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**A Disappearing Part of Traditional Taiwanese
Culture---**

**Professional Funeral Mourners: A Case Study of a
Family Funeral Business**

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Death is inevitable in our life.

Funerals are a special expression of our culture.

A Taiwanese funeral consists of a multitude of rituals and customs. Each and every one of them has its own special meaning, both cultural and historical.

Funeral traditions and practices within a culture reflect not only its history but also its current religious beliefs, community values, social framework, educational level, and the degree of government regulation.

A funeral is a way for the bereaved to express their emotions to the deceased. Often in Taiwanese culture funeral traditions have arisen to help the bereaved to adapt to life without the deceased.

Funerals can bring the family members closer, and develop stronger bonds.

Family story

There is a family, who has for decades devoted themselves to the traditional funeral industry. Their story starts from a young Taiwanese opera singer, who had changed her career to become a professional mourner, which is a profession that plays an important role in Taiwanese funerals. This profession's task was to help the bereaved to release their emotions and send messages of comfort to the deceased.

She started from doing what is known in Chinese as the ritual of "5 Sons Wailing at the Tomb".

This traditional ritual is a way of letting the deceased know his children are successful and hardworking, so that they may rest in peace without regrets.

Introduction of "5 Sons Ritual"

In ancient times, the bereaved had to engage the service of a performer who could carry out the ritual of "5 Sons Wailing at the Tomb". This custom symbolizes that the descendants of the deceased are sad to say goodbye and all mourn for the passing away of the deceased.

Grandmother:

Five people, symbolizing five sons, cry at the grave. They cry for the deceased's spirit and then for the grave. It symbolizes filial duty.

As times changed, the funeral industry was getting more and more competitive. She decided to diversify her career.

Grandmother's story

Grandmother:

I have done this job for a long time. Then times changed, and the ritual of "5 Sons Wailing at the

Tomb” became less and less popular. Someone created another similar profession called “professional funeral mourners”. At that time, I thought our ritual of “5 Sons Wailing at the Tomb” had been on the wane. Others could earn their living through the newer profession of “professional funeral mourners”. Fine, we could do this, too. So I switched to be a “professional funeral mourner” rather than do the “5 Sons” ritual.

Funeral mourners, also known as professional funeral wailers, are to guide and help the bereaved to release their deepest grief and loss in the most natural way—crying.

Ms. Liu:

You keep weeping day after day till you don’t have any tears left , and then it is not so easy to let out your emotions on the day when the funeral is held in public. So we are hired to help them to express their feelings.

Professor Lin from Chinese Literature Department in NTNU:

The mourner’s job is to guide the bereaved, and to create the atmosphere for sorrow. Many family members are too numb to cry, but they can when they get some trigger. By singing and chanting, the professional mourners create a unique atmosphere which not only touches everyone’s heart, but also links up the special connection between the dead and the bereaved.

The job requires a lot of physical and mental effort.

Grandmother:

I played a role as a daughter and led crying in front of the family members. Daughters had to cry in the front, and they still have to, at present time. If a person, especially an elder in the family, passed away, family members have to crawl on the floor from the door to the coffin. After they crawl to the position, they can prostrate themselves and cry for the elderly deceased. Professional mourners cry on the funeral day. They cry in front of the coffin, walk around it, fall on their knees, and prostrate to the deceased. They keep crying to see the deceased off. If the coffin is taken to some other destination, they’ll cry at the final destination of the coffin.

In the fast-developing 70s, life was getting harder. The lady had become a grandmother, who had lost her daughter at a young age. Her job as a mourner couldn’t supply the whole family’s need. Therefore, she trained her grand children as her helpers at work; also she taught them all the required skills of professional mourners.

Grandmother:

At first I did the job myself. But because of the living conditions were not that good, I asked my eldest granddaughter to help me. That was the time of the ritual of “5 Sons Wailing at the Tomb”.

After that, I switched to be a professional mourner. She still helped me, my eldest granddaughter, and went to school at the same time. When she was in school, I told her times were very hard, and the living conditions were bad so I asked her to help.

After the years of tough training, the oldest granddaughter then started to take part in many different funerals.

However, the family had many difficulties; in times like those, all of the children sacrificed their free time to help get through the hard times.

