

# Equatorial Research Centre for Ritual & Ancestor Worship: on love when distance across realms is incomprehensible

By Salty Xi Jie Ng

Dan yih jia ho, hui sio bo, yih dio zao liao.

*When she's done eating, and the candles are out, she's gone again.*

## Legend

(In order of appearance)

(.) --- Salty Xi Jie Ng

**TTBW** --- Through the Bamboo Window: Chinese Life and Culture in 1950s  
Malaya & Singapore, by Leon Comber, 2009

**RM** --- Religion & Modernization— A Study Of Changing Rituals Among  
Singapore's Chinese, Malays & Indians, by Tham Seong Chee, 1985

**VRX** --- Venerable Ren Xu from Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery,  
where the author's late grandmother's remains are interred. His words are  
translated from Mandarin.

**YIPO** --- adopted younger sister of the author's late grandmother (Yipo means  
grandaunt in Hokkien). Some of her words are translated from \*Hokkien.

**CDRS** --- Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore, by Tong Chee Kiong, 2004

**BC** --- Bernard Chen, historian and previous funeral industry professional

**AT** --- Alex Teo, third generation owner of Ban Kah Hiang Trading, Chinese  
religious goods merchant in Jalan Bukit Merah

**CAWM** --- Chinese Ancestor Worship in Malaya, by Leon Comber, 1954  
(Second Ed 1963)

**AZQ** --- Ang Ziqian, fourth generation owner of Ang Chin Moh Funeral  
Directors

**AGLG** --- Adam (altered name), volunteer and long time devotee at 檁林宮  
(Gao Lin Gong), historic temple at Ang Mo Kio Ave 1

\*Hokkien (福建话 or Fujian hua) is a Chinese language originating from the  
coastal region of Fujian province in Southern China. Often referred to as a  
dialect, it is widely spoken by the Chinese diaspora in Singapore and other  
parts of Southeast Asia. Taiwanese is a close cousin of Southeast Asian  
Hokkien.



*my hokkien is good now, right?*

the last time you were able to talk, you spoke only in Hokkien, i was with you, i was thankful, my tongue

wa zizun dih lih eh bang geng xia jid eh, lih kua dio bo?

*i'm writing this from your room, do you see me?*

sorry not sorry i messed up your ultra neat room ha ha ha <>

三魂七魄: When a man dies the seven spirits that preside over his seven senses die with him, but his soul survives and lodges in three places. One soul ascends to Heaven to enjoy the delights of Paradise, one soul stays in the grave to receive the sacrifices in its honour, and the third soul remains with the spirit tablet in the ancestral shrine, where at regular times throughout the year, members of the family meet to perform the customary rites of ancestor worship. <sup>TTBW</sup>

(.) I'm looking for all your souls and did one ascend? I want to find all the fragments of you, not to piece you back together again, because that would be impossible, but just to be able to say, my paternal grandma, my closest relation, my Mama, is there and there and there and there. Never really here again. But all the many theres that I can name even if I cannot go. <>

In The Interpretation of Social Reality, Max Weber wrote: "Concrete life situations...would push human beings to resort to accessible and tangible means such as magic or rituals in order to solve the immediate problems of existence...the performance of rituals is inherent in human existence and not necessarily dependent on social structures per se." Man's search for solutions will continue to be multi-dimensional. <sup>RM</sup>

(.) My theory: one soul in heaven (\*angmoh or Chinese or general), one soul in your urn at Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery (the mega Buddhist temple in Bishan which we call KMS), one in your ancestral tablet at Singapore Buddhist Lodge (Gu Si Lin in Hokkien), one at the shrine I made for you in your room, where four cute little bones I picked from your cremated remains rest gently in a tiny porcelain box waiting for bones from your husband, my grandfather, after his exhumation.

\*The Hokkien slang for white person, literally meaning "red hair"

(The foundation of the shrine is your 40-year-old glass bedside table. The box, swaddled with lavender-coloured paper stuffing from Thomson Plaza, is in the smallest Tupperware the size of your palm, with a photo of you pasted on it—you're in an evening gown, fat wobbly arms over your head forming an arc, a big obliging grin plastered on your face. Is it funny that this is where you are resting in your room? Right next to the worn out IKEA armchair on which you sat and dozed off to TV every night, your double chin spilling out across your rose powdered neck. I still say goodnight to you here every night before I sleep.)

The last piece of your soul is the one that will be reincarnated. Is this the consistent soul that gets reborn lifetime after lifetime? If so, this is the one I will meet again, and again, and again. <>

如果和亲人有未解的缘，有可能性在后生和他们见面。但是说我们反复没有办法一直把过去的记忆储存，然后到下一世还记得，说哦，这个人是我的奶奶。那一生可能变得另外一种关系。我们凭人类的智慧说... 是没有能力认知的。但是佛陀肯定会知道。

*There is the possibility that we may meet loved ones again in a future life if we have unresolved karma, but one cannot go to a next life and say, this person was my grandmother. The connection will remain but roles might be reversed—there are infinite possibilities. We cannot know such things. But Buddha knows.*<sup>VRX</sup>

YIPO: Lih gia do deng pang dua meng chud lai gua kao. Ai jid wah peng. Kuay bah, sio bah, dih bah, eh sai. Ai dok—pai sin gah eh sai gui jia, bai gong ma si ai dok. Ah bah mai bai hor. Ah bah aid dan sa ni. Dan bai liao ho yi beh beh kih. Ah jidsang dih, jid gi tng si, yi ga eh sai gia cai mah.

*Put a table near the entrance of your house. Get a bowl of rice. Chopped pork or chicken—for gods you pray with the whole chicken, for relatives you have to chop it. No duck, until three years after her death. Later she become white and skinny! Spoon and chopsticks, so she can take the food.*

Geh zee- peng geh, ciam, peh, tao jiam jiam hi ki eh —yih suka simi geji? Yi ai jia liu lian! Wa masi ai liu lian. Buay huat ge. Bai huat. Huat ge siong ho, lih nang eh sai huat. Ah yi ai jia lor mee hah? Ah, kana ki yih ma suka. Tau kwa, dong ai bai tau kwa, soon ga eh zoh gua.

*Fruits—apples, oranges, pointy-tip pears—what fruits does she like? Yes she loves durian! Also fortune cake (Huat Ge\*) so your family will be prosperous. Oh yes she likes Lor Mee? She also likes Kentucky. And you must have firm tofu (taukwa) so grandchildren can become officials\*\*!*

\* “Huat ge siong ho, lih nang eh sai huat”

\*\* “Bai taukwa, soon gah eh zo gua”

Si zup gao gang, buay sai bai gim, bai gun. Bang neng eh hiu. Siong tiong yao, ai sio eh mi gia, ai sia yi eh mia, sia tao jid diu dio ho. Yi ga kio eh dio. Hi zun li nang long zong bo sia mia, ah ma tip buay dio eh. Wa sio ho liao ga siu dio. An zua kio? Pat lang kio ki liao eh. Sio di tang dio eh sai, bian sia mia. Ah si bo tang do kio buay dio. Li ah si sio dih taw ka ah, dih tang dan si bo dih chu, ai sia mia.

*Praying to relatives for the 49<sup>th</sup> day death anniversary, you must pray with silver paper money, not gold. And get two candles. The most important is to write her name on whatever you're burning, just the first sheet. Do this for everything you burn for her. During her funeral when we burned the paper money you didn't tell me you didn't write her name, so she can't receive. I only realized this after we finished! How could she have received? Other people took them all! If you burn things in the red metal bin, you don't have to write her name. If you burn them on the street or in the bin but not near your house, you must.*



49<sup>th</sup> day prayer

On the forty-ninth day, a special ritual known as *gong de* is performed... The performance of the *gong de* ritual is important as it represents the final conversion of the deceased into an ancestral spirit... The offering of vast quantities of gifts and money seeks to transform the deceased into a wealthy ancestor who is obligated to reciprocate with return gifts. KUAH (Rebuilding the Ancestral Village: Singaporeans in China, 2000) notes that the *gong de* ritual has to do with installing the deceased as a bona fide ancestor in the genealogy. It is related to Buddhist ideas that the transfer of merit can make up for the bad karma of the deceased and provide the dead with the energy to move up in the underworld to other planes of existence: *gong de* is thus also a rite of redemption whereby the wrongdoing of the dead can be redeemed through the efforts of the living, so that the dead eventually become ancestors. <sup>CDRS</sup>

(.) YOU MY BONA FIDE ANCESTOR

BONA FIDE ANCESTOR

YEAH

YOU GOT YOUR PEARLS AND NESTUM

YOUR MILO AND ROLEX

WATCHIN' OVER ME FROM UP ABOVE

(OR IS IT DOWN UNDER)

WHOA WHOA WHOA

DO YOU DO YOUR MORNING AND EVENING WALKS

## IS THERE A FRIEND WITH YOU

### DO YOU MISS ME BECAUSE I MISS YOU TOO ——

嬷，你变成我的祖先 leh! 很好笑 hor?

*Mama, you're now my ancestor leh! Hilarious right?*

可是你以前做的坏事我不懂得怎么帮你. 你最好自己去跟那些人讲 sorry.

