rare old age, because it can be considered a happy event, just like wedding. In the past, it was common that death-related rituals were accompanied by loud and sad crying in the group. Not crying when someone has been lost was seen as disrespectful and impolite. Older generations even used to hire someone to cry at the scene, which was believed to create a heartbreaking environment for everyone else. Family members could come together in the same emotional state of grieving for the deceased one. Today it has been found that fewer people cry at the funeral than before. Now, various expressions are accepted as long as you are there for the deceased. Similarly, funerals now are conducted through a variety of services, including Taoist, Buddhist, Christian, and secular, respectively.

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