Brother:

My mother left home when I was little. She came back when I was in my third grade. Because she was interested in becoming a professional mourner, my grandmother just let her try. She had worked as a professional mourner till I was about in the ninth grade. I don't know the reason, but she just made the living conditions worse. Afterwards my mother passed away, so my grandmother had to work again. When she started to work again, there were not enough people to help out, and my sister was still young. So we had to hire others to help.

But there were still some funeral directors sympathizing with us, a family with only old people and little kids. They supported us, phoned us to work and said they would pay us as usual. Later I worked with my elder sister. She was the professional mourner and I was the musical accompanist. Later on, because everybody worked together, the living conditions become better. The youngest girl, Jun-lin, also started her career at an early age.

Ms. Liu:

In fact, I didn't work as a professional funeral mourner at first. I performed in "Spirit Leading" at the beginning. It was owing to the death of my parents and the shortage of helpers that I started to do this job when I was eleven years old. I had followed my elder brother and sister, and learned to be a professional funeral mourner when I was eighteen.

君伶說這一行(narration of Jun-lin the little sister)

Ms. Liu:

Lots of our material originated from Taiwanese Opera. The reputation of our business is enhanced by my grandmother. She used to put on many Taiwanese Opera performances. When the Taiwanese Opera industry declined, she started doing the "5 Sons Wailing at the Tomb" ritual. After she did that job for a long time, she started her own business hiring my mom as the professional mourner, at the same time taught my sister the skills, and had my brother play the traditional instruments and be the Taoist monk in funerals. After that we all joined for "Spirit Leading"

Her elder sister had received some strict training and she had worked extra hard. She is now one of the most professional funeral mourners, and also the youngest.

Ms. Liu:

It was tough. Every morning I got up at five or six o'clock to be forced to drink vinegar in order to make it easier to stretch my body. But all kids like to sleep in especially in winter time; it was hard to get up. And grandma would beat us if we didn't get out of the bed.

We had to do warm-ups such as stretching and leg-splitting.

After all this process, it gave me a great sense of accomplishment.

My sister thinks we may be looked down upon by others because we do not have our father and mother. She doesn't want others to think we children who have no parents are all naughty and bad. So she always says no matter what, you just learn the skills and you can always support yourself.

Prejudice and bias are everywhere in this society. Many people discriminate against funeral workers.

Ms. Liu:

This job is not an easy thing to do and it is disdained by others, but now I get used to it anyway.

People suppose we are in the lowest of the working class. Some people who hire us throw money on the floor, and if we want it, we have to take it by the mouth. But at the time you are going to grip it, they take it away and say "Come! Come!" to us. You bend your waist and follow, and then they keep taking the money away from me.

In spite of the harsh situation, this family still sticks to their belief, work hard and insist upon being respectable workers. For them, the best prize these jobs can offer is to see the smile on the bereaved and complete their work perfectly.

Ms. Liu:

Sometimes you feel a sense of accomplishment when the family members appreciate what we have done in the funeral, and they keep offering their

thanks. You would forget everything as they say a word "thanks" to you.

You don't care whether how much the amount of money is. One word "thanks" is enough. You have done your best and have been appreciated. That is a pleasure!

Brother:

Once we go out for work, all of our team members, including myself and all my family, are told to do our utmost no matter how people react. I consider the reactions of the bereaved after we finish our work. Their compliments are the strongest support for our next performance.

Meaningful Inside

Many people may not know this but all the rituals and customs in a funeral have their own special meanings. They not only pay respect, send messages, please the deceased, but also they are part of

history and traditional morality.

“Spirit leading” is a perfect example.

“Spirit leading” or “Leading the souls” is a kind of ritual that guides the soul of the deceased through the tasks he faces when arriving the underworld. The deceased soul will be brought to trial, and be judged by the kings of the underworld. The ritual is to help them pass all the judgments, and lead the soul to heaven. At the same time, it warns the living to stay away from evildoing, for they may not escape judgment of the underworld or make it to heaven.

The Meaning of “Spirit Leading”

The lyrics and chanting of “spirit leading” can be traced back to ancient times. The script was written in ancient Chinese; by singing and reciting, the spirit leaders have spontaneously kept this historical culture alive for thousands of years.