*But I don't know how to absolve you of all the bad things you did. You better apologise to those people yourself. <>*

根据佛法，我们诵经是帮助超度祖先，没有烧纸的这个习惯。以佛法的标准来要求所有人，这个不现实的。这个清明节人来光明山来拜拜的，可能八十八仙以上的不见得是佛教徒。但很多人把排位放在寺院、骨灰放在寺院。从某种方面来讲，这也是一种家慈。

*Buddhists chant to help our ancestors ascend, not burn paper money. We cannot ask everyone to adhere to standard Buddhist beliefs. Maybe eight percent of people who pray at Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery this Qing Ming festival are not Buddhist. But many choose to have their or their loved ones' remains interred at temples—this is a kind of spiritual protection.*

VRX

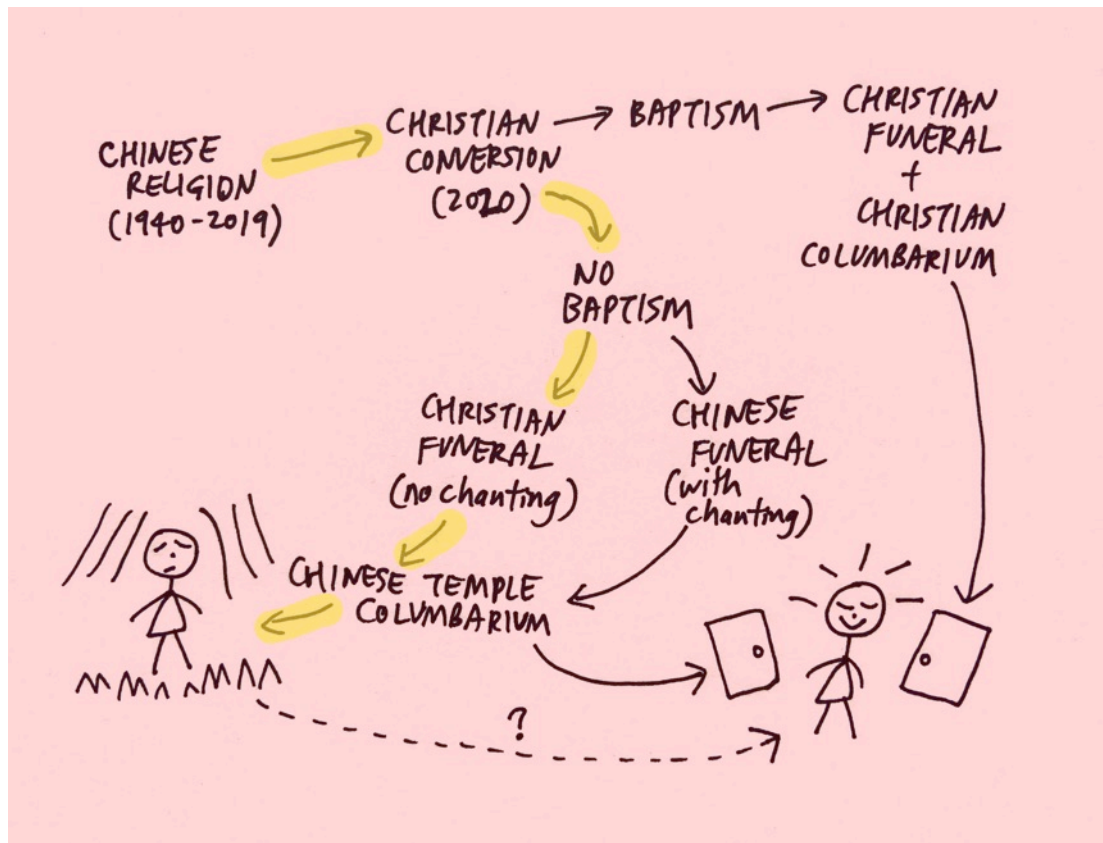


Diagram of grandma's situation as hypothesized by relatives and friends

宇宙无穷大。它可能有这些所谓的天堂，或者说这些天界，就是不同纬度的存在。可能有一些宗教不可能像佛法这么可以无限的包容的。我们可能在某种条件下把它归列在宗教的大模之下,但是它可能远远超过这个宗教的范畴了。

*The cosmos are infinite. They might contain the heavens of different religions, existing on different planes. However, not all religions can be as all-encompassing as Buddhism, for which a religious definition is but one. We might put these spiritual practices under particular religions, but the truth is, they might have gone beyond the boundaries of any particular religion.*<sup>VRX</sup>

YIPO: Ha lah, dio si yih neng eh soh zai ai kih do lo. Diu si ani lor. Lih ah ma bo nia suay, ko bo kio sihu lai liam geng, yih dao dit neng eh meng dio buay sai lip. Jid peng ah buay lip, hid peng ah buay lip. Bo lang hor yih lip. *Which side can she go to? No baptism. No Chinese priest chanting at her funeral. At the end of it all, she cannot enter either door. Neither take her in.*

ME: Ah yih dih do lo?  
*Where is she then?*

YIPO: Si guay gia lor. Yih eh beng you, jia gao eh peng you, yih mah eh hiao, yih poon si ga wang gong, yih gong ah ma ani kuan jin...jin gan kor, neng peng mm zai kih do lo. Neng eh kok gah ah bo sin lin, ka na sin ga po ka liem pang bo sin lin. Eh hiao buay? Lih bo hid poon passport. Eh hiao buay? Ka na lih suay leh doh si passport liao leh. Mm si, jid eh...jid eh...hong gao cua yih kih ma. Asi gong wu gio he siu lai liam hor, mah si seng zoh passport lor. Ani kuan lor. Yih neng peng bo lang cua. *Wandering. Even her Christian friend said her situation is very...very difficult. Both places are different. Like Singapore and Malaysia are different. understand? You don't have the passport. Understand? Baptism is a passport, so this...this...they will take her up. If we got the Chinese priest to chant for her, it's also counted as a passport. It's like this. No one is taking her to either side.*

ME: Wu kor leng yih wu passport liao?  
*Maybe she already got passport?*

YIPO: Bo sio sang wah ga lih gong, wah ah hia, yih mai nia suay, yih eh gia dan yih si liao ga yih geng kih hid dao. Yih asi jin gan kor. *This is different but my older brother refused baptism. His children waited till he died before taking him there—to church. He was also in a difficult situation.*

## *ii. BONA FIDE, or what I worship is what we had*

The more joss sticks, the foggier it is, and the more filial you are.<sup>BC</sup>

死去后的四十九天很重要。是个过渡期。一般人在这个四十九天之后就会投胎了。有些人说，在这四十九天之内我们可能可以帮助死去的亲人达到更好的状态。但真正利益到那个人吗？利益的还是你自己。

*The 49 days after death are a crucial transition period, after which most people will have been reincarnated. Some say that during these 49 days, we can help the deceased better their situation. But who does it really benefit? Only yourself.*<sup>VRX</sup>

Rituals actually give us self-assurance that you're giving them a better life on the other side. So it more or less seems like it's to make yourself feel better. If you don't conduct some kind of ritual for them, you will feel like, I'm not doing

enough for the family. Another reason people do all these rituals is because they actually want to be blessed by the ancestors. Say something bad happened to me, so I pray to my ancestors to look after us, to give us better luck. <sup>AT</sup>

祖先真的能吃到我们拜的食物吗？佛法讲，祖先是不能保佑，保护或处罚你。一切都是因缘和合。没有谁保佑谁。

*Can our ancestors really eat the food we offer? We don't believe that your ancestors can bless, protect or punish you. All is cause and conditions. There is no such thing as one person blessing another.*

VRX

One thing you can do to help your grandma now is to burn the joss paper that have the Buddhist sutras on it. Because in Singapore religion is intertwined, hence there is joss paper, which is Taoist, with Buddhist sutras on it. Usually at funerals the Taoist priest will 念经 (chant) from these sutras. This includes 往生钱 or 往生纸 (literally, towards birth money, or towards birth paper) to help her get reincarnated. Or you can hire a priest to go to KMS to chant and encourage her to move on. But if she really believe in Christianity, she may have gone to the Christian side heaven lah. <sup>AT</sup>

你要去问，为什么有这样的事情存在？做这个事情的意义是什么？它的目的是什么？你不能够只看表面，哦，大家都在拜。那拜的是什么？拜的出发点是什么？你要清楚你自己的起心动念啊。你为什么会来到这里？没有这种自我探索的过程的话，只是盲目地随大流。你不知道你为什么要拜，这个就变成了一个迷信了。并不是说做一个拜下去的动作叫拜佛。你的内在的品质很重要。

*You have to ask, Why do these things exist? What is the meaning and purpose? Don't look at the surface and go, Oh, everyone's praying to gods, ancestors and spirits. But what is praying? What is its point of departure? You have to know in your heart why you do these things, why you are here. Without this existential process of self-exploration, one can only blindly follow. When you don't know why you pray, it becomes superstition. Putting your hands together doesn't mean you're praying to Buddha; the quality of your intent is very important.* <sup>VRX</sup>

YIPO: Neng eh goh kak. lai, wa ga li gong. Jid neng eh gio zoh huay, hor? Jid peng leh, gio zoh tao. Eh hiao bo? Long zong bai ho liao hor, neng eh la zek, hui jid lang diam sa gih. Ai qia yi! Mai dan la zek siu ga jid pua, bo lin ah ma dip buay dio, pad lang lai kio liao!

