

# **Protestant Funeral Processions in Southeast China: From Gangnam Style to Overt Evangelization**

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## **Abstract:**

Christian funeral services and processions, replete with Christian-inspired banners and signs, church bands, and conspicuous crosses, are ways in which Protestant communities in South Fujian actively promote their faith. These events, which are often quite evangelistic, are more than simple demonstrations of faith. They are also formative because the expressions of social cohesion are meant to elevate the status of the church community or family in the eyes of society at large. This article will demonstrate that the *renao* (socially vibrant) atmosphere of Protestant funerals reflects how such activities are important avenues for church communities to gather and celebrate.

**Key Words:** Protestant, funerals, South Fujian

## **Introduction**

“Oooh, sexy lady!” One can imagine the scene, with the music of the popular hit *Gangnam Style* playing in the background, the dance team in a rural village in South Fujian enthusiastically performed their “horse dance,” following the motions made famous by the South Korean pop star Psy. However, what made this event in the fall of 2013 particularly interesting is that the performers were members of the local Protestant church dance team and the performance was part of the funeral service of a departed fellow church member. Not only did church members dance at the service, but the ceremony was a “Christian funeral,” presided over by church leaders and accentuated by red crosses adorning the scene, emblazoned on clothing, musical instruments, and banners. The celebratory atmosphere, punctuated by international pop music, dance teams, a long funerary procession, and Christian paraphernalia combine for an interesting display of local customs and religious belief.

The relaxing of restrictions placed on traditional customs during the Maoist years, coupled with economic growth during the last three decades, has resulted in a resurgence of a vibrant religious life in rural South Fujian. As Kenneth Dean notes, ritual events found in this region “are not remnants of a rapidly vanishing traditional past but are instead arenas for the active negotiation of the forces of modernity.”<sup>1</sup> Funerals offer a microcosm of the revival of traditional rituals and customs. Today, as before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), funerals are celebratory affairs often involving loud music, bright colors, sumptuous banquets, lively performances, and public processions. Most funerals organized by Chinese Protestant communities follow many of these local conventions, but also appropriate such activities to reflect a distinctly Christian identity.

This article, based on personal observation and informal interviews with dozens of pastors and rural church members, will look at how Protestant communities in rural South Fujian are in the process of negotiating funeral

practices, producing ceremonies that reflect their embeddedness in the local society while simultaneously exhibiting their religious identity as Christians.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, there are some funerary rituals that most Protestants in South Fujian refuse to do. Examples of these absent actions may include offering fruit or alcohol sacrifices for the departed, burning incense, creating an ancestral tablet for the deceased, bowing in front of the corpse (though some Protestants in areas of South Fujian may do this), or more overt contradictions such as inviting Buddhist or Daoist religious specialists to perform rituals. In fact, the conspicuous exclusion of some rituals could be thought of as a ritual itself, or as a “non-ritual.”<sup>3</sup> However, this article will focus on what actions and rituals are present in most Protestant funerals. Specifically, the analysis here will center on the funeral procession and how Protestant communities adapt local customs common in rural areas of South Fujian.

Chinese funeral practices have long been a topic of interest for historians and anthropologists because they reflect organizational networks and social allegiance.<sup>4</sup> In their edited volume on funerals in the Late Imperial era, James Watson and Evelyn Rawski note that “the rituals performed at marriage and at death were central to definitions of Chinese cultural identity.”<sup>5</sup> Discussion of how the dual status of Chinese and Christian is expressed today in South Fujian funerals is an important topic because from it we can see how Chinese Protestant communities form boundaries and construct identities that both distinguish their group from other religious groups and promote their faith in a manner comprehensible to the non-Christians around them.

This article will begin with a brief history of Protestantism in the region and background on a recent funeral held in South Fujian. Next is an examination of some of the major aspects found in most Protestant funeral processions in general. Following this, we will look at specific characteristics of these events, highlighting the evangelistic, public, and celebratory natures of such processions. Overall, the discussion here shows that Protestant communities are comprised of active agents in the construction of a visible Christian identity through funerals and their processions.

