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## Chinese Customs connected with Births, Marriages, and Deaths.

III.

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### DEATH AND BURIAL.

WHEN a Chinese begins to grow old, he and his family think it is time to prepare for death by the purchase of a coffin. It may easily happen that he lives for twenty years or more after the coffin is brought into the house, but that does not matter in the least: the coffin is ready whenever he may require it. Instead of the children being thought guilty of cold-blooded heartlessness in thus preparing for the loss of a father or mother, it is looked upon as a proof of filial piety and of respectability, and the old people would feel very much aggrieved if this duty were neglected, and they could not feast their eyes upon their future narrow dwelling, as it stands in an honourable place in the house, probably in the principal room. Many who have no children buy their coffins for themselves, quite in middle life, fearing lest, if the matter be left to be cared for by others, an inferior one should be provided for them. Horrible as the practice appears to our Western minds, there is something to be said in its favour. Should the person in question die suddenly, especially if in the country and at some distance from any town, it would be extremely difficult to get a good coffin made on the spur of the moment, besides which, the necessary money would probably not be forthcoming in such a hurry. A Chinese coffin is a massive affair, and Chinese workmen do not, as a rule, greatly hurry themselves, while in hot weather a corpse cannot be kept unenclosed longer than a day or so. "Unenclosed" I have said—not "unburied," for a reason which will be apparent later on.

Chinese villagers often join a coffin-club, especially if their parents are growing old, and they think a coffin may soon be needed. Each member of the club contributes his quota, and then, when a death occurs in his family, he

can claim the amount of dollars necessary for the purchase of a respectable coffin. One day, my Chinese teacher, who was living in our house at some days' journey from his own home, was surprised by a visit from his younger brother. The young man said that their father, who was about sixty years of age, was very weak and poorly, and he had thought it necessary to come and consult his elder brother as to what was to be done with respect to preparing a coffin, since the expense would be beyond the present means of the family. It was thought that the best thing would be to join a coffin-club, but there was a difficulty about getting together enough money even for that. I offered a little help, if necessary, but do not remember what arrangement was finally made; I believe, however, that the poor old man's coffin was ready for him when he died a few months later.

Burial-clothes, as well as coffins, are generally prepared beforehand, and are a good deal grander than the usual garments, being made very much in the style of a mandarin's. High boots, which are only worn by the Chinese on state occasions, are also provided.

An aged, or even elderly, person seldom sleeps out of his own home; if he happen to pay a visit to friends or relatives, they are afraid to invite him to stay the night lest he should die in their house, which they think might bring upon his hosts the suspicion of having hastened his end. So the poor old man or woman is hurried home the same evening, the fact of age and weakness, which ought to furnish a special reason for offering a night's hospitality, being the reason for refusing it. What looks like a strange lack of hospitality and good feeling is due to the want of mutual confidence which pervades all ranks of society. Children, as is well-known, are honoured with no grand funeral ceremonies, but, in too many cases, at any rate if quite small, are merely wrapped in a piece of matting and laid in a field, or on the hillside.

When a person is at the point of death, he is stripped of his ordinary clothing and attired in his burial-garments (a process which one would think must materially hasten the end, even if it does not cause death where recovery might otherwise be possible). This unseemly haste is due to the idea that the spirit ought to go into the other world respectably clothed. I remember two cases in point. Both were young men—opium suicides—whom we had been called in too late to save. In one case I had, though knowing it to be useless, tried a hypodermic injection at the earnest request of the district magistrate who was present. It had no effect, the patient being already all but dead, and suddenly some of the bystanders began to strip the motionless body, no doubt in great fear lest the best garments should not be put on in time to clothe the departing spirit. On the other occasion I

was called in the early morning to the bedside of a young man, whose relatives had only just discovered from his condition that he had taken the deadly drug several hours previously. The poor fellow was lying helpless and unconscious on his bed, his livid lips, clenched teeth, and stertorous breathing telling but too plainly that no efforts of ours could save him. As I turned sadly to come away, our Chinese cook, who had accompanied me, said to the relatives of the dying man, "It's no use: you had better put his burial-clothes on him." This was tantamount to telling them that the young man was at the point of death.