*Take two 50-cent coins. Come, let me tell you. These two sides are tails. These two sides are heads, understand? Arrange everything you need, light the two candles, then each person light three incense sticks. Then you must invite her. Don't wait until the candles have burnt more than half or someone else will take what is meant for her!*

Li dio ga lin ah ma gong si mi lang qia yi. Gong, si li eh 49 lid, gong li eh mia, wu nang zoh gan dan hor, siu gun zua, li lai kio. Ah li ai puapuay hor. Bo sio sang dio si yi hua hee, wu lai, eh hiao bo? Ah yi ah si gong pua loh kih hah, neng eh geh ah ni hah, yih bo hua hee. Ah ni jid neng eh leh, ah ni sio siang, yi qio, ai qio. Bai hoh liao hor, li dio ai gah yi puapuay leh. Gong ah ma lih jia ho beh. Asi neng eh bo sio siang, lih man jia siu loh, ko ho yi jia. Eh hiao bo?



*Speak to your grandma and tell her who has invited her back today to eat. Say to her, today is your 49<sup>th</sup> day death anniversary, say your names, whoever is there, say we are doing simple prayers for you, burning the paper money, please come and retrieve it. Then you throw the coins to do the \*puapuy. If it lands one head and one tail, it means yes, she's happy, and she is back. Understand? And if both are like that, heads, it's a no, she's not happy. If both are like that, tails, it's also a no, but she laughs, she's amused. Then start to burn the paper money. Halfway during the ritual, you have to puapuy again. Ask her, have you finished eating? If the answer is no, wait a while. You understand?*<sup>YP</sup>

\*The Hokkien term for traditional divination using wooden moon-shaped blocks. One can also do this with a matching pair of coins.

ME: An zua ai goh kak?  
*Why does it have to be 50-cent coins?*

YIPO: Wa pun mm zai ya. yi nang gong ai goh kak goh kak. Lang gong bai gong ma mai cao ge eh bo.  
*I don't know myself, they said so. They also say when praying to grandparents and ancestors, don't go past noon.*

ME: Anzua?  
*Why?*

YIPO: Wa mm zai an zua. Lao lang ani kuan gong, wo dio ani kuan zoh. Dimpang lin ah ma eh lao bu masi ani kuan gong, wa eh lao bu masi ani kuan gong, wunang dio oh loh.  
*I don't know, they said so, so I just follow. Your grandma's mother and my mother, they all said this, so we learnt.*

ME: Siang ga yinang gong eh?  
*Who taught them?*

YIPO: Lao lang lor! Lao gu dong ga eh zai mah.  
*Old people! Only the ancient ones know.*

The term "Chinese religion" as it refers to the Singapore context is...a religious belief system incorporating elements of practice traceable to folk-beliefs (making up the animistic substructure of Chinese religion), Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and indigenous (Malay) animism...(There are) shades of religious identity among Chinese Singaporeans...The fact that Chinese religion is not a formally organized system of worship and devotion (as in the case of Christianity or Islam) tends to exacerbate this difficulty (in ascertaining the connection between what people say they believe in and what they actually do).<sup>RM</sup>



*Homemade Chinese New Year reunion dinner paper gift set*

<> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> In this dream our family was on a tour bus trip in India. We stopped for lunch at a Chinese restaurant. Huge round table lined with red plastic. Empty seat between you and Papa. No one wanted to sit next to you because they knew you were a spirit. Dressed in your regal blue floral matching blouse and skirt. Looking 59 years old. Emanating gentle light. I sat there. You were eating Char Kway Teow. You put a hand on mine and told me to eat. Your hand was cold. I sobbed uncontrollably while putting food in my mouth with chopsticks. Sticky saliva and snot. You told me not to cry. You said, now that you're dead, whenever you try to eat, you feel empty inside. You're trying to get used to it and eat less. <> <> <>

The institution of ancestor worship (from the point of view of its ideological underpinnings) is essentially Confucian. Yet the belief in the existence of the spirit world goes back to early Chinese animism but later given systematization by Taoism, Confucianism, and Mahayana Buddhism...Ancestor worship may be said to be central to Chinese life in general because it serves as a link between the world of the living and the world of the dead...It is in the institution of ancestor worship that one sees more strikingly the meshing of folk, Confucian and Taoist ideas and beliefs. <sup>RM</sup>

Ancestor worship is how to recreate a relationship with a person whom I had a relationship with. <sup>BC</sup>

(.) I will never again eat our usual lunch together (sweet potato porridge, steamed fish, scrambled egg, spinach) while you lovingly nag me to take more fish gravy, hear your soft and slow footsteps at your patient pace of life, awake from your door opening at 5am every morning when you rise at that lonely hour, overtake you every night to shower first, secretly watch you sleep like a beached whale and check if you're breathing. All these small things

make me miss you the most. I will continue to study your great culinary mysteries. I will live well. I will smell you always. I will touch you always. <>

YIPO: Yih si bai sin asi jia gao?

(Literally: She prays to deities or eat christ? [eating the body of Christ, as in holy communion])

*Is she of Chinese religion or is she Christian?*

ME: Di bang lai bin ah, wa mm zai.

*in the dream? i don't know.*

With the invention of paper in the early Han dynasty, paper images were substituted and offered in token sacrifice by burning, in the belief that through the alchemy of fire they would find their way into the Otherworld to be used by the spirit in his new existence. <sup>CAWM</sup>



*Prada handbag with tissue paper, wallet and foldable umbrella inside*

YIPO: Lih ai wui ah? Ai wui ah? Mai buay ah? Buay hi kee zua eh sai!  
*You want to draw ah? Don't want to buy? You can buy the paper ones!*

ME: Wa suka wui.

*I like to draw them.*

YIPO: Ah lih do wui swee swee hor yih!  
*You have to draw pretty ones!*

ME: Eh sai.  
*I will.*

YIPO: Yih ai swee. Yih siong ai gim eh mah. Yih ai suan zio. [laughs] Da geh chood meng doh gua lian na, gua qiu kuan, qiu ji ah. Ah lih eh hiao wui yan ji bo? Lin ah ma jin ai swee, siong ho lih sa kor wui ka zuay hor yih. Ta pai ga wa chud meng buay kun sa. Wu si buay mo mi kia buay kun sa. Buay kun sa buay lai sa. [Cio] Yih ceng hiki simi ah, dai ai fen (Triumph) ah? Wa gong an zua lih deh buay lai sa? Wa lai sa bo diam diam buay, wa buay neng sa nia doh, dan gah pua, buay sai ceng, wa eh lai sa ho ho mah. Yih go mm gam buay ho eh, wa ceng wai koh (Wacoal) leh, yih gong bian ani ho, buay dai ai fen dio ho. Yih go jia niao. [Cio]

*She likes looking pretty. She loves gold most. she likes diamonds. [Laughs] everytime she goes out she wears a necklace, bracelet, rings. you know how to draw lipstick? Your grandma is so vain, you better draw more clothes to burn for her. when we go out, she loves buying pajamas. sometimes she has nothing to buy and she buys pajamas. pajamas and underwear. [Laughs] she wears that, what's that, Triumph? I said, why you keep buying underwear? I don't keep buying underwear, i wait till it has a hole and can't be worn. she doesn't even want to buy a higher quality one, i wear Wacoal, she says no need so good, buy Triumph enough. She's so stingy. [Laughs]*

(.) She stood outside the village classroom window peeking in, wanting badly to go to school, went to the jungle with other girl neighbours to collect piles of firewood, picked golf balls for white women at Singapore Island Country Club.  
<>

YIPO: Lih ai buay zua eh wei tua hor yih, yih jin ai ceng swee eh wei tua. Ah lih wu buay passport hor yih boh? Yih jin ai chood kok.  
*You must buy paper sandals for her, she loves pretty sandles. Did you buy passport for her or not? She loves travelling.*



*Homemade pajamas and passport paper gifts*

(.) You woke at 2am to make bazhang for your brood over a charcoal stove, mended their pajamas, found meaning in cooking all our favourite dishes. You chided me for being braless, for dressing “like a beggar”, for shaving my head. You raised me, spoiled me, responded everytime I asked you to cook me something no matter how tired you were, loved me unconditionally and selflessly. Even when we disagreed we never quarrelled. You worried for me everyday. Your greatest wish in your last years was for me to marry “a good man” and give me a Rolex as a wedding gift (running joke). <>

YIPO: Zua li lih mai buay siu dua diu leh. Siu dua diu hor, ah ma si sin bong eh, ah ma siu buay dio leh, mm tang. Diong diong ani kuan dio hoh. Mm tang buay jid diu gui zup ban ah, ah hee kee hor dua gua kio ki.

