

China (Confucianism)

Practices

Confucianism is sometimes considered a philosophy rather than a religion. Its emphasis is on secular ethics and morality. Additionally, it had no priesthood nor specific deities.

Older funerary practices were commonly used alongside Confucianist practices. It is not unusual to see a combination of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian practices at a funeral. One of the older practices commonly practiced in ancient times was termed *pungjang*, literally 'wind burial,' which involved wrapping the body in a straw mat and tying it to the branches of a tree; after the flesh had decomposed, the bones were gathered and buried or scattered. High ranking members of society were interred in stone chambers (K. *seoksil*). However, many still opted to bury their dead in pit-style graves; normally in the form of stone-lined graves (K. *seokgwangmyo*) or earthen pit graves (K. *ogwangmyo*). The stone-lined graves being earthen pits lined with roughly cut stones, while the latter are simple rectangular earthen pits.

Funeral rites did however evolve to specifically reflect Confucianist beliefs. Today funerals often start at death, when the relatives cry out aloud to inform the neighbors. Mourning garments are worn as prescribed by a person's relationship to the deceased. The site of the burial is selected using Fengshui principles so that it is auspicious. A reflection of the importance of selecting the correct site is the belief that "If ancestors are buried in an auspicious site, their descendants will prosper in this world."¹ When the coffin is interred friends and family follow the coffin to the cemetery, holding a willow branch, which symbolizes the soul of the person who has died.² Ancient practices followed the *Jia li* (book of Family Rituals) by using graves with a bottom layer of charcoal that were then cement-lined.³ These graves were created out of the belief that the bones of the deceased deserved to be treated with respect. Bodies were found in wooden coffins and niches where carved in which were placed miniature burial goods. Burial goods typically included ceramic vessels, bronze spoons and miniature replicates of everyday items. Precious items were not buried as they were considered a burden to the deceased.⁴

Deities and Important Concepts

- Reliance on the concept of family to deal with death. That the ancestor will be honored and the family will survive.
- Death is seen as being out of the control of the individual and part of Heaven's mandate. Thus it is not seen as proper to over mourn someone's death, but to accept it as part of a natural passage.
- The best way of achieving immortality is by establish moral virtues, the next best is to accomplish magnificent feats, and the least is to hand down classic writings, lasting and unfading. The most practical way to achieving immortality is to hand down classic writings, since this is something everyone can do.

Modern Adaptations

- Start the ceremony by crying out that the loved one is dead and that you honor his/her memory with your tears.
- Speak of how the physical remains of our dead are as precious as an antique. That they serve as a reminder of the person to whom they belonged.
- Bury small inexpensive representations of everyday things. You might use items for doll houses for this purpose.

¹ Bryant, Clifton D., and Dennis L. Peck, eds. "Confucian Beliefs and Traditions." *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 222-23. <http://books.google.com/books?id=LFOn7rpkVdQC>

² "Confucianism Practices." *Confucianism Practices*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Jan. 2013.

<http://www.shangrila.org/father/RELIGIONS/7Confucianism/Practices.html>

³ Horlyck, Charlotte. *Confucian Burial Practices in the Late Goryeo and Early Joseon Period*. N.p.: n.p., n.d.42. Web. 10 Jan. 2013. <http://tinyurl.com/atzmkit>

⁴ *Ibid.* pg 48.

- Have everyone carry a willow branch as the coffin is taken to the burial site. Explain that the branch symbolizes the soul of the person who died. Explain that each of use carries the memory of that soul with us, just as we carry the willow branch.
- Hand out a small book of Confucius sayings dedicated to the deceased.

Sample Readings

- Death and life have their determined appointments; riches and honors depend upon heaven.
- In the ceremonies of mourning it is better that there be deep sorrow than a minute attention to observances. (Analects, bk. iii., c. iv., v. 3.)
- On remembering your dead parents
When early dawn unseals my eyes, before my mind my parents rise. (Shi King, "the Book of Odes")

Resources

Korean Funeral Rites

http://www.asianinfo.org/asianinfo/korea/cel/funeral_rites.htm