Brother:

“Spirit leading” is based on a liturgy, a written script, which details what barriers the deceased’s spirit has to pass. We sing the script for the deceased’s spirit in order to lead them to through all the barriers in the underworld. We chant the directions from on barrier to another to guide the deceased to pass all the trials. So “spirit leading” has its own basis to substantially help the deceased.

In Taiwanese culture, however, the traditional funeral industry isn’t treated as a respectable business. Death has always been a taboo, and jobs involved in the funeral business are considered inauspicious. The funeral industry is declining, because misunderstanding and bias of the public have obscured the industry’s virtuous essence.

Though many big funeral directing companies are swallowing up the small groups, this family still believe that, little by little, they can change the society, and do their best to spread true virtue and morality to the world.

Brother:

Society nowadays has been changing so much, but I believe we should retain some traditional customs, something meaningful like what we are doing now.

What professional funeral mourners do is more than crying. They try to play the role of “daughters”, talking, crying or even expressing their regret for their parents, which may remind the funeral attendees that they often argue with their parents over some trifles, and in this way they may be touched and start to cherish the time spent with their family.

Therefore, what professional funeral mourners do really means a lot to some people?

So does “Spirit leading”. Some sections of leading the souls through the underworld are positive. There are some pictures that describe what the underworld you are going to is like. If you have lied,

stolen, or done anything evil in your life, the reflections will appear in the mirror placed in the underworld after you die. Every barrier you pass has a certain judgment. We influence some people who attend the funeral by chanting the lines and singing. The participants may remember the consequence of doing bad things after listening. I, myself taught my nephew in his childhood not to lie or his tongue will be cut off.

All these rituals have their essential ideas or some positive meanings. It is not just my personal job but also I intend to promote the culture. It is not only for earning my own livelihood. In my own opinion, still, there is something essential to deliver

Innovation of the business

The funeral industry is not only a symbol of tradition, but it is also dynamic, active, and always changes with time. The family changes the ancient Chinese- written lyrics into comprehensible Mandarin. They change the old tunes the mourner sings into popular melodies. When the public are no longer satisfied with the old practices, they invent something new; something more interesting and more impressive.

Brother:

I am not saying I'm good at everything. But I suppose we never stop making some changes, such as the language the mourner uses. In former days, like the Taiwanese Opera, when it comes to singing, some of the lyrics are mixed up with the ancient language terms and phrases and the new terms used nowadays.

In fact, some of the ancient terms, we the younger generation cannot understand them. So, we innovate all the time. The original meaning is still there, but we change it into more like the words we speak today to make it more easily understood by the public.

Like the Taiwanese Opera, the funeral mourner industry was born in the 1960s. In the 1990s. If you still follow the steps of the 60s, it's not hard to guess that young people cannot understand what we are doing. So no matter if it is the form of the music or the language we use, the lyrics, we all keep innovating.

For example the mourners in northern Taiwan, no one sang in Mandarin Chinese before, normally in Taiwanese. But we think we have the need to sing in Mandarin Chinese and so do the employers. We have to innovate, so now we also do the Mandarin ones.

People are becoming more demanding and will ask you more. We cannot just follow the older ways with only three girls walking around and singing. This can no longer meet the standard of the employers. Sometimes one session takes forty or fifty minutes to one hour, and people can't sit still at the funeral and no longer have the patience to watch. People leave and just we are left to finish the performance. Frankly speaking, we feel very ashamed if that happens. We feel guilty because

we have done everything but no one else has participated in our performance.

Our first change was splendid, which was the changes to our costumes. To begin with the changes of the dress, and then we divided the stage into two areas: the front area and back area. Three girls danced in the front while in the back the Taoist monk chanted the mantra to the music. So the performance could attract more attention of the funeral attendants. It then evolved to forms of acrobatics. Despite the acrobatic tricks added to the funeral, the root of cultural meaning is still here. We remain the meaning of “spirit leading” to guide the spirit to the Pure Land of the Western Paradise. The origin isn’t changed, so it doesn’t matter much to add these things to a funeral. The public can accept it, so we continue to wear more shining costumes and perform acrobatic tricks, and play the torch.

The disappearance of the business

The decline of funeral industry is happening really fast. Fewer and fewer people understand the true meaning of the performance, and inevitably, these precious rituals and traditions are gradually fading.