*Don't buy paper money in big denominations. She's newly dead, she can't receive those. Cannot do that. The medium one is enough. Don't get the \$10,000 one, they will be taken from her by the big officials.*

### *iii. INQUIRY, or asking what I already know*

按照佛法来讲，一个人死后去哪里，是没有办法通过外力来改变的。最后临终一刹那的意识状态，这个是第一因素决定他将来要去哪里。如果他的意识不清楚或者昏迷，在想一些乱七八糟的东西，那可能就去不好的地方。如果心很清楚、念念分明，有人帮他住念、有人看事，他可能就去好的地方，甚至可以去到这个西方极乐世界，阿弥陀佛那里。

*According to Buddhist belief, where a person goes after death is not something that can be determined externally. One's state of consciousness in the flash before death is the number one determining factor of where they go after death. If their intent is unclear, if their mind is muddled, or if they are in a coma, they may not go to a good place. If they are clear in heart and mind, if someone chants for them, they may go to a good place—even to the Pure Land or Paradise, in the west of the cosmos, where Amitabha is.*

按照经典来讲，它的距离比较遥远。但是人的信念可以穿越，一念之间他可以去。你要知道，我平时要念佛，然后我在临终那一刻，心心念念，也有阿弥陀佛，记在心里面。然后你的心一直跟着这个阿弥陀佛，你才能够去。不然你去不了。

*According to the scriptures, one's faith and conviction can traverse the great distance of Paradise; one can arrive there in a moment. One must chant regularly so that in one's last thought, in the moment before death, Buddha will be in heart and mind. Just keep following that Amitabha inside, and you might ascend up there. Otherwise, there is no chance.*

第二的根据就是你自己的重大的善业或者重大的恶业投胎。做过重大的善，一下子就上去了。做过重大的恶，一下子就下去了。上去不见得是去极乐世界。你可能还在天道或人道里面投胎。那你投身恶鬼道，地狱道，你的痛苦就是很长时间了。

*The other determining factor is how much good or bad you have done. If you did great good, you can go up in a moment. If you did a lot of bad deeds, you will go down there in a moment. Going up is not necessarily going to the Pure*

*Land. You might be reborn in another realms. But if you go to the realms of bad spirits or to hell, your suffering will be long.*<sup>VRX</sup>

(.) Did you see me do this? One cool eve, I went by myself to consult the medium at Gao Ling Gong, a historic temple at Ang Mo Kio Ave 1. Gao Ling Gong houses 三王府大人, three generals who are deities helping the gods help humans. The medium was an old man who looked like an ordinary beer-guzzling uncle who would lounge at a coffeeshop with his friends watching their prized pet birds. I was intrigued by the fact that the gods had chosen Medium Uncle (MU) to transmit their messages, which one could ask for only on Sunday nights after obtaining a queue number. MU wore an ancient-looking sort of embroidered silk inner blouse. He was possessed by 形大人 (General Xing), whose original statue, brought over from China in the mid 1800s across the seas by Chinese immigrants, is still there.

I explained my query to red-shirted, diligent volunteers who took notes on officially designed templates. It felt like a family mission to collect more information. No one knew. I had to do this. Sitting on a red plastic chair outside the altar area, I saw the well-dressed querents before me lean politely toward MU, trying to hear him, surrounded by several male volunteers, some stiff, others shifting their weight from side to side. MU hit the table rhythmically with his palm and the flesh of his hands' sides. I could only see his back. The beat that he made echoed out into the night, mingling with the sweet smell of incense. After those querents left, I was called forward for my turn. Feeling like a small girl on a quest in a room of mostly older men, I listened carefully as the translator-volunteer read aloud my query in Hokkien to MU. I corrected him at times, partly in a bid to prove that this 小妹妹 (little sister) had agency.

When the situation was explained, MU furrowed his brows, made calculations by touching his thumb to various fingertips, and pronounced that your whereabouts are unclear—it wasn't something to be ascertained until three years had passed. Meanwhile, I was to pray to 大爷伯 and 二爷伯, whom I had never heard of, to give you a safe passage. I then asked if I could conduct rituals for you of my own invention, both for your benefit and for my art. I nearly jumped for joy when he said I could do whatever I wanted as long as 你跟着心去做 (have good intentions from my heart). By now, a younger volunteer around my age was playing helpful mediator. Before I left, I tried to ask if the temple had a Chinese Jesus statue (I heard tell it was tucked away at the back) but was told that questions like this would be answered outside, later. <>

有些没有机缘投胎的就变成流浪的，所谓孤魂野鬼。孤魂野鬼也不是去下面。它可能就是在这个地球上的某一个角落，可是我们看不见他。或者说，它在另外一种生活空间。里面条件就不像人类这么好，可能很糟糕。但是他的这个 energy 比人类低很多，所以没有办法伤害人类。

*Some who cannot reincarnate become lonely, wandering souls or ghouls. That does not mean they go down there. They exist in various corners of earth but we can't see them, or they are on another plane, where the conditions are different from ours and might be horrible. Because they vibrate at a much lower energy, they cannot harm humans.*<sup>VRX</sup>

(.) Adam, the younger volunteer, led me to the innards of the temple, into a dark enclave with two near life-size statues of the two Constables of hell appointed by the Jade Emperor, 大爷伯 and 二爷伯 (Dua Ya Peh and Lih Ya Peh, or Eldest Master Uncle and Second Master Uncle). Brothers in the official court, they chose to end their lives to save China from widespread opium addiction, according to one version of events. Dua Ya Peh had protruding eyes and a long tongue rolling out of his mouth because he had hung himself. Lih Ya Peh, hardly visible in the dark, was short, stout and had a black face because he died of drowning. They flanked an altar, in front of which were offerings of peanuts and Tiger Beer cans. The smell of incense in this part of the temple was coupled with a mustiness that emanates from dark places. It wasn't just visually indistinct; energetically we were in a shadow space, portal to a sooty realm. I only realized later there wasn't much to be feared. Dua Ya Peh and Lih Ya Peh were in charge of escorting spirits of the dead to the Underworld and maintaining law and order in hell. It is said that they provide winning lottery numbers to people in desperate situations. <>

ADAM: You can kneel down and pray to them. Then you can ask them to take her to a good place. Like 请神明带她去好的地方 (*ask the Gods to take her to a good place*) .

*But I don't know what to say.*

ADAM: Okay just repeat after me. <>

当然我们没办法确认说，指地狱给你看。地狱跟人间的这一个维度是不同的，所以你就不能够用人类的标准来衡量这个地狱的状态。按照经典里面的记载，地狱也有很多种。道教有些审判，就是阎罗王他给你 ok。有一个功德谱，一个人就好像电脑，把你所有的这些善行都记录下来。

*It's not possible to point at hell and say, this is it. Hell exists in different dimensions, so we can't use human constructs to measure its conditions. According to the scriptures, there are many kinds of hell. Taoists believe in a trial conducted by the king of hell using a manual for judging merit. All your deeds are recorded in a system just like in a computer.* <sup>VRX</sup>

The fate, destiny and behaviour of every person are recorded [in the Otherworld files]. When one's allotted time has come a warrant of arrest is issued and the soul of the wanted man is taken into custody to face the Supreme Ruler. <sup>CAWM</sup>

(.) *So because of the way these rituals are passed down, can I say that every single person here sitting at this temple tonight has a slightly different belief unique to them?*

ADAM: Yes you can say so.

*Some think that when people die and go below, they are judged and punished. What do you think?*

ADAM: I don't think so leh. I personally believe when they go down there they can 和家人团聚，吃好饭，一起保佑后一代 (reunite with their family, have good meals, work together to bless and protect their descendants).

I took a near empty bus home, staring out into neat tree-lined streets, picturing you—no, feeling you—beaming at a huge round table of 山珍海味 (treasures of the mountains and seas: luxurious food), sitting with Grandfather and Grand Uncle as they sipped whiskey, smoked, and spoke in their sandpaper, low Fujian men voices. You had pearls around your neck, gold on your thick ear lobes, double chin wobbling delightfully. You were not thinking about your bad deeds. You would not be punished. You were just a beacon of flabby joyful whale. <>

佛法的宇宙是非常非常宏大的。天有很多层的。比如 某一个天是有三十三天。每一个都有相对应的，有标准的。不是随随便便，谁都可以去的。

*The upper world is immense, with many realms and levels. For example, one of the realms has thirty-three levels. Each level and realm has its own requirements for entry.* <sup>VRX</sup>

(.) *If she is not going to 超度 (transcend), does that mean that she's in a bad place? Some people say down there they can 吃喝玩乐 (make merry with food and play). Is that possible?*

ALEX: My personal view is if you were to 吃喝玩乐 it's up there.

*Down there is the punishing place?*

ALEX: Yes, correct. Usually people say 升天 (ascend), 去极乐世界 (go to "extreme happiness world"), which is like the heaven lah, not down there. <>

YIPO: Lih bang ki yi bo cu kia bo? Wu bang dio, yeesih si gong yi bu cu kia, ai sio zua cu hoh yi. Wah eh gang lang bang ki wah eh ang hor, dih ciu na asi do loh hor, bo cu leh, zao lai zao kih, yih gong jin cam, bo ceng sa koh, gia bo zua bao bao leh. Wo bua sim bua yi lah. Wa eh dua ji ga wa gong wa eh kia ang mo kio eh ah soh wu bang ki yi bo chu. Wa jin ki, wa bo hua hi, wa ga wa ah soh gong, yi ga li gong lua gu? Yi gong gong jin gu liao, ki hun deng eh si zun. Wa jin xiu ki, an zua li zizun ka gah wa gong, anzua za za mai gong! Gaobuh wa deng lai do ga wa eh ang gong, wa kia bang chu luakao gong, lao eh ah, li ai simi li ga wa gong, mai ga pad lang gong.

