
2025 FYS Essay Prize Submission

The Purpose of My Project

Entering my First Year Seminar without prior knowledge on the subject, I was surprised when our class discussions started to resonate deeply with a formative experience of mine: the death of my grandmother in 2019 – an event that had remained emotionally enigmatic to me for years.

I found myself treating the class not only as a space to satisfy curiosity and intellectual appetite, but a way for me to understand my own unresolved grief. For my final research paper (this submission), I blended research and ethnographic methods to analyze the roles of gifting, offering, and sacrifice in funeral traditions in Hong Kong, my home city. The project also aimed to illuminate Hong Kong's cultural attitudes toward our obligations to the dearly departed during mourning.

Ultimately, writing this paper deepened my understanding of my heritage, invited me to reflect on memories both beautiful and confusing, and prompted insightful conversations with loved ones. In this emotionally challenging process, I was able to sublimate the events of my grandmother's death into a piece of work of which I am profoundly proud, and believe she would be too. For this, I am deeply grateful to my FYS.

(193 words)

The Gifts We Keep On Giving

Introduction

The first time I lost a close family member was on November 11th, 2019, when my dear grandmother, my 婆婆 (pó po), died in a hospital in Hong Kong after fighting lung cancer for over a year. My most vivid memories related to her death come from her funeral: the smell of incense, the discomfort of my ill-fitting clothes, the sound and sight of paper offerings engulfed in big orange flames. I still remember turning to my dad and telling him, “I can’t catch a break,” after finally finding a moment to sit down two hours after arriving at the funeral. He laughed a little. I had thought funerals were about mourning and sitting peacefully with loved ones, but in reality, I was busy all day as my mother, aunts, uncles, and the funeral director ushered me through various rituals, each with elaborate rules done in specific orders. How did everybody else know exactly what to do?

Rituals surrounding death vary significantly across cultures. How we treat, honor, and offer to the dead are often considered sacred practices – set apart, distinct from other profane or everyday actions. Robert Hertz argues that death is not only a biological event but is also connected to beliefs, emotions, and social practices. He emphasizes the importance of transitional periods, such as mourning, and the need for social obligations and duties to the dead.¹

This rings true in my home city of Hong Kong. Rituals and rites surrounding death, funerals, and subsequent mourning periods are heavily influenced by Chinese culture, particularly a blend of Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian practices. While Hong Kong’s population is predominantly Han Chinese (92%), its 156 years under British colonial rule, ending in 1997,

¹ Hertz, Robert. *Death and the Right Hand*. Translated by Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham. London: Cohen & West, 1960.

and its identity as ‘Asia’s World City’ have resulted in a fascinating hybridization of culture. Thus, traditional death practices and attitudes may also be actively influenced by the effects of colonialism and globalization.²

In this paper, I aim to better understand my family’s behavior around my grandmother’s passing, her funeral, and everything that followed by investigating the roles of gifting, offering, and sacrificing in Hong Kong funerals. I seek to learn more about Hong Kong’s cultural attitudes toward our obligations to the dead, exploring how Marcel Mauss’ theory that gifting is a social practice binding people in reciprocal relationships remains relevant even when one party cannot reciprocate.³

Beliefs about Death and the Afterlife in Hong Kong

Hong Kong’s belief systems and culture cannot be discussed without mention of the Three Teachings (sān jiào): Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, three philosophies that interact dynamically across Asia. While the majority of Hong Kong’s population is religiously unaffiliated, the Three Teachings are so influential that many cultural beliefs about death and the afterlife stem from these spiritual teachings. The concept of reincarnation is a core doctrine in Buddhism, a major religion in Hong Kong that influences all residents, not only practicing Buddhists, as religious beliefs permeate the culture. Moreover, filial piety, a Confucian ethic of care, emphasizes our moral obligation to respect, take care of, and demonstrate loyalty to our parents and ancestors, including honoring their spirit after death. Although the Confucian tradition does not explicitly reference reincarnation, the notion of filial piety implies that

² Throughout the paper, you will find that ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘Chinese’ are used interchangeably only as adjectives, while ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘China’ as nouns are not interchangeable. ‘Chinese culture’ can be used to describe cultures beyond the geographic and political border of China. Hong Kong is not a part of China, but Chinese culture overlaps with Hong Kong culture a lot due to complex sociopolitical circumstances and the dominant Han Chinese ethnicity.

³ Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. Foreword by Mary Douglas. Routledge, (1925) 2002.

ancestors can still receive the gift of continued care and honor after death. Hong Kong-based anthropologist Dan Waters notes that “filial piety has been described as the most powerful force in China for the past 3,000 years” (Waters 1991, 106).⁴

In Cheung’s 2006 article, *Letting Go and Holding On*,⁵ he asserts that funerals and their rites are vital in helping the dead transition from the realm of the living to the spirit realm. He states that “participation in religious services assists the deceased in terminating their relationship with this world and their passage into the next.” (Cheung 2006, 71). He also explains that “the sins of ancestors not expiated can have damaging consequences for their descendants in this world” (Ibid, 85). This statement exemplifies the necessity of funeral rites to both purify the dead and to protect the bereaved family. The funeral, including all the gifting, offering, and sacrifice involved, “benefits not only the deceased... but also all of his or her descendants living in this world” (Ibid, 85).

What does a funeral in Hong Kong look like?

My grandmother’s funeral was a traditional Hong Kong ceremony featuring Taoist and Buddhist symbols and influences. The event took place in a funeral parlor with a large main room, known as the spirit hall, adorned with extravagant floral arrangements and a portrait of my smiling grandmother from about ten years prior. Soon after I arrived with my mother, father, and five-year-old brother, my aunts handed me a bundle of white robes to change into. The smell of incense in the spirit hall was overpowering; my eyes watered when I stood too close to the altar.

The room was busy with mourners and dizzying, colorful floral displays and fruit offerings, yet

⁴ Waters, Dan. “CHINESE FUNERALS: A CASE STUDY.” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31 (1991): 104–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23891029>.

⁵ CHEUNG, Peter Ka Hing, Cecilia Lai Wai CHAN, Wai FU, Yawen LI, and Grace Yee Kam Pau CHEUNG. “‘Letting Go’ and ‘Holding On’: Grieving and Traditional Death Rituals in Hong Kong.” In *Death, Dying and Bereavement: A Hong Kong Chinese Experience*, edited by Cecilia Lai Wan Chan and Amy Yin Man Chow, 65–86. Hong Kong University Press, 2006. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jc3xm.11>.

its high ceilings and white walls made it feel sparse and clinical. It didn't resemble the funerals I had seen in movies. For one, where was my grandmother? I didn't see any casket on the altar.

Next, I was led to a small room behind the spirit hall with the rest of my grandmother's close family.⁶ I walked in to find her lying peacefully in an open casket behind a large glass door. Nobody warned me that I was about to see a corpse for the first time. I was surprised, but it wasn't scary for very long. She was dressed in beautiful robes, her favorite wavy brunette wig, and somebody had applied shiny blue makeup to her eyelids and rouge on her lips. I hadn't seen her all dressed up in a long time.

The Role of Purification and Cleanliness

Menstrual Blood as a Pollutant

One of the first rituals was about to start. The funeral master explained that this would be my opportunity to send a message to my grandmother by kneeling in front of her portrait in the spirit hall and speaking to her in my mind, accompanied by the monks' chanting in Teochew⁷. As he handed out sticks of incense, my eldest aunt paused to ask the women, "Nobody's on their period, right?" I meekly raised my hand. The funeral director looked almost agitated, went into the spirit hall, and returned with a single white flower to replace my incense sticks.

This stuck with me for a long time. The taboo surrounding menstrual blood is a deeply gendered issue in Chinese culture, where menstruation and its products are regarded as "both dirty and polluting", according to Cordia Chu.⁸ She discusses a folktale that encapsulates the serious stigma surrounding menstruation: "women, by spilling blood during childbirth and

⁶ The close family included myself, my mother, my three aunts, my two uncles, and my grandfather. It would have included other grandchildren if they were old enough.

