



Funerals

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Conversations · the wake · the spirit chair

WHEN Over several nights, and you will be there as a guest.

BEFORE YOU USE ANY OF THIS

Your book says this plainly and it belongs at the top of the page, not the bottom: if your friend is mourning someone recently dead, be a friend. Be present. Provide comfort. Do not start a spiritual conversation. These talks are for when the timing is neutral — which means this page is for reading beforehand, and probably not for using on the night.

There are two forms, Taoist and Buddhist, and syncretism means you will usually see parts of both. Watch for one thing above all: what still gets burned after the ceremony that was supposed to have already brought the deceased out.

01 What you will see

You are a guest at a wake. Observe, and say almost nothing.

- A chair at the foot of the coffin, dressed in the deceased's clothes, usually with a photograph — the spirit is held to reside there through the wake.
- Food and joss incense offered to the spirit chair.
- In the Taoist form: a priest, a procession circling the coffin on the final night, bridges to be crossed.
- In the Buddhist form: no circling, no bridges — priests chanting and praying for a few hours each night.
- Even at a Buddhist wake: the spirit chair, land bought from the king of Hell, and an effigy of the deceased and a paper house burned.
- And after the crossing ceremony has been performed: money and goods still being burned.

The words your friend will use

Three terms, and the third is the one to hold on to.

The spirit chair

A chair at the foot of the coffin dressed in the deceased's clothes, where the spirit is believed to sit through the wake. Offered food and incense like a guest.

Buying land from the king of Hell

A purchase made on the deceased's behalf. Note what it assumes about where they have gone.

Crossing over

The Taoist ceremony ushering the departed out of Hell and into Paradise. It is performed — and then the burning continues anyway.

The ceremony is performed, and then nobody relies on it

Your book's sharpest observation is here and it is made almost in passing. The crossing-over ceremony is supposed to bring the deceased out of Hell. Yet the effigy, the house and the money are still burned afterwards. If the ceremony had settled it, none of that would be necessary. The practice itself testifies that the family are not sure — and Heaven, in this system, was never theirs to decide. It belongs to the judge of the first court.

Where the two meet

Everything in this section leads to one question, and a funeral is where it becomes unavoidable.

Does something happen to us after we die?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes, and it matters enormously what.	Yes.
BOTH HOLD THIS	
Is there a judge?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes — the judge of the first court decides, not the family and not the priest.	Yes. And likewise not ours to decide.
BOTH HOLD THIS	
Can the living buy the dead a better outcome?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
It is attempted — land, money, a house, an effigy.	No.
HERE THEY PART	
Can anyone know where they have gone?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
No. There is no guarantee of Heaven. The default assumption is Hell — which is why the money is burned.	Yes, and this is the whole difference. Assurance is offered, and it rests on someone else's finished work rather than on ours.
HERE THEY PART	
Is the outcome permanent?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
No — a spirit may graduate out over time.	Yes. Which is heavier, not lighter, and should be said as such.
HERE THEY PART	

The hinge

The money is only burned if you believe the deceased has gone to Hell and needs it.

That is your own sentence and it is the strongest line in the book, because it is not an argument — it is a description. Nobody burns money for a person they believe is safe. Every paper house, every purchase of land, every offering after the crossing ceremony is a family saying, in the only language available to them, that they do not know and cannot rest. Assurance is not a bonus feature of the gospel here. It is the entire point of contact. And it is the one thing this system, by its own admission, cannot give — Heaven was never the family's to decide.

Things you could actually say

Not at the wake. Weeks later, over coffee, when nothing is raw.

Can I ask you about your father's funeral — not to be nosy, I just didn't understand what was happening.

The chair with his clothes on it. Was that comforting, or was it hard?

Somebody told me the money is burned because you assume they need it. Is that right?

After the priest did the crossing ceremony, why did the burning carry on?

The thing I'd want you to know is that I'm not braver than you about dying. I just think somebody already paid, so I've stopped trying to. I don't expect you to agree — I'd just hate for you to think I have it sorted out on my own.

Leave it open

Especially here, nothing gets settled today. Your friend has buried someone. The most that should happen is that a door is left unlocked.