*Did you dream of her without a house? If you did it means she has no place to live. Then you have to burn a paper house for her. After my husband died, my helper dreamt that he was running about in the swamps, suffering a lot, not wearing clothes, with newspaper wrapped around his body. I wasn't sure whether to believe her. My sister-in-law told me my older sister who lives in Ang Mo Kio also dreamt of him without a house, in the same situation. I was very angry, I asked my sister-in-law how long ago she learnt of this. She said long ago when they went on a trip to Genting. I said, why didn't you tell me earlier! So I went home, stood outside the house and talked to my husband. I said, "Old man, whatever you need, just let me know. You don't have to tell others."*

Dui dui hoh wa da. Bang gong ceng nia sesah neng diao dua, kua liao jin ko lian. Yi eh chu long zong lao zui, gia bin tang – aiyoh gui geng chu long zong pua, an zua kia? Buay sai kia la, wa gong. Jid dao ah jid eh bintang, hid dao ah jid eh bintang, suay suay eh, plastic bintang, jin ko lian. Hid zun jid pa li zo,



yi gong tahan neng ni, ah hid geng dio buay sai eng liao. Ah yi eh sa ni, ga wa neng eh da bo, zai wa ki kimzua diam, buay chu. Chu wu huay hng, ah wu qia, jia dua geng ah! Hid koh taukeh jin ho leh, yi ga wa xia wun ang eh mia, xia jin dua diu leh. Wa sio ho yi liao, mmpat bang ki liao.

*That very night he showed me. I dreamt he had a makeshift house in the forest, and was wearing rags. Poor thing! Water was dripping non stop, he was collecting water with pails! The whole house was falling apart! How could he live in a place like this? There were small pails everywhere. He was suffering so much. They say that the house you burn after the one year death anniversary becomes useless at the third year mark. But this already happened after two years. So for his three year death anniversary, I went to the religious goods shop and bought a lavish paper house. It had a garden, a car, it was so huge! The boss was so helpful and wrote my husband's big name on it. After burning this house, I didn't dream of him anymore.*

Yinang eh kah eh lang ga lan bo sang. Lin ahma balu si, jizun hor li ah ma si putong eh chu lah. Sa ni hid heng chu wa bo liao. Dan sa ni, li dio ai zoh jid geng ani kuan eh. Dimpang lin ah gong ma si, lih eh gi buay, lin ah ma mmsi zoh jid eh dua chu ho yi loh?

*People down there live differently from us. Now that your grandma just died, a simple house will do. After a few years, that house will be gone. When she is nearing her third year anniversary, you can do the same as me. Don't you remember your grandma burnt a lavish one for your grandfather?*

(.) 你过得好吗？

The above is an untranslatable question. It asks to the effect of, how is your life? But what it means is, how is time passing for you, are you sleeping and eating well in your days, how are you in this immense ocean of suffering? <>

#### ***iv. INHERITANCE, or what carries on and more dreams please***

YIPO: Wah do mm zai, zid eh tou tai bo ani gin lah! Wu eh gui zup ni do buay tou tai ah! Lih siu, zen seh gai ani zui lang, mana ani gin? Yih bo hor lih bang kih, doh si tou tai.

*I don't even know, this reincarnation is not that fast! Some people haven't even been reborn after decades! Think about it, the world has so many people, how could it be so fast? If she is not coming in your dreams, it means she's been reincarnated.*

<> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> He's been dreaming of you a lot the past two weeks. Or should we say you've been visiting him a lot. In this dream you came back to our house and he said, “嬷你回来了。” (Mama, you came back) even though he knew you were a ghost. Then you both had some normal conversation, he forgot about what. <> <> <>

ME: Wa wu meng yinang liao. Wu lang bang dio yi di chu, wulang bang dio yi di guakao, kana kih causeway point shopping. Wa wu xia.

*So I checked and some of them dreamt of her in the house, some of them dreamt of her outside the house. Someone dreamt they went shopping for handbags with her at Causeway Point. I wrote down all their dreams.*

YIPO: Jiki buay hiao gin. Sigong bang dio yi jid eh dih guay loh gia, jiki si gong bo chu. Shopping jid eh buay hiao gin.

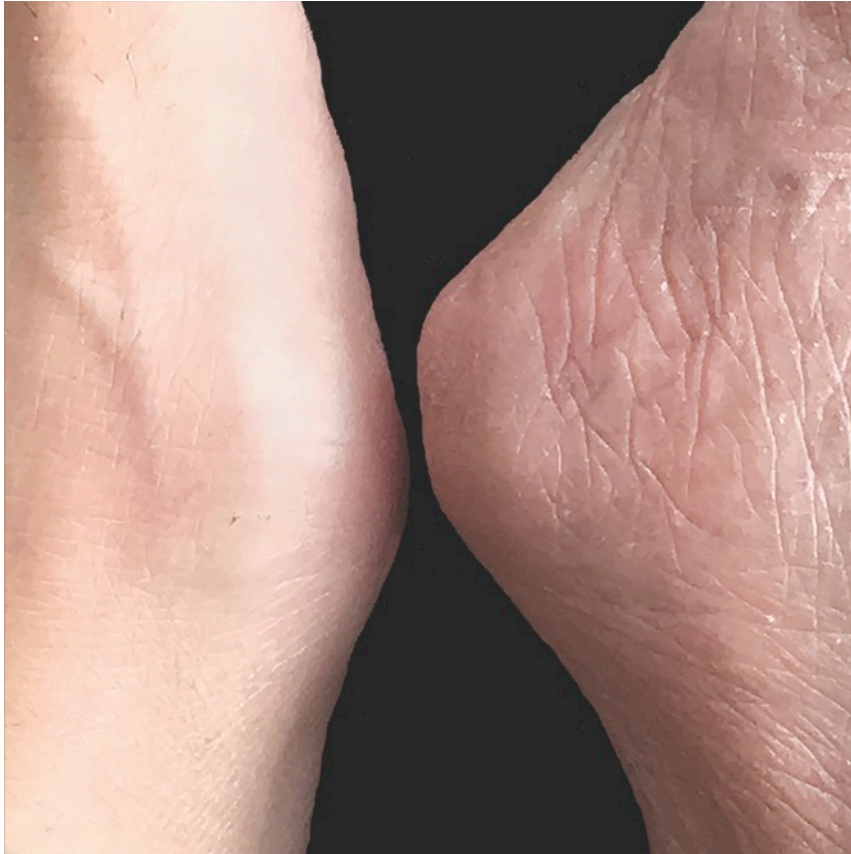
*That's fine, that's okay. Only if they dreamt of her wandering alone in desolate streets, that would mean she has no home. Shopping is fine.*

<> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> One of your granddaughters dreamt this and cried: She is queen of our nation. When she passes there is a public funeral with a huge procession that everyone came out to see. Me and Cousin are trying to hold back our tears because we cannot appear too emotional in front of the media. <> <> <>

当你内心说能够跟这些祖先有连接的时候，无论你做什么，这些都是一个显现。你可能也什么也不用做，不用烧金纸，或按照佛法供一点水果、鲜花，拜一拜。他也是一种方色。真正孝顺是他们在活着的时候，你怎么样陪伴他。有些人生前一眼都不关心，没有时间陪他们。那亲人走了之后搞得五花八门。这个有意义吗？他能收到什么？这些事情是给别人看的。所以活着的时候，跟他们之间的关系才是真正有帮助的。多陪伴、多聊天，尽量地把矛盾化解掉。

When your heart tells you to keep connecting with your ancestors, whatever gestures you make are just manifestations of your intent. It does not mean you have to burn paper money, or pray with some fruits and flowers like Buddhists do—in a way, all these are just gestures. Real filial piety is how we are in relation with our ancestors when they are alive, how we spend time with them, how we talk with them. Some people are too busy to spend time with their loved ones, yet when these loved ones depart, they conduct extravagant funeral rites. Can your loved one benefit from this? This tends to be more to gain the favour of others. So, resolving any issues and finding harmony with our loved ones when they are alive is more important.<sup>VRX</sup>

(.) I knew you were lonely but I was always living in the whirlpool of my own painful emergence. I hung on by a thread so much that I could not do more with you, or so I told myself. But you were in so much of my art, even if you thought it was a silly profession and everything was referred to as simply a “project”. You even flew to the U.S. at 77 years of age and performed with me in a gallery for my show. I instructed you to perform your everyday life by folding plastic bags, and you obliged. You giggled along when the audience giggled at you. You let me massage your bunions—the source of my own chronic ones—with sesame oil. You applied lipstick on my face while we shook with laughter. You bowed with me as everyone applauded.