### ***Historical Background***

As one of the first treaty ports at the end of the First Opium War, Xiamen was opened to Protestantism in 1842. Within a decade, three mission agencies had put down roots in the city, the (Dutch) Reformed Church in America (RCA), the London Missionary Society (LMS), and the Presbyterian Church of England (PCE). Soon after, the RCA and PCE churches merged and authority devolved to Chinese church members. The result was the establishment of a Chinese church independent of the missions in the 1850s.<sup>6</sup> LMS-affiliated churches joined this union in 1920. The independence of Chinese churches in this region meant that while missionaries were influential and involved in crafting church polity on activities such as funerals, they were not arbiters and often had little control on the actual practices that Chinese Protestants performed. The expulsion of missionaries in the 1950s and the early independence of the Protestant churches in South Fujian mean that there are few vestiges of a missionary past in Christian rituals today.

Chinese Protestant funerals in the area, beginning with the first Protestant funeral in 1848, were from the outset distinctly both “Christian” and “Chinese.”<sup>7</sup> The Christian and Chinese characteristics of Protestant funerals in South Fujian continued even after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Pictures of Protestant funerals from the 1950s and early 1960s show family members in traditional Chinese mourning garments at churches and with crosses or Christian messages adorning the coffin entourages. Such overt religious displays, though, were stamped out beginning in the mid 1960s. Religious rituals, including funeral celebrations, experienced revitalization in the 1980s after the implementation of the Reform policies of Deng Xiaoping. However, it has been in the last two decades that rural Protestant groups in the area have had the ability and confidence to highlight their faith through funeral productions.

The restoration and revitalization of Christian elements to rural funerals in South Fujian can be clearly seen in the funeral of Mrs. Liu Yinglin, which will be referred to throughout the analysis below.<sup>8</sup> Mrs. Liu was born in Hui’an County in 1905.<sup>9</sup> Her father was of the first generation of preachers in Hui’an, a hotbed of LMS activity and Christian expansion in the late Qing Dynasty. Growing up in a Christian home, Mrs. Liu was imbued with a focus on education. She studied at a Christian girls’ high school on the small island of Gulangyu. Returning to Hui’an after graduating, she started her own church-affiliated elementary school. In the 1920s she married Zhuang Xiuting, also a graduate of Christian schools. After completing his studies at Talmage College (a mission school more like a high school), Xiuting initially served as a teacher and headmaster of church schools in Yongchun and Hui’an, then served as a preacher for various churches in Hui’an before being ordained as a pastor of the church in Wangchuan village. However, due to the land reform campaign of the early 1950s in which all rural churches were closed (at least temporarily), the couple and their family were forced to return to the Zhuang ancestral home to work the land.<sup>10</sup> They lived there together until 1993 when Zhuang Xiuting passed away. The couple had 9 children and a total (at the time of Mrs. Liu’s death) of 105 descendants. The children (the eldest being 87) were preparing for the Spring Festival at the family home when Mrs. Liu, at the age of 110 years, passed away on Jan. 30, 2014.<sup>11</sup> The family immediately shifted their preparations from welcoming the New Year to organizing proper funeral arrangements for the family matriarch.

### ***Protestant Funeral Processions***

The most public aspect of rural funerals is the procession. The main purpose of this ritual is what Watson calls the “expulsion of the coffin,” that is the transporting of the body to the burial ground.<sup>12</sup> However, this act is also an opportunity for performance and to attract attention. The procession normally starts after the funeral, which is either held at a church or more commonly at the deceased’s home or ancestral hall, and terminates outside the limits of the village where the body is then transported to the crematorium.<sup>13</sup>

The funeral service for Mrs. Liu was presided over by a respected local church member and was held in the courtyard of Mrs. Liu’s home (which is referred to by the family as “Canaan” [*jianan*], the Old Testament name for the Israelites “promised land”) where hundreds of villagers and Christians from

churches throughout the region crammed in to witness the service (Image 1). Following the wake was the funeral procession, which departed from the family home. Depending on relational proximity to Mrs. Liu, family members were arranged and announced by the emcee according to a set order, with church friends and guests following in the procession. Mrs. Liu's sons flanked the casket, which was carried with poles by pallbearers. Trailing the casket were elderly relatives (including some of Mrs. Liu's daughters), most of whom were seated in the backs of pedaled tricycles. Behind these relatives were various groups of mourners, including "church bands," as well as a church "drum team," and then more distant relatives. At the end of the procession was a local "drum team" comprised of elderly village women followed by the final group which consisted of members of the local street committee. It is significant that these two groups, neither connected to the church, were relegated to the end of the procession, after the various church groups.



