

# Happy Funeral: Tearless Farewell

By MAJORIE CHIEW

DEATH is a sad, grim affair but when it comes at the ripe old age of 100, apparently it's a different story altogether. The Chinese do not mourn when an elder who has lived for almost a century passes on. Instead, a quaint funeral rite or siew song (Cantonese for "happy funeral") is held in his honour.

"It is regarded as a happy funeral because the elder is considered lucky to have lived to such an old age. No mourning or crying takes place, & #8217; ' says Ong Seng Huat, vice-chairman of the Federation of Malaysian Taoist Organisations.

According to Chinese custom, three years will be added to a person's age when he dies. So an elder who was 97 would be regarded as being 100 years old.

However, Ong says that three other conditions must be met before the elder can be buried according to the customary rites of a happy funeral. First, the deceased must have attained a five-generation lineage, including himself; second, no descendant should die before this elder; and third, it is compulsory for all descendants to turn up to pay their last respects and to participate in the funeral rites.

"Even if one descendant is overseas and unable to turn up for the funeral, this rite cannot take place, "says Ong.

With such restrictions, it would appear that a happy funeral is a near-impossible scenario.

"Over the years, the Chinese have relaxed conditions to carry out such funeral rites. Some families conduct a siew song if death involves an elder who is 80 years and above.

"Red, which is associated with a happy or auspicious occasion, dominates a siew song. A pair of red lanterns is hung to mark the death and red candles (instead of the usual white) are lit. The deceased is also garbed in red 'longevity clothes' (special clothing for the dead)," explains Ong.

Chinese customs dictate that if the person passes away at home, the coffin is placed inside the house. But if the person dies elsewhere (like in a hospital or in a traffic accident), the coffin is placed in the compound outside the house.

However, sometimes the family of the deceased might want the body to be

placed inside the house even if the deceased did not die at home. In such cases, another traditional rite has to be carried out.

Citing the case of a banker who was shot dead by his kidnappers some years ago, Ong says that the man's family decided to put his body in the house because his life was deemed incomplete if he died outside the house.

The family members arranged for his body to be brought back in a car, and he was dressed in a suit. The main doorway was hung with a red cloth to welcome him. Only after he was helped across the threshold of his house, did the family members started crying and mourning for him.

Hakka Taoist priest Choo Kong Yow of Kepong, Selangor, says when a Chinese elder dies at 94, he is deemed to be close to 100, so red lanterns can be hung up at his funeral.

"Three years are added to the deceased's age according to Chinese customs. Then there's also the bonus years in which one month is added for every three years of one's life. In the case of a 94-year-old, he would gain another two-and-half years, on top of the obligatory three years, which makes him close to a 100," says Choo.

"The descendants would wear red, and a red cloth would be hung across the doorway reminiscent of a wedding. There will be no mourning and the band will play happy tunes, not sad ones. Even the priest will wear a red robe instead of yellow when performing the chanting."

Choo adds that a feast will be held where there will be a free flow of food and even beer and wine. Depending on the family budget, a wake can be held for three, five or seven days.

Funeral parlours are big business in Hong Kong as the locals do not like to hold a wake in their homes.

"The Hong Kong Chinese believe that a house is meant for the living, not the dead," says Choo. "It's bad feng shui if a funeral has taken place; it will result in a drop in property price."

After the funeral, some families distribute gifts of sau woon (longevity bowl) and sau fai (longevity chopsticks) to friends and kin in the hope that they will receive good luck and live a long life, adds Choo.

"In the southern parts of the Peninsula such as Tangkak and Muar in Johor, and in Malacca, funeral rites are still carried out in a very traditional way. For the siew

song, red is the predominant colour, from the cloth hanging over the main doorway to the lanterns, candles, tables and chairs," says Lee Kee Kiong, managing director of a funeral parlour in Petaling Jaya.

In a normal funeral, the children and daughters-in-law don black to signify that they grieve the most, sons-in-law wear white, grandchildren are in blue, while great-grandchildren are garbed in light green.

"In Kuala Lumpur, if the elder is less than 100 years old, a half-red ceremony will be held," says Lee. "Family members will be dressed in white and wear a red waistband. They will also wear coloured cloth tags on their arms to represent their order in the family. "

In a happy funeral, Lee says the altar is usually decked in red. But in the Klang Valley, some families would deck the altar in light yellow cloth and line a red cloth on the table.

"Paper sedan chairs are used for the happy funeral of the Hokkiens, but not the Hakkas and Cantonese," says Lee. "The sedan chair symbolises the transport for the soul. For the Hokkiens from Eng Choon district in Fujian Province, China, two sedan chairs are used. The small sedan chair is burnt in front of the house during the funeral, while the big sedan chair is taken to the cemetery and carried around the grave. It will then be taken to the home of the deceased where it is kept for three (five or seven) days before it is burnt. "

Nilai Memorial Park sales and marketing director Nancy Choo Yuen Sze says: "Some-times a sedan chair is used for a happy funeral and four grandchildren will carry it for a short distance, after which it will be transported to the cemetery.

"If the deceased is a man, the top of the chair will have a qi ling, a legendary sacred animal which symbolises peace and good luck. If it is a woman, a white crane with open wings will decorate the top of the chair. The bird is also regarded as a vehicle for immortals. To simplify matters, some sedan chairs have a red flower ball made of cloth, regardless of the sex of the deceased. "

Choo adds that the deceased will be dressed in expensive goldthread longevity clothes and covered with a red blanket. Some Chinese will place a red cloth on top of the casket. After the funeral, the family of the deceased will keep the cloth for good luck. A red flower ball will also be placed on top of the photograph of the deceased to indicate a happy funeral.

According to Asso Prof Soo Khin Wah, head of Chinese Studies Department, Universiti Malaya, "the descendants of the elder in a siew song need not wear black or white which are mourning colours. They can wear normal clothes. There

is no need to shed tears because the family members do not consider the death a sad affair. The elder is seen as a lucky individual who has lived to a fulfilling age. "

"When a happy funeral takes place, the elder is assumed to have died happily for he has completed his mission in life with five generations to the family line. So he can leave this world in peace, "adds Ong.