*Salty Xi Jie Ng's and her grandma's bunions*

I dreaded losing you and had thought about it since I was a teenager. It felt like I was the only one who would talk to you about preparations for death and the afterlife. I used to say, “以后你死了，你要来我的梦里找我啊！” (*After you die, you must look for me in my dreams ah!*) You would laugh and say, “不要啦，等一下你怕！” (*Don't want lah, later you scared!*) Now I wonder why I don't have more dreams of you. <>

What do the dead mean to us? Who are they to us and who are we as a people? <sup>BC</sup>

(.) These bones are very adorable. I'd never touched cremated human bone before and I approached it with much fascination, even a guilty sense of morbid curiosity. It was a grave moment anointed with golden light streaming into the sterile Crematorium room, but inside I wanted to shout and laugh, “嬷!!!!!!!!!! 我在动你的骨 leh!!!!!!!!!!” (*OMG MAMA I'M TOUCHING YOUR BONES*) I knew you would be the only one laughing. I picked a dainty curved rib bone (are they so small?), a finger bone (your deft hands sewed and cooked and cleaned for so many years), a tooth (so lucky to retrieve one, said undertaker uncle), and a piece of skull that housed your clever brain. <>

你没有办法测量，我到底跟这死去的亲人有几分的联系。按照佛法的观念来讲，过世的爷爷奶奶身上的美好品质、乐于助人的精神这些心态，这是家庭的财富传承，一个精神资助。这个是我们向他学习的地方。我们可以继续把这个家庭文化，所谓的家风，代代相传。

*After someone is gone, there is no way to measure how much of a connection you have with them. According to Buddhist thought, the spirit, good qualities or helpful mentality of passed on ancestors are a kind of rich inheritance, and*

*a spiritual aid for their descendants. This is what we can learn. We can continue to pass on these qualities, this family culture, for generations.*<sup>VRX</sup>

What we can pass down to the next generation is not our CPF and money, but our values.<sup>AZQ</sup>

(.) Your mixed bag of values: unconditional love for family. girls should dress decently. relentless work for the home. if a couple has pre-marital sex, the girl is dirty. unabiding patience for plants and flowers. "I hate pets". making our favourite dishes, cooking to the point of exhaustion to keep us happily fed.

## *v. ORIGINS, or how I came to love the smoke*

(.) These rituals dotted my childhood like memories of silver, gold, red, and smoke.

I loved hearing you patiently fold the silver paper money into ingots. Your hands and the parchment-like papers swooshed gently over each other. Huge red plastic bags became filled with silver ingots dropping in like soft baby birds.

When I was 8 I put on an amulet from you because it was fun to wear something around my neck. Like I belonged to something. A religion, or whatever.

You would ask me to join you. We stood under the hot sun, facing the red metal bin. There were stacks of different papers. I had no clue. I enjoyed throwing them into the fire, watching them burn. The heat made my face tingle. I always wanted to be near you.

The best part was when you fanned the paper out like performing a magic circus trick. A stack of paper in your left palm, right index finger on the paper's centre as firm pivot, your left fingers would swirl one after the other, and all the silvers or golds underneath would peek out. This made it easier to take smaller stacks to be licked away by the fire. I learnt this. Everytime I do it, you live in my hands.



*Ascension #1 - paper money, wok, personal effects.*

A few years ago, while living in the U.S., I was commemorating my grandfather's death anniversary alone for the first time. It was Singapore's National Day. I put on a minnie mouse red and white polkadotted dress and found myself at an Asian supermarket asking a Vietnamese worker where to find "the thing...you burn for your loved ones, the thing...together with your family..." He asked, "You mean for barbeque?" It turned out only the mega Asian supermarket carried it. I went to the beach with my Chinese-American friend who grew up in the U.S. and lost their father recently. I taught them what I knew about the ritual, which was not much then. At the beach where the Willamette River meets the Columbia River in Portland, Oregon, we set up photos, cherries, durian (thawed, from the Asian supermarket), and a used longan tin the size of a big Milo can. Under the sky, we shared memories of my grandfather and their father, while burning the paper in the tin, poking it with twigs. When the fire raged for the last time, I watched with protruding eyeballs as they gravely threw the cherries and durian into the fire. "We take this home to eat!!!!" I cried through laughter. "Oh, I didn't know," they said.

In the last years of your life, you would say, “我死了谁会烧给我？我跟你讲，以后我死了，放在公明山，什么都不必烧！简单就好！” (*When I die who will burn things for me? I tell you, my remains will be at KMS, no need to burn me anything! Keep it simple!*) But I would insist. This insistence came through sobs when you were very ill. “我会永远烧给你的,” (*I will burn you paper offerings forever*). I wailed. <>



An array of joss paper at Ban Kah Hiang Trading. Different dialect groups use different gold and silver paper money designs. Top left: folded lotus flowers with reincarnation sutras. Yellow rectangular paper on right: 往生钱, reincarnation money (literally, towards birth money).

During the Hungry Ghost Festival, when people throw the 过路钱 (*white joss paper money of small denomination*), it's a wrong practice. We can only see this in old Hong Kong 僵尸片 (*zombie movies*). People now throw because of effect. You know movie effect, at funerals when the zombie is really coming. So people are picking up this kind of practice from movies, especially in Singapore. They throw it during the Hungry Ghost Festival and don't burn it. It makes a mess everywhere. Even in Taiwan, when they throw this joss paper, it is to say, “I want to curse your company,” then you throw joss paper at the company. Or got government protests they will throw the joss paper at the government place to ask the spirits to come and give the government suay (bad luck) lah. Usually people throw joss paper to invite bad spirits to come. Because if you throw and you don't burn, the ghost can only see the joss paper, they cannot receive it. <sup>AT</sup>

# HOW TO SEND GIFTS TO DEPARTED LOVED ONES

## 1. Draw gift item (e.g. chanel bag, milo, aircon).

You may wish to consult your own & loved ones' dreams as a pragmatic divination tool. For example, if your grandpa appeared complaining of heat, draw him an aircon. As the drawing is symbolic, its level of detail does not affect the item's quality. You may also consider gifting them something they had wished for when alive.

## 2. Prepare Taoist seal.

Write date & name of loved one on seal provided below. Sign off with a circle & a dot inside it. This is your unique signature and lets your loved one know it is you.

## 3. Affix seal onto gift item. Items may be grouped in a paper bag with one seal.

## 4. Burn with loving intention.

The Earth God is usually prayed to first, but here the talisman does the magic.

take one		take one		take one		take one		take one	
靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅	靈寶 大法司 勅
陽曆	陽曆	陽曆	陽曆	陽曆	陽曆	陽曆	陽曆	陽曆	陽曆
陰曆	陰曆	陰曆	陰曆	陰曆	陰曆	陰曆	陰曆	陰曆	陰曆
年	年	年	年	年	年	年	年	年	年
月	月	月	月	月	月	月	月	月	月
日	日	日	日	日	日	日	日	日	日
付收	付收	付收	付收	付收	付收	付收	付收	付收	付收
封	封	封	封	封	封	封	封	封	封

Educational resource from Equatorial Research Centre for Ritual & Ancestor Worship, designed by Salty Xi Jie Ng, approved by an industry expert

(.) 一个圆圈，里面一个点。

A circle with a dot inside.

In the past, this was how illiterate people signed paper offerings burnt for loved ones. Some descendants want to be rewarded and blessed. I just want you to know it's me.

From heart through to hand, the circle and dot contain my essence.

A 3D mark to unknown realm.

An interdimensional transmission.

Like, this is me can you tell?

Like, sealed with a kiss.

Like, from here to there.

Like, I love and miss you. <>

YIPO: Hid eh zo chu eh lang gong hor, lan zid dao sio si suay suay eh hor, hua kih eh peng bo siang leh, jin dua geng liao leh. Bian jid dao zo ga ani dua geng, go ani gui, mm bian, gan dan liao lor. Wu yia leh, dim pang wah diam diam sio hong qia hor wah eh ang, wa eh dua kia diam diam bang ki yih hua hong qia, wu sih gong kih zai yi, mm zai zai ga gao do lo bua lor, kio yih lo, yi zo yih kih.

*The man who makes paper houses says, here when we burn it's small small ah, but when it's burnt across it's different, become very big already leh. So here no need to make such a big house, so expensive some more. No need, simple is enough. It's true—I used to often burn cars for my husband, and my elder son frequently had dreams of him driving, sometimes giving him a lift, until a road in the middle of nowhere. Then he tells his son to get off and then he drives off on his own way.*

## *vi. LINEAGE, or being held by that which came before*

Death is a social event. There are levels of brokenness that come with death. The worse you manage this, the longer and worse are grief and regret. A funeral is a platform where different value systems come to play, appropriated by the living to rationalise their values and understand the death that has happened. The Singaporean death is a mirror of the Singaporean life. Religion and faith groups do not have the sole prerogative to the understanding of dying, death and the afterlife. The living need to break away from institutional remembrance to a more personalised remembrance, to render greater thought regarding the relationship that the living and the dead share with their community, the society they belong to and the nation(s) they grow old and die in. A more enlightened and literate understanding of death and its many facets in our daily life would be pivotal to understanding the many end-of-life choices and its implications, thereby achieving a greater ownership of our lives and death.<sup>BC</sup>

(.) We did not burn you an artisan-made big house, servants, car. I was not happy with the embalming but I didn't know what feedback could have done. *You could have consulted us on the style of the makeup. Why is there a*



*plaster by her neck? Is it too late to snip off a clump of her beautiful eyelashes as a keepsake?* I gazed at your strange face, imagining that the blood in your veins had been drained out. Where did it go? Into the South China Sea? How did someone none of us knew get to be so intimate with your body?

Me and Little Sister made a photo slideshow. There were so many food photos it reminded us of all the happy meals we shared. And a video of you scolding Littlest Granddaughter, making her wash her hands after touching a neighbourhood cat. "These cats do not take showers!" you griped from the sofa. We laughed, under the white canopy in our mournful garden surrounded by the plants you tended to for decades.