*Image 1: The funerary wake, held in the courtyard of Mrs. Liu's home, was attended by hundreds of guests. This photo shows some of the guests crowded around Mrs. Liu's decorated coffin. (photo by author)*

In total, there were 647 people who took part in the funeral and the whole procession stretched for over half a kilometer. The procession travelled nearly 3 miles, winding its way through narrow alleys and then traversing the length of the main village road. While there were many options for shorter, more direct paths to the destination (where the coffin was loaded into a vehicle), the funeral organizers clearly opted for a longer route in which more spectators would see the procession. At around the halfway mark, the procession stopped for about 10 minutes and water was handed out to all the mourners. In accordance with local custom, the coffin of Mr. Zhuang (originally buried in 1993), was exhumed and joined the procession for the last 50 meters, so both husband and wife entered the hearse and were taken to the crematorium together. The size of the procession made it a large event for the whole village. Dozens of spectators lined the streets or stopped to watch as the procession went by. One local resident commenting

on the pomp and circumstance of the procession remarked, “with a person like this [of this magnitude], even the emperor must give way.”

### **Funeral Attire**

Today’s Christian funerals mostly follow local customs regarding vestments. The exact protocol governing appropriate funeral attire changes depending on the locality, but those familiar with a village’s traditions can clearly see the degree of relatedness to the deceased or the generational level of the participant through the clothing and accessories worn. In general, white, coarse mourning garments (often worn over normal clothes) are donned at least for the procession if not the funeral itself.<sup>14</sup> In many villages in South Fujian, as was the case for Mrs. Liu’s funeral, wearing a blue mourning dress or a blue headband would indicate the male had married into the family of the deceased. In addition, all the sons and the eldest grandson wore hemp belts outside of their white robes. In this instance, all guests who drove cars were given red strips of cloth to attach to their vehicles (though the vehicles did not take part in the procession). In some districts in the region, a white sackcloth vest worn on the outside of the white mourning robe shows the direct sons of the deceased. Such local traditions are seen as natural or normal for local Chinese Protestants.

### **Coffin Ornamentation**

A paper mache cover, usually decorated with red crosses and words such as “rest in the Lord” (*anxi zhuhuai*) commonly sits over the casket. Normally, as was the case for Mrs. Liu, a large red cross will also be placed atop this coffin cover (Image 1). Such decorative displays are made specifically for each funeral and tend to be quite colorful and eye-catching. At first glance, they are clearly Christian. What would have probably been controversial for the missionary in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but which seems acceptable for many church members today is that this paper mache covering (and the funeral wreaths—see more on this below) is usually burned at the end of the procession. Burning items at the end of funerals has long been a custom in South Fujian, as it is in most rural areas of China. The original reasoning was that by burning (fake) items made from paper, such as clothing, mansions, money or other necessities, the descendants were providing comfort for their departed loved ones in the afterlife. While such a practice may not seem theologically compatible with Christian belief, many Protestants in South Fujian do not dwell on such topics. Most see no contradiction in their identity as Christian and their practice of burning the paper coffin covers. The feeling of most rural Christians is probably similar to one Christian I interviewed who simply said, “What else would we do with the coffin cover?” Instead of reflecting on the story or reason behind many rituals, most participants see their actions as common or normal. In many cases, the rituals that are carried out at Protestant funerals are simply what are expected.

In this sense, Christian funerals can be understood as guided by orthopraxy, or correct action. Nearly three decades ago, Evelyn Rawski and James Watson debated whether Chinese funerary rituals were governed by orthodoxy or orthopraxy.<sup>15</sup> While a full discussion of this controversy between historians and anthropologists is outside the scope of this article, it seems to me that neither

option may be suitable for Protestant funerals in South Fujian. The question most Christian communities face is not what is the correct belief or what is the correct practice, but what rituals consolidate the group and reflect the social cohesion they seek. We may understand this concern as “ortho-belonging,” or the desire to manifest correct group adherence.