⁷ A Sinitic language spoken primarily in the Canton region of China, and my grandparents' mother tongue.

⁸ Chu, Cordia Ming-Yeuk. "Menstrual Beliefs and Practices of Chinese Women." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 17, no. 1 (1980): 38–55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3814221>.

menstruation, pollute the earth and seriously offend the earth god and other deities. Thus, they are condemned to undergo torture in the “blood-lake jail”... in hell after death.” (Chu 1980, 40). This ingrained cultural understanding of menstrual blood as offensive underpins rules like how menstruating women “are not allowed to worship gods in public ceremonies or public temples or ancestral halls.” (Ibid, 48). Menstruating women’s connection with the spiritual realm is severed by biological constraints. Sherry Ortner’s classic article *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?* is relevant here,⁹ particularly her observation that “women represent a lower order of being, as being less transcendental of nature than men are” (Ortner 1974, 73). This highlights a fascinating gender role in death rituals. As far as I know, there is no comparable condition in men barring them from participating fully in funeral rituals.

As discussed further in the next section, fire and incense smoke play a significant symbolic role in Chinese funerals. It serves as a means of communication between the living and the dead. My prohibition from holding something that produces smoke almost implied that my final words to my grandmother would not reach her, unlike those of non-menstruators in the room. I would argue that Chinese attitudes and stigma around menstruation informed this prohibition, as the fear likely stems from the belief that my menstrual blood could travel through the smoke and pollute the purity of her afterlife.

Is Female to Male as Yin is to Yang?

This ties into the larger tradition of cleansing and purification in funeral rites. The all-white mourning clothes we were given to change into, for example, are ceremonially “shed” at the graveyard “immediately after burial” (Cheung 2006, 76). This can be connected back to the

⁹ Ortner, Sherry B. “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” In *Woman, Culture, and Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, 67-87. Stanford University Press, 1974.

Taoist principle of *yin* and *yang*, which respectively stand for “negative and positive, moon and sun, dark and light, cold and hot, water and fire, soft and hard, female and male, death and life, private and public, and inside and outside....As long as yin and yang are balanced, the universe is in order” (Chu 1980, 42). Female and blood are both categorized as *yin*, putting a menstruating woman at a serious imbalance toward *yin*. This imbalance becomes significant during rituals surrounding death where the need for balance and harmony is paramount, hence an obsession with purification and cleanliness in funeral rites.

Moreover, the corpse is treated as a pollutant in many ways. There exists a tension between honoring the deceased and treating them as a representation of death itself. Where life, activity, and warmth represent *yang*, the corpse, with its stillness and coldness, can be seen as a conduit of *yin*. A common tradition during burial is to turn one’s back on the casket as it is being sealed or lowered; without this, it is believed the souls of the living may be trapped in the casket and buried with the dead.¹⁰ This duality reflects a broader existential struggle mourners face. Reconciling our love for the deceased with our fear of death can be profoundly challenging.

The Role of Gifting, Offering, and Sacrifice at the Funeral and Beyond

Ritual Fire and the Immolation of Objects

To this day, when I think about my grandmother and her death, the first image that comes to mind is of myself at her funeral. I remember sitting alone on a footstool in front of a wood-burning fireplace, a cardboard box full of gilded paper at my feet. I picked up pieces of paper that had been meticulously folded to look like gold ingots, tossed them into the fire, and watched as their pigment turned black, then orange as the flames swallowed them, then white as the ash fell. The cardboard box emptied fast, so I walked back into the spirit hall, found another

¹⁰ Chan, Coasette (mother), interview by author, telephone interview, April 26th, 2025.

stack of paper on a plastic chair, and kept folding. I didn't really enjoy doing this; the cheap red dye on the paper stained my fingers and my white mourning clothes. Yet, I wanted my 婆婆 to enjoy as much wealth as possible in the afterlife. Thus, in an almost-mindless zen state, I just kept going.¹¹