I organised your memorial and gave a teary speech in my Chinese New Year white lace cheongsam while wiping snot from my face. The Christian pastor came and delivered a sermon in the most beautiful Hokkien I had ever heard. You received so many wreaths; you would have loved the dizzying array of flowers. After the cremation, we came back and deliriously made bouquets to soothe our hearts. *Here, take this flower! Oh, that's lovely! Wow, we should put this in the living room! Let me make you one!* For a moment we were a florist family, bobbing in a sea of grief and flowers.

But did you see?—my friends came for your wake and I had told them I didn't feel like talking about you. They came and devotedly helped me carry out my plan of making custom paper effigies for you. Little Brother, Little Sister and I had made a list of your favourite things. It did not matter if this was the right way or not. Under my instruction, my friends drew your parma ham pizza, watercoloured your water bottle wrapped in plastic bag with a rubber band. We were a therapeutic huddle while the older adults around us discussed work and lamented the progress of your illness. It was then I knew things could be done differently.

When night fell, your beloved sister and clan of nieces streamed in because I had invited them to our ritual. I asked them to each pick one gift item to burn for you, out of all the ones we drew. There was an evening gown, pajamas, your hair dye, your favourite flavour of RICOLA sweet, your favourite Taiwanese drama, a house with a garden, chicken wings, white seafood beehoon, and more. Yipo picked the gold abacus necklace with matching earrings, because, "yi jin ai swee" (*your grandmother loved being pretty*). With her past as a cosmetologist, I suspected she too loved it when you were pretty. The women taught me to write your name on the back of each paper gift, with a circle and a dot, so that you would receive it correctly. I later learnt that when there are a lot of gifts, they are packed up into big paper bags printed with Underworld stamps and paper money offerings to the guards and postal service. For the more glamorous gifts at Chinese funerals, which are always professionally made: the paper servants and the chauffeur of the paper car are "taken outside and lectured by the priest on their duties to the deceased. The servants are advised to be honest and hardworking, the chauffeur to drive carefully." <sup>CAW</sup> <>

Chinese religion remains characteristically anthropocentric or this-worldly—a fact that seems to have been accentuated in the light of Singapore's socio-economic conditions...It might be construed that the central thrust of Confucian philosophy, namely, the emphasis placed on the proper and

adequate management of the practical affairs of man as against abstruse theorization or spiritual contemplation, remains to be the prevalent characteristic of Chinese culture life in Singapore...special tax reliefs for those supporting aged parents, public housing priority, Confucian moral philosophy in school etc.

The continually changing social structure coupled with the loosening hold of institutions organized along clan, dialect, and regional lines is directly contributory to the weakening of certain traditional beliefs and values pertaining to the burial and care of the dead...Over the years the minds of Singaporeans have been attuned to accept the government's philosophical standpoint that development frequently requires the implementation of unpleasant but necessary policies. <sup>RM</sup>

Grief infrastructure is important. It takes a village to raise a child; it takes a community to support the bereaved. Grief, if unresolved, can cost the city billions of dollars. In the past, graves were in backyards. You feel great, because, "My ancestor is blessing me." As Singapore starts to progress, came the artificial divide between the living and the dead. Policies shape the behaviours of people. The 1998 policy limiting burial to 15 years results in people asking whether they will live long enough to be able to exhume their loved ones. The smaller homes become, the less people install ancestral tablets. The government is also planning to build four new funeral parlours in industrial parks. The effect of this will be felt two generations later. Singaporeans will continue to grieve in such infrastructure that is located away from the community. <sup>AZQ</sup>

(.) Soon we will take Grandfather out of his grave after twenty one years, to be next to you at KMS. No more will we take long drives to what feels like the end of this tiny island state, to hilly golden green meadows and big sky. No more will we huddle around his traditional tombstone chatting about the best laksa, trim the grass determinedly as an expression of our missing him, wash his tombstone and anoint it with fresh yellow Chrysanthemums from the market, light incense and pray with food. No more will we be brought together like this under the sky's blessings, surrounded by other people's departed loved ones for as far as our eyes can see. What will we find when they open it up? I heard you're not allowed to look at the very moment of uncovering. Something bad might happen to you after. I picture us all standing in outward-facing formation under the clouds, you and him watching from above. You both laugh to see that the maggots left me four little bones to keep. <>

现在的年轻人接受的都是唯物主义教学，西方的这一套理念。年轻人心都很浮躁、忙忙碌碌的，都是向外看。他们可能就问，我们为什么要做这件事情？对他们来说没有很大的触动。这也是整个世界的一个大的趋势。按照佛法讲，每个人的心都生病了。那我们为什么会痛苦？你想东想西追求这、追求那。过度的追求，你就变成了欲望的奴隶。

*Young people today live in a materialistic world influenced by the West. They tend to be impetuous, busy, outward-facing, and might question the merit and meaning of these practices, finding little resonance with or pay little attention to them. You can say it's a global trend—searching for meaning externally, neglecting the inner world. If you go by Buddhist belief, you can say everyone has a sick heart. Why are we suffering? Because your mind is always busy,*

*because you always desire more—in this way one becomes slave to desire.*  
VRX



*Salty Xi Jie Ng with Venerable Ren Xu, Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery, where her grandma's remains are interred*

My family has been praying at this temple for many years. My great grandma, in the kampong days, she will pray to the 三王府大人 (the three generals) to bless her mother pig to have more babies, and the baby pigs to eat more. My family still lives around here. There's many religions in Singapore. I believe that, for example my friend, any friend, like it's his fate to be whatever religion he is. And for me, it's my fate to be Taoist, to come to this temple. 有缘才会来到这里。AGLG

Rituals are...seen as performing useful functions in society, for they are not only part of one's cultural identity but also give meaning and direction in life... Rejection or discarding of one's cultural rituals is not seen as tantamount to the rejection of one's culture or society. RM

(.) After everyone who came to participate picked their paper gift for you, we made our way to a nearby alley, away from the main funeral wake area. Second Uncle and I led our humble ceremony, in place of a Chinese funeral. I had a strange sort of fun all afternoon engaging in a creative act, witnessed and supported by my friends. When he invited me to make a speech of sorts, I sobs erupted through my words to you. Everyone then burnt some paper money and the paper gift item they picked. This was our expression of grief. This huddling around fire and paper, smoke and incense. This had been in my blood for generations. Later the older women, some putting an arm around me, told me I could ask them anytime if there was anything I didn't know about the rituals or what to do at the temples. I felt so held by your women. I had never known them in this way. Is this how I am Chinese? <>

要把习俗传下去，重要的是把精神或者精髓保留。形式可以随着时代而有些灵活的变动。可能未来以后都是通过上网的方式来拜拜了。你不用千里迢迢。网络时代已经打破了这个时空的限制了。比如说，现实条件方面不那么圆满时，

你可能清明节回不来亲自扫墓。从这个现实客观的角度来考量，我们应该是提供多元化的方式给大家。学习佛法要有智慧的看待问题，提供一些解决方案。  
*There must be new ways of passing on traditions, of which the spirit and essence are key. Form is dynamic and can change according to the times. Perhaps these practices, like ancestor worship, will all be conducted online in future. You won't have to travel far. The internet age has broken constraints of time and space. For example, you might not always be able to physically sweep the grave during Qing Ming Festival. This we have to accept. From a realistic point of view, we should hence provide many ways of practicing ancestral worship—in Buddhist teachings, this is an example of the wisdom in looking at issues and coming up with solutions.*<sup>VRX</sup>

Will these beliefs and values maintain their integrity in spite of the perceived need for ritual simplification? Or have the rituals arrived at an accommodation with current existential demands?<sup>RM</sup>

(.) I existentially demand to form a line of connection straight through to you through these rituals, wherever you are in the cosmos. I will invent my own rituals to reach you. And you will hear me calling to you from the heart of infinite flower fields that ensconce you. <>

Some of them [the non-traditional-educated in Singapore, meaning English-educated] have become interested (though mainly in an intellectual fashion) in rediscovering their native traditions. The moot question therefore is whether this interest would lead to a parallel growth in the practice of such traditions (including rituals) or, more critically, whether the traditions so discovered can be adapted to current and future value-orientations as well as beliefs.<sup>RM</sup>

(.) Did you receive the driving license and pink car I burnt for you? You always said you were stupid, didn't know how to drive, had to rely on others to take you around to buy heavy things or see the doctor. I want you to know you're not stupid. I will use \*拜拜 as a tool for you to live your dreams. <>

\*Baibai, meaning praying to ancestors, gods or deities

Increasing rationality seems to be directly responsible for the weakening of influence of such rituals on everyday life.<sup>RM</sup>

(.) The quiet devotion of ritual (self-guided, passed down, adapted, or otherwise) is balm for all sorts of heartache. "Ordinary devotion", Maggie Nelson wrote in *The Argonauts*. Perhaps one day the inventive, dutiful repeating of this love can mend the truly strange, cruel absence of you. After all, the day you left is also when I started living with your energy, spirit and memory like a perfume on me always. <>

vii. *TENSES*, or can you understand the time of a flower



*Allamanda, paper money, paper effigies, clock, measuring tape.*

ME: Wa eh sai da bud si meng yi migia bo? Ai dan yi wu zoh gih bo?  
*Can I ask her questions normally, do I have to wait for a special occasion?*

YIPO: Ai dan. mai ca yi. hoh yi ki hui sek lah. Wun dua lid ji bai ga lai meng.  
*Yes you do.*  
*Don't disturb her. Let her rest. You can only ask her questions when you are properly praying to her!*

<> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> From one of your grandchildren: I at the staircase first landing and she was sitting on her rattan chair. I think lying backwards relaxed. Then I called out to her and stretch out my hand. But she never hear. I keep trying to reach her but can't that's all. <> <> <>

ME: Lih wu dam sim yi dih dolo bo?  
*Are you worried about her whereabouts?*

YIPO: Lih asi bai jid ba lid hor, lih ga yi puapuay, meng ah ma, gong jigu si wunang bai lih pad lit, wunang si gia zoh budleh lah, lih si wu jiap xiu dio bo? Lih puapuay kua yih gong simi. Jizun ai hoh gu si lin eh sihu liam geng doh buay hu liao lor.