The idea of “ortho-belonging” corresponds to analysis by Richard Madsen. In a recent article, Madsen argues that a major attraction to Christianity for new converts is the new forms of community the church can offer. Madsen suggests that the growth in numbers of Christians over the past three decades is due in part to the collapse of previously strong social units, such as coops or work teams. As Madsen suggests, religious adherents in China carry out ritual practices “because they want to be a part of a community of practitioners.”<sup>16</sup> Funerals in South Fujian offer tangible opportunities for Protestants to gather and generate fraternal sentiments.

### ***Funeral Music and Objects***

Bands are an integral part of funeral processions and large Protestant funerals may invite more than one band, as seen in the example of Mrs. Liu, whose funeral included five complete brass bands, all coming from different churches in the district. The arranging of bands in the procession is also significant. The band from the Chongwu Church, nearly an hour away from where Mrs. Liu lived, was given prominence in her funeral procession because of its professionalism (it was considered the “best” band) and the distance it travelled to attend the event. Many rural church congregations form brass bands specifically for weddings and funerals, but funeral processions offer the most public opportunities for expression. Similarly, rural churches that cannot maintain a band may have dance or drum teams, often consisting of middle-aged or elderly women. Church networks are employed in inviting bands or teams for funerals. Some church bands have their own vans and travel fairly large distances when requested to play at funerals. I spoke with one preacher in rural Anxi who told me that his church band had only six members, but it was important that the church kept its band because of the service it provided for funerals. Two other church leaders in different areas of South Fujian explained that their churches do not have brass bands, but for Christian funerals, they will hire the “local” or “secular” bands, but ask them to play “Christian music.” One pastor told me that the local band in his town specifically learned two Christian songs to appeal to this market.<sup>17</sup>

The bands, whether Christian or not, are decked out in professional uniforms and led by a conductor. The church bands usually also include signs showing their church name and phone number and a cross. Likewise, the largest tuba and/or bass drum are often emblazoned with a large red cross and the name of the church. This was the case at Mrs. Liu’s funeral in which each church band had its own distinct uniforms and was led by a conductor with a large baton beside an attendant holding a sign with the name of the church they were representing (Images 2, 3, and 4).



*Images 2, 3, and 4: The photo on the top shows the Chongwu Church band, the most professional of the church bands in the procession, led by a prominently displayed first-place award. This band was the first in the procession and meant to welcome the casket entourage. A church band is seen in the picture on the bottom left, led by their distinctively Christian sign. Similarly, the flag in the picture on the bottom right displays a large red cross announcing the “drum team” from the Shanyao village church. (photos by author)*



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One of the most visible aspects of rural funerals is the colorful wreaths displayed during the wake and carried throughout the procession. Wreaths are often given (or rented) by churches in memory of the deceased and clearly state the church name on the ribbons attached to the wreath.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, banners for the deceased will often refer to him/her as a Christian (or “brother/sister”) and are commonly decorated with crosses. In one recent funeral in Anxi, the pastor was asked to write the characters on the lead banner, which read “Father of Five Generations.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the pastor is seen as a religious specialist and could be compared to a Buddhist/Daoist/*Lisheng* specialist who would be called upon to perform similar services. In addition, many Protestant funerals also have large evangelistic signs or pictures as part of the procession (see more on this below). Slogans such as “Forever with the Lord” or “Believe in the Lord for Eternal Life,” are prominently displayed in the processions.

The procession for Mrs. Liu was spearheaded by commemorative wreaths given by various organizations. In total, there were 36 wreaths, each one carried by a church helper wearing a festive, bright uniform. The first wreath was given by the government of a distant provincial capital where the eldest son resided, reflecting his status within the family and society. Other wreaths were sponsored by local organizations and various churches in the area. Following the wreaths was a large vertical red banner (approximately 5 meters tall—it often had to be lowered to fit under electrical wires) carried by about 8 male relatives. A cross was displayed on the top of the banner and below this read “Mother of 7 Generations” and “110 Years Old” and then below, “Mrs. Zhuang Liu Yinglin Funeral Banner” (Image 5). Two smaller flat banners followed, the first in black with a red cross and the words “Zhuang Family, Mother of 7 Generations,” and the other banner being white with a large red cross and the words “Rest in Peace in the Lord.” Both of these smaller banners were carried by women relatives (Image 6).