When the sick person has died, and has been noisily wailed over (often no doubt, sincerely, but often as a mere form) the first thing to be done is to send for a *yingyang sienseng* (a species of soothsayer) to decide at what hour of the day the bereaved family must assume their mourning garb. This consists, in the case of the widow, sons, daughters-in-law and unmarried daughters, of a coarse yellowish material of the nature of sackcloth; but married daughters, who are regarded as belonging principally to the family into which they have married, do not wear *ma y*, but white garments, a slighter degree of mourning. Sometimes, indeed, a particularly tyrannical mother-in-law will not allow her daughter-in-law to put on any sort of mourning for her parents. *Ma y* is worn by the nearest relatives for forty-nine days, during which time the widow also wears her hair in a sort of net, made of coarse linen thread of the same colour as her garments. I may observe, however, that the rule as to the wearing of *ma y* does not appear to be very stringent, for I have seen widows wearing the prescribed net, but clothed in white garments instead of *ma y*. They were poor women, and the probability is that they could not afford to observe all the proprieties as strictly as those in easier circumstances. A son, during this period of deep mourning, does not plait his hair in a queue as usual, but ties it together with flax, and wears straw shoes like the poorest beggar, even mandarins not being exempt from the rule. For forty-two days he does not shave, and, if in a position to afford it, he must remain indoors for forty-nine days. Of course a poor man cannot carry out this precept, as he has his living to earn; the mourning ceremonies fall most heavily on the upper classes. When the forty-nine days are over white garments may be worn instead of sackcloth, and later on, the outward signs of mourning may be reduced to a blue knob on the cap instead of a white one, which was previously worn. This again in due time gives place to the usual red knob. The queue is plaited with white thread during the time of lesser mourning.

But to return to the day on which death has entered a house. Having put on their mourning garments, the sons issue forth to kowtow to their

friends, and inform them of the sad event which has just taken place. They carry with them on their errand a small stick called "the Staff of Tears and Sorrow (or Wounds)." This staff they always use when obliged to go out, and on their return lay it on the bed of the dead man, or later on in front of his coffin. Relatives and friends hasten to the house to mourn and kowtow to the dead man or woman; all day long they are coming and going in and out of the room where the corpse lies on a bed, at the head of which a lighted lamp stands on the floor, while tall white candles burn on a table in front.

The soothsayer is consulted as to the hour at which the body must be placed in its coffin. The hour having arrived, all stand in front of the coffin, the bottom of which is spread with lime; the eldest son then takes the head of the corpse, and the eldest daughter the feet, and with the help of the others they lift it in. Then they place around it rolls of lime, wrapped in a kind of parchment, corresponding in number with the years of life of the departed, a custom which reminds one of the American passing-bell, slowly counting out, as it tolls, the years of the one whose death it announces.

If it be the mother who has died, the son, as soon as he has put on his mourning garb, sets off for her old home, and breaks the sad news to her family, who then hasten to the house of mourning. As the time approaches when their arrival may be expected, someone is sent out every now and then to see whether they are in sight, and when they appear, the sons and daughters-in-law go out to meet them, and kneel down in the road before them. The mother's relatives raise them from the ground, and all enter the house together. Incense is lighted on the table at the bedside, and the newcomers perform the kowtow while the sons and daughters-in-law kneel upon the ground. When the body has been placed in the coffin, the brother of the deceased woman strikes two blows on the lid, as a proof that he is satisfied that his sister did not come to her death by foul means. In the supposed necessity for such a declaration we cannot fail to observe a fresh sign of the terrible distrust undermining all relationships among the hundreds of millions of this vast empire. The son then presents some white calico to his uncle, which, however, the latter does not wear unless it be in the form of underclothing, for *p'ing pei-tih ren*, that is, relations belonging to the same generation, only wear very slight mourning, such as a blue knob on the cap; but those belonging to a younger generation wear it, and for this purpose the son gives white garments to his cousins. A husband only wears the blue knob for his wife.

The burning of paper money, paper chairs, houses, and other articles, takes place directly after the death, for the spirit will need the things thus represented in paper, which are supposed to be changed in some mysterious

way into a more substantial form on, or before, reaching the nether world. Friends and relations bring presents of paper-money, which they have hastened to purchase at one of the numerous shops which supply this commodity.