Perhaps one of the most fascinating types of gifting in the Hong Kong funeral tradition is sending material objects into the afterlife through fire and smoke. Most of my memories of my grandmother's funeral are emotional and blurry, but my vivid memories of immolating paper money and paper houses in ritual fire have a picture-like quality. Janet Lee Scott, who conducted an ethnography in Hong Kong in 2007,¹² writes that "paper offerings are burnt to ashes so they may go beyond the confines of the living world — to the gods, the ghosts, and the ancestors" (Scott 2007, 20). The act of burning is so vital because it "changes the nature of the offerings... it is fire that possesses transformative power"¹³ (Ibid, 20). Fire and smoke become vessels for communication between realms, facilitating not just thoughts and words like in the incense ritual, but also the transfer of material possessions. Burning folded ingots (spirit money) signifies financial support for the deceased in the afterlife – a gift.

This gifting tradition doesn't only include paper money. One of the last rituals was at dusk when we all walked up the fire escape up to the roof of the funeral parlor and gathered around an open furnace. We stood and watched as my uncle, her oldest son, lit the match to burn a meter-tall paper model of a lavish mansion. The fire and smoke act as a conduit to send this house to the spirit world, where my grandmother could enjoy her afterlife.

¹¹ In my research, I read Fred Blake describe this paper folding labor as "very determined: it is utterly tedious, in some sense lonely work, but also "a world of cheerful work."" (Blake 2011, 125) which resonated deeply with what I describe here.

¹² Scott, Janet Lee. "The Practices of Paper Burning." In *For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors: The Chinese Tradition of Paper Offerings*, 19–52. Hong Kong University Press, 2007. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jzbzfn.5>.

¹³ Here, Scott is referencing Sangren 1993:567 on the significance of burning incense

It's Just Paper! What a Ruse!

The symbolic nature of these gifts raises some questions about authenticity. There exists tension between the value we place on paper money and houses and the understanding that, ultimately, it is just paper. It feels like a trick; a ruse against the dead. One might argue that the value we assign to the paper feels fragile because it has little monetary worth in the living realm.¹⁴

Fred Blake's discussion on spirit money in *The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld* helps us understand this.¹⁵ He identifies the immolation of paper in traditional Chinese funerals as a form of sacrifice because it is destroyed willfully, immolated in ritual fire (Blake 2011, 117). His argument is that the labor and time involved in preparing offerings contributes to the ritual's value. He writes, "The folded paper contains the work that is put into it...it is sensual work, pure work, the work of devotion, of sacrifice, of self-sacrifice" (Ibid, 138). Blake also references Karl Marx when he asserts that paper money sacrifice may be a "more sophisticated and truer sacrifice than what blood sacrifice entails" (Ibid), citing Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion*.¹⁶ He suggests that folding paper is a way of showing effort and devotion without violence or sacrifice of living beings. Instead of using blood to symbolize a sacrifice, it highlights the value of hard work itself – work that is genuine and not exploited or disconnected from the person doing it. Immolation and sacrifice in the Hong Kong funeral serve not only to transfer material gifts between realms but also to express duty and devotion, where time spent caring for the dead is a gift, regardless of whether the burned materials really make it to the afterlife. The time and energy spent, at least, certainly are not a ruse.

¹⁴ Note that Scott does acknowledge that the paper money "seems to suffer no abatement" after it is burned (26). This, however, still does not explain why the paper money has value in the first place, before being burned.

¹⁵ Blake, C. Fred. 2011. *Burning Money : The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

¹⁶ Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Nuer Religion*. Oxford University Press, 1956.

How Do We Engage in Gifting Relationships with the Dead When They Cannot Give Back?