*Images 5 and 6: The picture on the left shows a couple of the 36 funerary wreaths, followed by the large red banner adorned with a cross. Below is the casket entourage with banners and a picture of the deceased leading the casket. (photos by author)*





Despite the misgivings of missionaries in earlier eras, portraits of the deceased are an ingrained part of Protestant funerals in South Fujian today.<sup>20</sup> Depending on the village, a certain descendant will be asked to carry a picture of the deceased, usually near the head of the procession. In the case of Mrs. Liu, this picture was placed on a cart (on top of which was a large, red paper cross) with a young descendant (a great, great, great grandson, the eldest male of the most recent generation) riding behind it, but often times it is carried by a young descendant at the front of the procession. The picture is often surrounded by decorations, usually including a large red cross. Others have a Christian message or Bible verse printed directly onto the picture, which often includes the name of the departed referring to them with the Christian title “brother” (*dixiong*) or “sister” (*jiemei*) (Image 7). While Protestant families would normally not have ancestral tablets, today they keep pictures of recent ancestors. Usually only one copy of these pictures would be made and prominently displayed on the wall at the home of the deceased or of the eldest son. Instead of burning incense or placing tablets in front of these pictures, many families surround them with Christian ornaments, such as a poster of a cross or Christian calendar, or border the pictures with Christian couplets.

*Image 7: This picture was carried at the head of a Protestant funeral procession in Hui'an. The top of the portrait reads “Christian Sister Zeng Shang at Rest in the Lord,” and the bottom lists the dates of birth and death.*



### **Protestant Funeral Processions as Evangelistic**

Holding a Christian funeral is a statement act—it often has significant implications that reflect the deceased’s identity and relation to the family or local society. However, such funerals are also recognized as ready occasions for a public endorsement of the faith and even as opportunities for evangelism. The son of a deceased church leader in Anxi I interviewed was happy when the pastor spoke during the wake because the villagers, most of whom were not Christians, actually listened to the message. He made the point of mentioning to me that this was significant because in many cases funerals are one of the only chances these villagers have to hear the gospel.

The preachers and pastors I spoke with throughout South Fujian repeatedly mentioned that funerals, events that deal with existential questions and offer a relatively captive audience, are very conducive to evangelization. I attended one funeral in the region in which the pastor gave what could be considered an “altar call,” challenging all those in attendance to repent and accept Jesus.<sup>21</sup> Not only do religious leaders view such occasions as opportunities to proclaim one’s faith, family members also often do this. For example, the funeral wake for Mrs. Liu culminated with a speech by Zhuang Honghua, Mrs. Liu’s eldest son and clearly the family leader. Honghua began his speech by saying, “I’m a [Communist] Party member, but I’m even more a Christian.” He went on to say, “Because I’m a Christian, I can be a better Party member.” Honghua, who is the retired Vice Party Secretary of a large, provincial medical university, attributed his achievements (as a provincial model worker, previous representative to the National Congress, etc.), to his Christian upbringing. Likewise, Honghua reflected on how many descendants his mother had (105) and how many of these were university graduates (over 60) or held professor-level posts (over 20). These accomplishments were said to be a reflection of God’s blessing on the family.

The evangelistic opportunity afforded by Protestant funerals is explained in a recent instructional video produced by leaders at a rural church in Hui’an and distributed free of charge to churches throughout the region.<sup>22</sup> The DVD shows how to hold an “appropriate” funeral service, offering suggestions on what to preach at services and how to evangelize through symbols and actions during funerary processions. The local church that produced the video uses 12 large signs summarizing the gospel story, from creation (with a picture of the Garden of Eden) to the birth, death, resurrection, and second coming of Christ (Image 8). The last sign ends with the proclamation, “God Only Gives You One Chance to Choose, Don’t Choose Incorrectly!!!” These signs, carried by volunteers during the funeral procession, are often displayed outside the crematorium during services held there.