Another highly important item is the consultation of a soothsayer with regard to the time, place, and hour of burial. If, however, the body be committed to the ground within three days of death, or if the event take place during the period of *Ta Han* (Great Cold), which lasts for about half-a-month in the depth of winter, any convenient day may be chosen. At all other times the *yingyang sienseng* must first select a place, and afterwards a propitious day and hour, for the funeral. The choice of a suitable spot is a question of such vital importance that sometimes a corpse is kept in a house unburied for ten or twelve years, because the soothsayer has had such difficulty in finding a burial-place with the right aspect. A Chinese friend of mine once heard some fellow-passengers on a boat discussing the cause of the wonderful prosperity of Li Hung-chang. The reason suggested by one of them, and which seemed to find favour in the eyes of the rest, was that the great statesman had chosen a good spot in which to build his house, and that the graves of his ancestors were also in an auspicious place.

Two or three days before that of the funeral, invitations are sent out on yellow paper books, consisting of two or three leaves. The previous day is known as *K'ai Tiao* (Begin the Rites), for then relatives and friends swarm into the house of mourning (before the door of which an ornate pavilion is often erected), in order to again pay their respects to the poor unconscious body. As fresh guests arrive throughout the day, they first kowtow to the dead man or woman, and are then regaled on doughstrings. In the evening a feast is provided for them, and during the night prayers are chanted by Taoist or Buddhist priests.

The burial will probably take place in the early morning, and accordingly the procession must start betimes. The hour of dawn is generally chosen, but at times, for some occult reason, the ceremony takes place during the night. If the *yingyang sienseng* has decided that the body must be let down into the grave exactly at sunrise, it must of course be carried out of the house while the sky is still dark, and so great is their dread of being too late that the funeral-party sometimes has to wait a considerable time before the sun rises. The more distant relatives only accompany the coffin halfway, and are not present at the interment, but the mourners and bearers stand, shivering perhaps on a bleak hillside, till at last the brightening sky shows that the orb of day is about to make its appearance above the horizon. But now a very disagreeable hitch is apt to occur. Just at the critical moment the unsympathetic bearers utterly refuse to perform their sad office, until they have

received a tip in the shape of *shi k'un ch'ien* (wash pit money). It will be remembered that the same thing takes place on the arrival of a bride at the door of her new home, whence it would appear that the Chinese coolie is not to be prevented by any sentimental notions of either joy or sorrow from the due consideration of his material interests. However much against the grain, the person in charge must hand over the money demanded, if he would not incur the heavy responsibility of burying his deceased relative one or two minutes too late. This important transaction settled to the satisfaction of the recipients, if not of the donor, the coffin is lowered into its resting-place, in which has previously been deposited the sum of four cash (about the ninth part of a penny). One by one the members of the family kowtow before the grave, crackers are let off, and the mourners, having duly given expression to their grief by loud and discordant wails, set out for home. Outside the front door a fire has been lighted, through which all are supposed to pass on reëntering the house. It would be extremely interesting to trace these ceremonies of passing through fire, used in connection with both marriages and funerals, back to their origin in ages long gone by, for surely they point to some idea of cleansing by fire, and remind us of idolatrous practices among the Phœnicians, and also (probably as introduced by them) among the Irish of more recent times. A *yingyang sienseng* is then invited to chant before the idol certain words wishing peace to the family, water is sprinkled upon all in the house, and afterwards relatives and friends assemble and drink wine together.

The feasting connected with both funerals and weddings is a heavy drain upon the family purse, for, though each guest brings a contribution, either in the form of money or food, he will often eat more than twice the amount represented by his contribution; women, too, frequently bring with them one or two voracious children, who devour an immense amount of provisions, without having paid anything towards the expenses. An amazing number of friends and relatives turn up on such occasions, and though entailing much expense and worry, they are not unwelcome, since the greater the number of guests, the greater the amount of "face" enjoyed by the family at whose expense they feast, and the Chinese is an eminent lover of display. To "lose face" over his wedding or funeral feast would be still worse than losing money!

In the case of somewhat well-to-do families, devoutly inclined, there are special religious observances held every seven days up to the forty-ninth day, the relations coming to the house to worship the tablet of the dead man. Indeed, during the whole period there is always something going on in houses of this class—priests droning through their monotonous chantings, music (!) torturing the ears of any unfortunate foreigner who may happen to be a

neighbour of the bereaved family, and rendering sleep at night, if not an impossible, at any rate a difficult operation. Fortunately for the Chinese, their nerves are made of such substantial material that they can sleep through almost any amount of noise, and in the midst of the greatest discomfort. On the forty-ninth day comes the grand finale, Buddhist and Taoist priests chanting with special ceremony all night long, for bereaved families often employ the ministers of the two rival religions to waft the departed spirit to its future abode, thus making assurance doubly sure! Proud Confucianist scholars, who for the most part look down with tolerant contempt upon the superstitions of both Buddhism and Taoism, do not hesitate to call in the priests when death enters the home, probably in some cases merely in order to conform to general custom, in others, from an uneasy feeling that, after all, in view of the *after-state*, a cold scheme of moral philosophy will not suffice, but some sort of religion is needed.