Ms. Liu:

The difficulty is that not many people are willing to learn this. The newcomers that join our family are the ones from impoverished families. They might stick around for a while but then leave us to a better-paid funeral directing company. We have no way to make a contract with them.

Grandma:

People who chose or wanted to do the job were living in want or in difficult positions. How could a rich person choose to do this?

People don't view this kind of career as a profession. The government pays very little respect to it. The public don't know the meaningful and historical culture the traditional funeral practices bear. People just pay attention to its old-fashioned, unpretentious outside, but never willing to comprehend the virtuous and cultural message inside.

Ms. Liu:

The government thinks we are nothing. They won't consider there are people who need this industry. Perhaps the people don't have any child.

Some mass media reported they hired us to wake up the dead by noise.

The government gives us stress because they think we are bad for the community. They put us together with the “stage truck performers.” They suppose we are all of one kind.

Professor Lin from Chinese Literature Department in NTNU:

This kind of job can still give the society some positive influence, but they need some changes, they need to improve the way they present themselves. The part that needs urgent reform is to stop using

microphones.

Ms. Liu:

There are lots of people around when we do our job outdoors. We need our techniques. And sometimes when two funerals take place at the same time, two mourners start to compete with one another. They want their voice to be heard but so do we want our voice to be loud. People who hire us would wonder why they have to give away their money to us if the voice of the mourner isn't heard.

Brother:

Problems about the environment are urgent to be solved, the loud speakers for example.

Perhaps now people prefer a quiet living environment and can no longer accept the noise of a loud funeral. But actually all this can be changed.

The government makes some restriction and regulations of the sound and noise, and it is a big blow to this industry...

In this case, we have no way to make a living. If we want to keep doing this, I think our strength is limited.

The government is blind to the strong threats to this industry. Serious problems will arise all over Taiwan, because the government is narrowing the opportunities for the lower class' living and deprives them of job opportunities.

Brother:

The government forbids this kind of job invariably without an appropriate vocational guidance policy. They aimed to put us on a dead end in this way. For instance, many big businesses are moving out of Taiwan. However, we can't go to mainland China for work, can we? Therefore, it will cause chaos in society if things become over regulated, I think.

The room for this industry is getting smaller. What should they do? No one knows the exact answer.

Brother:

If there are no stages, you won't have places to perform even though you want to. This stage has been disappearing. It doesn't have a profitable niche. Even the "Eight Household Generals" is supported by the traditional art center, and promoted to the worldwide stage. But many people, including our government think our performance is out of tune with the times. They just don't care.

Brother:

How do we preserve our business? It's difficult. We do as much as we can. If there are thirty people in one funeral, we want all of them to think it is worth it to spend the money on us.

They spend this money and receive what they want. We try to communicate with the family members to see what their needs are. We can discuss with them, talk to them and then make the

decision on how they want the rituals to be done.

For us the most important thing is: when we stand on the stage we just conscientiously perform what we want to express and make the show understood. That's it. There is no other way! Perhaps now there is no other choice for this industry but to continue to shrink. We do hope we can keep doing it, but if there is nothing left, we can do nothing about it. Then of course it comes to an end. What we can do now is just to do our job well and keep preparing for the next funeral. That's all.



This is a story about a family in Taiwan. It is the family members that continue this traditional industry.

This path of passing on the family tradition somehow seems to get more and narrower as they keep going on.

And the scenery along this path is much more different than it used to be when they first started it.

“Let bygones be bygones!” cried some people.

But should we?

The setting sun casts long shadows. Taiwan is not the only place that watches the sunset.

The sun also sets on other horizons.

Aren't there other chances to change?

In our life, how many times do we walk past these people who strive to preserve the dying culture?

Can we break the mold of stereotypes that is deeply rooted in our mind and to behold them in an alternative aspect?

From this family story, we not only realize how much they have paid for this industry to survive nowadays, but also understand the meaning behind the customs.

You and I may be from different cultures; you and I may see things in a different way; but we all have seen these kinds of people—people who are marginalized, and yet struggling to shine until the day they can't.

Let us learn to hold other attitudes to view and to respect them; and to cherish the unique beauty of the declining sun's reflection on the sea.