*Image 8: This picture shows a Christian funeral using “gospel signs” to evangelize during the procession. (photo from huansonghuijia video)*

The video additionally presents a list of do's and don'ts on terminology to be used throughout the service and on funerary wreaths. It explicitly notes that "during Christian funerals [homecomings], we [Christians] should use terminology appropriate for our Christian identity, so as to be a witness and glorify God." For example, Protestants are told to not use "die" (*si*), either in writing or in speech, but rather "homecoming" (*huijia*), since the departed is in heaven. The video also suggests that the music played by church bands should be referred to as "holy music" (*shengyue*) and that instead of the commonly used characters "respect" (*zun*) or "grieve" (*dao*), funeral wreaths should display the characters for "praise" (*zanmei*) or "worship" (*jingbai*).

Implicit in the production of this video is the space afforded by funerals for religious proselytizing. The public spectacle of funerals couples with the delicate topic of regulating how to commemorate the death of a loved one, resulting in a legitimate opportunity for the Protestant community to express itself largely without fear of any government interference or reprisals. Most governing authorities, at least in South Fujian, would think it intolerable to restrict funerary rites. The restoration of dynamic, exuberant funeral services in rural South Fujian means that there is more latitude for local church communities to display and promote their own faith. While some areas of China continue to experience occasional restrictions on Christian activities, such as the cases of churches and crosses in Wenzhou being torn down in 2014, during my conversations throughout rural South Fujian, local state interference in funeral expressions was never mentioned as a concern of church leaders or lay believers.<sup>23</sup>

In a recent conference paper on funerals in Southern China, Bram Colijn identifies Christian proselytizing at funerals with Donald Sutton's concept of "heteroprax standardization" or "the standardizing of practices largely or wholly beyond the control of the state and without regard to its intent."<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the public and blatant evangelistic techniques employed by Christian communities in South Fujian, while in opposition to the state's noted restrictions on proselytizing, are nonetheless common.<sup>25</sup>

Recent scholarly discussion of religion, particularly Christianity, in China has moved away from a resistance and repression model that emphasizes state constraints on religious practices.<sup>26</sup> The previous paradigm overemphasizes the political nature of religious belief, but is being replaced by more nuanced analyses that highlight the negotiated space that is available for religious belief and expression. Overt displays of Christian symbols or subtle evangelism at funerals do not fit the resistance-repression rubric. Actions such as hanging Christian calendars in one's home or business, pasting Christian couplets outside one's doors, wearing Christian jewelry, hanging a cross on a car's rearview mirror or carrying Christian signs at a funeral are all common, normal expressions of a Christian identity that are not regulated, not political, and not thought of as "dangerous" or subversive.

### ***Protestant Funeral Processions as Formative***

The exclusivity required by Christian faith requires that some local rites are absent from Protestant ceremonies. Protestant funerals are often contentious times for they bring to the forefront the fact that Chinese Christians have made

apparent breaks with local religious beliefs and practices. Drawing this line and rejecting some customs can single Christians out for ridicule or even more overt forms of persecution. It is precisely because of the potential friction that church communities tend to unite and actively promote their religious identity on such occasions. The “non-rituals,” as well as the explicit Christian aspects of funerals create differences with local traditions, but they also create similarities within the church community. Robert Weller and Adam Seligman refer to such ways of thinking and acting as constructing “groups” and “gaps.”<sup>27</sup>

For many rural Protestants in South Fujian, attending a funeral for a church member is often less about paying respect to the deceased (or even his/her family) and more about an expression of unity and communal strength. I witnessed one rural church service that announced the death of a church member and the funeral details via Powerpoint, without even listing the deceased’s name. Instead, the announcement simply called him a “brother” and asked the congregation to gather the following morning at 9:00 a.m.

In some ways, this corresponds to anthropologist Adam Chau’s ideas on the concept of “reciprocity” in preparing for and attending funerals. As Chau notes, “funerals are social events in which social debts are incurred and re-paid, gestures of sentiments are expressed and reciprocated, social ties are re-affirmed and reproduced, and most importantly the social and moral worth of the household in question is evaluated and judged.”<sup>28</sup> Protestant funerals in South Fujian, however, seem to offer reciprocity to a certain church community rather than an individual family. The prevailing notion for many rural church members seems to be something like, “I will attend this Christian funeral in another village and expect members from that village’s Protestant community to support a funeral in my family or village in the future.”

