ABSTRACT

Despite modernisation, traditional death rituals are still prevalent among Chinese in Singapore with inevitable adaptation. This academic exercise attempts to discuss the significance of death rituals to the Chinese and seeks to review their changes in attitudes towards the forms and styles of such death rituals.

The study begins with an exploration of the Chinese religious belief as this is the fundamental basis of Chinese funeral rites. It is a synthetical religious system comprising elements from Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and traditional indigenous beliefs with Confucian value 'Xiao' (filial piety) as the most salient value upholding the practice of traditional death rituals.

Moreover, death ceremonies also involve a complex system of presentation with significant meanings, which are of social, psychological and spiritual importance to both the dead and the living.

Death rituals among the Chinese in Singapore are constantly being modified and adapted to reflect the evolving social structure. Changes in ritual performances reflect changes in attitudes such as greater concern for the living than the dead, and more important, scant-knowledge of ritual
symbolism results in simplification of traditional death rituals. The growing apathy of young Chinese Singaporeans towards traditional rites has also resulted in some forms of death rituals becoming corrupted and vulgarised. Such trend is worrying because of its erosive effect upon the Chinese tradition.

This academic exercise also discusses conflict which arises between proponents of Chinese death rituals and followers of Christianity (Protestants in particular). The conflict lies mainly in the area of ancestor worship. Whether the practice of 'ancestor worship' among the Chinese is mere memorialism or spirit-worship has been a matter of debate for many years. The fact that the Chinese perform the ceremonies of ancestor worship with the aim to avoid calamities and to secure worldly prosperity shows that in popular ancestor worship the element of religion is so strong as to justify the term 'worship'.

The concluding part of this academic exercise suggests that Chinese traditional death rituals must adapt to the changing social environment in order not to become outdated and extinct. In the process of modification, younger generation must be taught of the meaning and significance of their rich cultural heritage. This imperative task lies in the hands of government, academic scholars and influential clan organisations among Chinese community.