*When you are praying for her 100 days, you can say to her, "Under the Chinese custom, we are praying for your hundred days. We are with Buddha. Do you accept?" Then you can puapuay and see what she says. It's too late now to pay the monks at Gu Si Lin to chant for her ascension.*

YIPO: Wun da geh ze mrt. Ang mo kio kih bishan, goh gia ki serangoon hid dao, zeh geh serangoon ga pua jid eh purple colour kih gu qia zui. Ah gu qia zui neng eh soh soh lor. Ah soh soh jia mi gia dan eh go lai buay mi gia, goh wad do deng jia ice kacang, wusi jia cendol.

*We used to take the MRT from Ang Mo Kio to Bishan, then change lines and take to Serangoon, then change again to purple colour line and take it to Chinatown. We would wander and shop and eat. After getting our dried goods, we would go back to the food area and eat ice kacang or cendol.*

<> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> Lih eh sio beh gong yi eh bang: wa deh li bai bang dio yih, wun zeh mrt. Gao liao, wah gong, "Liap ah, gao liao lor". Yih bo gong simi, yi ki lai, wa masi ki lai, chud mrt, wa dio jin sin.

*As reported by your sister: in the second dream I had of her, we were taking the MRT. We got to our stop, I said, "Ah Liap, we've reached". She didn't say anything, just got up with me. We walked out of the train and I woke up. That was it. <> <> <>*

YIPO: Yih da bai ga wa gong, Suan ah, lang neng eh ceh mi gu, mm pat li, da geh ceng gah swee swee, wu makeup, ceng gah ani ho ho, da geh dih busstop hor, wu lang du diu wu nang hor, ang moh lang ah meng wu nang, gia dor hor wu nang kua, woon neng eh buay hiao kua, jin zuay bai. Yih gong, eh, lang jin paiseh leh, wu si zeh MRT lang pun meng leh. Yih gong, wa ga lih gong hor, eh bai lang na sih si hor, ga liam lio ong, eh ka eh ong gong, pad mi mai, tak ceh neng eh li lang dia dio ai. Wa gong, si lor, si lor. Yih gong, lan bo pat li jia gan kor, chud gua kao buay hiao ga lang gong, pai seh ga bo si. Lan bo pat li jia gan kor.

*She used to say to me, Ah Suan, us blur illiterate ladies, always wearing pretty clothes with makeup, dressing so well to go out, but people at the busstop, like white people, hold maps asking us for directions. Neither of us can read, this happened so many times. She says, so embarrassing, sometimes taking the MRT they ask us too. She says, I tell you, when we die, we tell \*Yanluo Wang, the downstairs god, we don't need anything special in our next life, except this: education—these two words we definitely want. I said, absolutely, absolutely. She says, being illiterate is so difficult. Not being able to communicate with people outside, I'm so mortified. To be illiterate is painful.*

\*Ruling deity of the underworld



*Wok, English textbooks, English storybooks, driving textbooks, Hokkien gold paper money, reincarnation paper, paper bills, Allamanda, water jasmine, spade.*

The idea is that the ancestors are perceived as being present among the family, and they are therefore often invited to participate in the various activities of the living. <sup>CDRS</sup>

<> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> You were eating a magic ice cream cake with me, Mother, Little Sister and my lover at a cafe in a high building amidst clouds. Mother in a gothic dress sat on a swing hanging from the ceiling. She makes a big swing to pass my lover a pastry. He bends parallel to the ground to catch it, then pivots and passes to me. It is a puffy éclair with mint green cream and vanilla ice cream. Unaware of us, you sat in a black evening gown studiously reading one of my favourite English books, Einstein's Dreams by

Alan Lightman. In it, for thirty nights before the theory of relativity comes to Einstein, he has a dream each night where time is a different conception. <>  
<> <>

(.) 你死的第三天，那个新加坡艺术博物馆问我要不要跟他们...做 project” (On the third day of your funeral, that Singapore Art Museum emailed me to...do project.) Maybe if there hadn't been your funeral, there wouldn't have been this email. And without the email, there might not have been this entire project, this adventure I took myself on to chase you. In this essay, I describe you in past and present. It's been 171 days since you left the life we are still living. Will I one day catch myself referring to you only in past tense? Did you know that the languages you speak—Mandarin, Hokkien, Malay—have no past? <>

Grief does not have a fixed length of time. It is infinite. <sup>AZQ</sup>

(.) If I print this essay out, affix the Taoist seal, write your name, sign mine with a circle and a dot, and burn it, will you receive it?

YIPO: Deng leh bai bang ki wa sio kimzua mm zai ho xiang. Mm zai hoh simi lang wa mm zai.

*Last week I dreamt that I was burning paper money but I can't remember for whom. I just can't recall.*



*Mama Xmas Tree - bougainvillea plant, personal effects, paper money.*



(.) I understand my maintenance of a humble shrine for you as both a self-soothing act and one that amuses you. It houses your Enchanteur rose powder, a free toothbrush set and comb from Little Sister's recent cruise trip, and fresh flowers. I hear you chiding me for secretly picking them from our neighbours on my evening bicycle rounds. <>

花无百日，人无千日。 In Buddhist rituals, they use flowers, water and incense. At funeral wakes, to see flowers slowly die over a few days is to see the impermanence of life. If you recognise that, you can understand how to live more meaningfully. <sup>AZQ</sup>

<> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> <> In this dream, she was walking with you in a garden—Butchart Garden in Victoria BC, Canada, a place you visited together over thirty years ago. You couldn't walk very fast, and held her arm to walk. You admired the flowers. The weather was not too hot, just nice, in the hour of 9am. You wore your white polo jogging shirt and long exercise pants. No one else was there. <> <> <>

YIPO: Yih pun ga wa ki sentosa huay hng jid pai, woon neng eh. Hid zoon offer, neng eh lao lang mm zai zup gwee kor. Yih ai kia huay.  
*Together we even once went to Sentosa, to the garden, just the two of us. There was an offer, two senior citizens for—I can't recall—just over ten dollars. She loves walking in flower gardens.*

(.) I told my friend about this project I'm doing to reflect on your absence, your continuation, our customs. She said it's like an ornate tunnel into the other side. One without a form, I said, or perhaps the form is love. <>

YIPO: Dan yih jia ho liao, hui sio bo liao, yih dio zao liao.  
*When she's done eating, and the candles are out, she's gone again.*

(.) lih dih wu huay eh soh zai, wa zai.

lih xiu wa, wa zai.

lih zizun hua hee liao, wa zai.

lih bo deng lai liao, wa zai.

*you are in the place with flowers, I know.*

*you miss me, I know.*

*you are finally happy, I know.*

*you are not coming back, I know. <>*



*Mama Don't Die - water jasmine bonsai, personal effects, medical equipment, paper money.*

This essay was a written reflection for the Singapore Art Museum Residencies pilot programme. Salty Xi Jie Ng was a pilot artist-in-residence with her project *She Became My Ancestor*, housed under the *Equatorial Research Centre for Ritual & Ancestor Worship*.

*Present Realms*, the pilot Residencies presentation, runs from 14 – 23 January 2022 at Singapore Art Museum's Tanjong Pagar Distripark location. It presents work by Chu Haopei, Salty Xi Jie Ng and Johann Yamin.

*She Became My Ancestor* by *Equatorial Research Centre for Ritual & Ancestor Worship* is a transdisciplinary and dimension-crossing constellation exploring relationships between living and deceased loved ones. The Centre maps relationships, investigates cultural identity and pursues self-invention through its experimental and collaborative research. It was founded by Salty Xi Jie Ng following her grandma's retirement from physical form.

Salty Xi Jie Ng co-creates semi-fictional paradigms for the real and imagined lives of humans within the poetics of the intimate vernacular. Often playing with relational possibilities, her interdisciplinary work is manifested through humour, care, subversion, play, discomfort, a celebration of the eccentric, and a commitment to the deeply personal. Her practice dances across forms such as brief encounter, collaborative space, variety show, poem, conversation, meal, publication, film, performance. She was recently artist-in-residence or artist fellow at the Singapore Art Museum, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's College of Visual & Performing Arts, New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park, and Buangkok Square (commissioned by the National Arts Council Singapore).  
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