Marcel Mauss' gift theory¹⁷ becomes relevant at this point because if the “cycling gift system is the society” (Mauss 1925:2002, ix), then gifting to the dead keeps us in ongoing relationships with them, raising questions about reciprocity. Mauss writes, “one loses face forever if one does not reciprocate” (Ibid, 42). How does this apply to our gifts, offerings, and sacrifices made for the dead when they *cannot* reciprocate?¹⁸

Jacques Derrida, in *Given Time*, presents a rich discussion about the existential nature of the gift¹⁹. He argues that true giving requires a kind of “radical forgetting” (Derrida 1992, 174), suggesting that without this forgetfulness, the expectation of reciprocity nullifies the essence of the gift. He writes “For there to be gift, it is necessary that the gift not even appear, that it not be perceived or received as gift.” (Ibid, 173). This complicates gifting to the dead. Derrida might suggest that our acts of care are overshadowed by the duties and obligations we feel toward the deceased. How heartfelt and genuinely altruistic are our gifts of time and care when they are deeply embedded in social rituals and cultural expectations?

We engage in numerous acts to honor the dead, from folding paper money to acts of abnegation (detailed in next section). Ultimately, however, a gift that is never reciprocated nullifies its essence because gifts are tied to social exchange. Thus, perhaps the living are the true recipients of these gifts. I argue that by ‘gifting’ to a party that can never reciprocate, we enter into an egocentric relationship where our gifts only really benefit ourselves. Breaking social expectations and rules is deeply uncomfortable; we wouldn't be able to live with ourselves if we broke them, especially in the context of funerary and mourning rituals following the death of a

¹⁷ Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. Foreword by Mary Douglas. Routledge, (1925) 2002.

¹⁸ Interestingly, Mauss also believed that “one of the first groups of beings with which [humans] had to enter into contract... were above all the spirits of both the dead and of the gods” (Ibid, 16).

¹⁹ Derrida, Jacques, and Peggy Kamuf. “Given Time: The Time of the King.” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992): 161–87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343781>.

parent or grandparent given the deep roots of filial piety in Chinese culture. The guilt would be immense. Therefore, our gift to ourselves is the avoidance of such guilt and discomfort, which we can accomplish by performing the rituals we are expected to complete.²⁰

A Double Bind: The Heartfelt and the Performative

According to Derrida's radical forgetting, we have to forget the expectations of reciprocity that our gifts carry for our gifts to the dead to be genuine. On top of that, we would also need to *radically ignore* the fact that the dead will never reciprocate – an impossible task – rendering it selfish to enter a 'relationship' that we knew, from the start, would only serve ourselves. There are two sides to mourning: the authentic and the performative. Performative practices during the Hong Kong funeral and mourning period can still be sincere, but they will not be completely authentic as long as they are observed by an audience. The moment behavior is observed, it is performative on some level.

An example of this can be seen in Waters' claim that in Chinese culture, "close relatives, especially females, are expected to display grief." (Waters 1991, 105). This statement reveals a paradox: when the expression of a raw and genuine emotion becomes an *expectation*, it loses some of its authenticity. It has become socialized. In a similar vein, my mother shared her memory of the moment they closed her mother's casket.²¹ In those few seconds, the overwhelming realization that she would never see her mother's face again brought her to tears. As she watched the funeral master approach her through welling tears, my mother expected a few words of comfort. Instead, he simply told her to make sure her tears didn't land on the

²⁰ To clarify, performing expected rituals is not *solely* about absolving guilt. There is overlap between performing rituals for the benefit of the deceased as well as for oneself. The bereaved also deserve a sense of closure. Cheung (2006) writes that involvement in the preparation of the body before the funeral, for example, allows "the bereaved to "let go" of the beloved. It is a personal confirmation of the death of one's beloved" (p. 69).

²¹ Chan, Coasette (mother), interview by author, telephone interview, April 26th, 2025.

coffin. This illustrates the tension between heartfelt grief and the rule-ridden performance that culture and tradition demand are upheld. It seems that at a certain point, these sociocultural expectations can *hinder* the mourning process by tainting the authenticity of the bereaved's emotions and behavior.

Rites and Rules During the Mourning Period

Abnegation as Sacrifice: What is Prohibited, Sacrificed, or Given Up During Mourning?