I remember, not many months after my arrival in China, being taken one evening by friends into a Chinese house of mourning (that of their next-door neighbour) to witness the performance of the funeral ceremonies by the priests. A strange, weird scene it was. The large gloomy-looking room, for the chief part in semi-darkness, or "dim religious light," the groups of women looking on, among whom we took our place, and in the upper part of the room, a curious arrangement of various objects, of the nature of which I have but a dim recollection, not having been able to see them very clearly, though I remember an elaborate pattern traced upon the floor in rice. A young man and a boy, who appeared to be the chief mourners, knelt at the edge of this pattern, and kowtowed at certain points during the performance, while the priests, solaced and sustained at intervals by cups of tea, handed to them quietly from the background, walked in procession round and round the rice-strewn spot, and droned out their monotonous dirge, a portly and somewhat grandly-robed individual, who appeared to be the archpriest, occasionally going through various bowings and genuflexions close to the principal mourners.

"Which have no hope" are the awful words engraved upon the mind of the one who witnesses either the foolish and hollow ceremonies carried on over the dead, or the last moments of the dying heathen, whether he passes away in ignorant indifference, or crying out (as many do), his eyes wide with terror, that he sees the demons which have come to carry him away. A bright contrast to these sad scenes was presented some time ago by the deathbed of a little Christian Chinese girl, who, just before she "fell asleep," said, "I'm not afraid; I don't see any demons; Christ is with me."

During the period of deepest mourning a son is supposed to sit perpetually by the side of his father or mother's coffin in the upper part of the middle room, which has been curtained off for its reception, and to eat nothing but the coarsest food. The ancient books also prescribe that, after the burial has taken place, he should make a little hut for himself by his parent's grave, and sit and watch there for three years, but such devotion is seldom, if ever, shown in these degenerate and money-making days. There is, however, one rule which is still rigidly observed, never being broken, except in the case of some great national or local emergency. A mandarin must retire from office immediately on the death of his father or mother, and remain in private life during the whole of the twenty-seven months, which are always reckoned as the three years of mourning.

This rule is, of course, often a cause of serious inconvenience, especially during crises in which the services of a competent and honest official cannot well be dispensed with for so long a period. Keen observers of current events will probably have noticed a case in point during the recent troubles, in which one of the best and ablest of China's great men had the misfortune to lose his mother. It was immediately decided to petition the Throne to allow him under the present exceptional circumstances to continue to serve his country, instead of going into retirement. We will hope, for China's sake, that the precedent will be largely followed, till the senseless and hollow custom has lost its hold upon the minds of a great and practical nation.

Ancestral worship is, of course, closely connected with the burial of the dead, but to take up such a wide and far-reaching subject would require more information than I possess, besides drawing out this paper to too great a length, so I must refrain from entering upon it, as well as upon various details of superstitious observances connected with funerals.

One example of the latter, however, I may as well submit to the reader, as illustrating and adding to the account already given.

A Chinese friend of mine saw, not long ago, affixed to the door of a house in Shanghai, a large square of white paper,\* written by a *yingyang sienseng* on the occasion of the death of one of the inmates. On this paper it was stated that the dead man was thirty-two years of age, the year, day, month, and hour of his birth being also given. Then followed the day and hour which had been chosen for putting the body in the coffin, and

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\* It will be observed that in connection with funerals white or yellow paper is always used, whereas all the paper that has to do with betrothals and weddings is red, the same colours prevailing in the matter of clothing. The symbolical meaning of these colours is such an understood thing that weddings and other festivities are known as "Red Affairs," and funerals as "White Affairs."

persons of three specified ages were warned against being in the house at the time. The day and hour chosen for the burial were also announced, together with the ages (differing from the first) of persons who must not be in the house when the coffin was carried out. The *yingyang sienseng* then informed all whom it might concern, that the ghost of the dead man was twelve feet in height, and fixed the night on which it might be expected to revisit its old home. He had ascertained, he added, that the spirit had gone on the road towards Buddha.