In his analysis of Catholic funerals in the Ming and Qing dynasties, Nicolas Standaert notes that lineages used funeral ceremonies as a way to “reaffirm the corporate identity” of the family.<sup>29</sup> Standaert goes on to note that historically, “as Christian communities manifested themselves on the occasion of a funeral, they reveal[ed] inclusive as well as exclusive characteristics.”<sup>30</sup> Funerals today offer a similar opportunity for rural churches. Overt displays of a Christian identity are not merely an evangelistic tactic, but are also a demonstration of social cohesion and strength. In the case of Mrs. Liu’s funeral, leaving the family courtyard, procession walkers were arranged in an aisle about three to four people wide. The aisle was cordoned off by white ropes on either side that stretched approximately 500 meters. This was to keep order in the procession and separate those on the inside, that is those participating in the procession, from those simply watching (Image 9).



*Image 9: This picture shows some of the procession walkers at Mrs. Liu's funeral and the rope separating the participants from onlookers. (photo by author)*

A large portion of those who participated in the procession at Mrs. Liu's funeral were members of churches throughout the Hui'an region. While the local church in the village averages less than 200 worshippers on normal Sundays, the procession included hundreds of "non-relative" Christians from the surrounding area. Many of these came from rather distant churches. Mrs. Liu's eldest son explained to me that the family did not feel they could invite many local villagers to the funeral because they were afraid their mother's funeral would overshadow the funeral of their father. He noted that in 1993 when his father passed away, there were many representatives from the larger Zhuang lineage who participated in the procession. However, local custom mandates that a wife's funeral should not be bigger than her husband's, so the family did not invite local distant relatives. Despite this, the funeral was clearly a very large event and was well-attended by many guests from outside the village.

For Protestant funerals, a large attendance is more than just a show of respect, but also a demonstration of a personal faith, and a reflection of Christianity in general. In this respect, I see Chinese Protestant funerals not as simple cosmetic ritual expression, but as formative. This corresponds to Rubie Watson's analysis of funerals in Southeastern China. Watson claims that funerals are "not so much occasions for the assertion of already existing groups as opportunities for creating new groups." She goes on to say that "in participating in funerals individuals create, change, reaffirm, and deny social relations."<sup>31</sup> Active participation in public funerals is an important avenue for rural church members to confirm their status as Christians. For new church members, such a step may be fraught with challenges and risk (such as alienating relatives or inciting ridicule), which therefore increases the significance of such participation. As Watson argues, such rites are "active; they are part of the change itself."<sup>32</sup>

While the absence of some ritual expressions and the alteration of others mark Protestant funerals as unique, they are not performed in a cultural vacuum.

I tend to think of Protestant funeral processions in South Fujian as a dialogue with society at large. For any successful dialogue to be achieved, the Protestant funeral must be done within the confines of the local culture; that is it must be understandable to society. A complete discarding of prevailing rituals would risk alienating the exact groups the church community is hoping to dialogue with. Instead, what Protestants in South Fujian do is adapt existing customs and rituals, imbuing them with Christian symbols and content.

This dialogue is not always successful and the sides are often not evenly matched. For example, one Christian funeral procession in the outskirts of Quanzhou City faced complications when their path to the Christian columbarium passed through a village which viewed the influence of death and Christianity to be polluting. It was not until the procession had entered the village that the Protestant community realized it had deeply offended the local villagers. After the procession, the organizers were pressured into giving the village a “donation” to placate their anger. Subsequent funeral processions leading to the large Christian columbarium have been forced to take a detour around the confines of the village.