January 25th, 2020 was just over a month after the funeral. It was the first day of Chinese New Year, so naturally we went to my grandfather's house for family gatherings, celebrations, good food, and red packets full of cash. When we got there, however, I saw that the apartment wasn't decorated like it was last year, nobody was wearing red, and the dish my grandfather would always bring out for his famous Chinese candy display was gathering dust in the cupboard. There were a few more fruit offerings and incense sticks in front of the Guanyin shrine than usual,²² but other than that, everything looked ordinary. I stayed quiet about my confusion. Eventually, my mom explained that we wouldn't be celebrating this year because there were to not to be any big celebrations in the year following the death of a close family member. I love Chinese New year, so this temporary renunciation felt a lot like a sacrifice.

Abnegation, the act of rejecting or renouncing something, is central to mourning rites in Chinese culture. Gang Chen conducted an ethnographic study in 1996 of mortuary rituals in a Sichuan village.²³ His paper details the common tradition of a 49-day mourning period wherein the bereaved family are "banned from all recreations" and required to "go to the tomb... and

²² The Guanyin bodhisattva, also known as Avalokiteśvara, is a Buddhist figure of ultimate compassion worshipped in many Buddhist households across Asia, including my grandparents'. They had a small shrine with her statue in their living room.

²³ Chen, Gang. "The Old Tradition in a New Setting: A Preliminary Study of Mortuary Ritual in a Chinese Village." *Journal of Ritual Studies* 10, no. 2 (1996): 41–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44398697>.

burn paper money and incense sticks” for the first two days after burial, and then every seventh day after that (Chen 1996, 47).

Blake’s ideas about duty and devotion as sacrifice in Hong Kong resonate when considering the connection between abnegation and filial piety. In the Confucian tradition, mourning is an important way to express filial piety, as continuing to participate in elaborate rituals after death demonstrates enduring respect and loyalty. The old tradition mandates a three-year mourning period after the death of a parent to reflect the three years of weaning in early life. During these three years, mourners abstain from certain foods, liquor, social activities, and even actions like haircutting and laughing.²⁴

Death as an Ongoing Event

Sacrificing recreational activities in honor of a deceased loved one is a gift because it requires time, sacrifice, and demonstrates care; an element of social relationships. Continuing to honor and give to someone after their death is to maintain a relationship with them even when they cannot give back. As Derrida argues, the essence of the gift is that it demands to be reciprocated. Why, therefore, do we continue to give to the dead as if they are alive?

The ideas of Robert Hertz are pertinent to this discussion. He argued that death is not a one-time biological event, as a completed life remains connected to the beliefs, emotions, and social practices of the bereaved living.²⁵ He writes, “We cannot bring ourselves to consider the deceased as dead straight away: he is too much part of our substance and we have put too much of ourselves in him, and participation in the same social life creates ties which are not severed in one day” (Hertz, 1960, 81). His theory helps us understand why the deceased in Hong Kong are

²⁴ Chan, Natalie (aunt), interview by author, telephone interview, May 1st, 2025.

²⁵ Hertz, Robert. *Death and the Right Hand*. Translated by Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham. London: Cohen & West, 1960.

treated, in many ways, like they are still alive. For instance, birthdays of the deceased continue to be celebrated every year. Furthermore, my grandmother does not benefit from our abstention from celebrations, social gatherings, or even laughter. Yet, Chinese culture considers it honorable to sacrifice personal enjoyment out of respect for her memory. We continue to give the gift of devotion, care, and sacrifice as if she were still alive. As Chen puts it, the “image of the significant other does not fade in the bereaved family for a long time” (Chen 1996, 48).

The Burden of Mourning

In conversation with my eldest aunt, she mentioned that certain abnegation practices, such as the prohibition on wearing bright colors, are becoming less common as more Hong Kongers view them as outdated. Adherence to these practices, however, is still case-by-case and often depends on the family, with even progressive families sometimes maintaining strict death rituals. This might be due to the gravity with which traditions related to death and the spiritual world are treated. This speaks to the sacred way we treat death practices, apparently a global phenomenon.²⁶

At one point during the funeral, I sat with my mother and her five siblings in the spirit hall, folding paper money together. They began reminiscing about a time as children when a few of them handed their pocket money to my grandmother for “safekeeping,” only to find out she spent it on groceries the next day. My aunts and uncles laughed softly as they recalled her defense: “Do you not need to be fed?!” I kept asking questions to keep my mother engaged and laughing; I hadn’t seen her genuinely smile in a while. Soon, one of the funeral assistants approached and reminded us that we shouldn’t be laughing. This again highlights the tension between authenticity and performance. There was no malice in our laughter, yet we were

²⁶ Ibid

expected to respect the mourning rite that expected abnegation of expressions of happiness. As we sat together, reminiscing wholesome moments while folding spirit money for her, our authentic, healing way of mourning was incompatible with the performance expected of us.

This connects back to the notion that certain aspects of funeral rites may impede the mourning process of the bereaved in the name of upholding tradition. It has been established that engaging with funeral rites is not only a gift of honor to the dead, but also a gift to the self, as our participation alleviates the guilt and discomfort that would undoubtedly come with non-participation. Thus, where should we draw the line? How much must we give, abnegate, and sacrifice – particularly when excess in any one of these areas, while seen as respectful to the dead, can be counterproductive or detrimental to the living? Perhaps acknowledging that we sometimes engage in cultural traditions for self-serving reasons could help us identify that boundary. The question, then, is: How do we admit that we are selfish – especially in the context of something as sensitive, taboo, and *feared* as death?

Gift Theory, The Hong Kong Funeral, and Closing Thoughts

Why Do We Continue to Give to the Dead?

We continue to give to the dead as a way to stay in relationships with them. Our continued time, effort, and energy is the living's way of showing a form of devotion, care, and duty that transcends the living realm into that of the spirits. All of these are gifts. As Hertz explains, death is an ongoing event, meaning while there is a biological time of death, socially and culturally speaking, a life cannot end in a day which is why death rituals continue long after a loved one passes on. In Hong Kong, one reason for this continued practice is deeply rooted in cultural traditions that emphasize filial piety. Another reason, less discussed due to social taboos, is that

the living need these rituals to navigate their own grief. A double bind is presented, however, when traditional, cultural practices hinder the grieving process more than they support it.

What Are the Dead Expected to Give Back to Us?

Mauss shows us that gifting underpins all of our social relationships, making it fundamental to our lives. I argue that the mere idea of being unable to reciprocate gifts – of losing this vital ability that enables us not only to survive in society, but to cultivate a vibrant social life – *terrifies* us. We feel immense sympathy for the dead because they have experienced this loss. In an effort to alleviate our anxieties for them, we give and give. We give so much that we have practically stretched ourselves to be on both sides of the once-reciprocal relationship since our deceased loved ones can no longer show up on their end.

In Hong Kong culture, many death rituals focus on protection. My interpretation of this is that the living project their fears about death and thus fill the funeral and mourning period with elaborate rituals intended to minimize danger for our loved ones. This manifests in various ways, from ensuring their financial and physical comfort by burning spirit money and lavish paper mansions, to mourning them deeply for up to three years and making sacrifices in their name to provide spiritual and filial protection.

I would go as far as to theorize that we are acutely aware that the dead cannot give back our gifts, therefore we don't believe they owe us anything back. We continue to give to the dead because the only thing worse than death taking away a loved one's ability to reciprocate one's gifts is the thought of oneself, the living individual, ceasing to give. Because then does the social relationship truly disintegrate, and the dead individual is lost to us completely.

I know that my grandmother can no longer reciprocate my gifts to her, and I don't expect her to. I continue, however, to honor her memory every year on Tomb Sweeping Day, Chinese New Year, and the anniversary of her death, because as long as I keep giving, she will not truly be gone to me.

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