Similarly, the recent funeral procession of a departed church leader in Anxi wove its way through four neighboring villages on its way to the hearse. While the neighboring villages were not opposed to having a Christian funeral procession traverse their territory, they did require firecrackers to be let off before entering the borders of each village to ensure evil spirits were not accompanying the procession. The story of a funeral of a young Christian in Tong’u also shows how Protestant communities in many ways play by the rules of the dominant culture. In this instance, the funeral tent and the beginning of the procession was held outside the boundary of the village. While most funerals are held in the center of the village, local custom mandates that funerals in which the deceased died due to an accident must be held outside the village. Thus the funeral for this “brother,” who had died in a car wreck, was held on the outskirts of the village.

The public manifestation of Christian faith afforded by funeral processions offer Protestant communities the chance to demonstrate their religious networks and social solidarity, but this is accomplished with distinctly local conventions. As Standaert writes, Christian funerals “identify and consolidate the identity of participants as Christians but...also [allow] them to remain integrated within the wider Chinese community.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Protestant Funerals as Power Structures**

What may be most apparent about the Christian characteristics of Protestant funeral processions in South Fujian is how conspicuous the Christian symbols are. This can be described as a display of what I have termed “Christian conspicuous consumption.”<sup>34</sup> The “Christian conspicuous consumption” of funeral processions refers to the conscious effort of the family and church community to publicly parade their faith through signs, symbols, size, and atmosphere. However, such actions are also expressions of wealth, status, and power of the individual family and the Protestant community in general. Francis Hsu, in his classic study *Under the Ancestor’s Shadow*, explains that Chinese communities (Hsu is speaking of lineages, but I think we can substitute church

here) demonstrate extravagance or ostentation in ceremonies such as funeral processions because “the greater their excesses...the greater will be their prestige and power.”<sup>35</sup> A missionary in Fujian in the 1870s reported on the affluence he witnessed at funerals:

They [Chinese] waste on the lifeless form what suffering humanity sadly needs for its comfort and well-being. And not only is the regard shown for the dead excessive, but a pretentious display is made for the glory of the living. Chinese Christians too are in danger of falling into this error. I have known a few cases where they have unreasonably run into debt in connection with burials, professedly to prevent it being said that Christians lightly regard the persons of their deceased relatives and friends.<sup>36</sup>

C. K. Yang argued that demonstrative behavior from the family had the dual effect of consolidating lineage relations and enhancing the social status of the family in society at large.<sup>37</sup> According to Yang, large funerals had the purpose of reasserting the status of the family and could show, in the words of Standaert, that the group was not “weakened by death.”<sup>38</sup> If we regard the church as similar in function to a lineage, like the historian Jessie Lutz suggests, then the position of Christian communities and even the Christian faith is reinforced through active participation in funerals.<sup>39</sup>

More recent research has corroborated analysis of earlier scholars. Ellen Oxfeld looked at Hakka funerals in neighboring Guangdong in the 1990s and found that rural families in Reform Era China (1979-present) consider funerals as opportunities to demonstrate power and wealth. For Oxfeld, “funerals become templates on which families can assemble their social skills and material resources... [whereupon] their status in the community is judged and ratified.”<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Linda Sun Crowder analyzed Chinese funerals in San Francisco, arguing that “the impression made by the funeral and the opinions of the observers [are] consequential.”<sup>41</sup>

At the death of one Christian in rural Anxi County, the local pastor asked the family if they wanted a “big” funeral or a “small” one. The son of the deceased explained to me that the family opted for a big funeral because the village where his father lived did not have a strong Christian presence. In this instance, the deceased’s family did not want a large funeral for evangelistic purposes, but rather to ensure the family would not be bullied by non-Christian neighbors or pressured into performing rituals they deemed incompatible with their Christian faith. By asking the pastor to arrange for a “big” funeral, the family was in effect asking him to “gather the troops.” The result was that the funeral saw hundreds of guests from churches throughout the county gather to participate in the funeral procession. Most of the Protestants from outside the village did not even know the deceased, but they understood the significance of their presence at a Christian funeral. During the procession, these members displayed a black ribbon with a red cross pinned to their clothes. These ribbons were brought by the individual church members who would use them for all Christian funeral processions. In this example we see how church networks can be employed to increase the number of participants who express their religious status and the strength of the church community through the use of clothing accessories and religious symbols.

Not only can a successful funeral procession exhibit strength to those outside of the church, it can also assert the influence or standing of a family within the church community. For Mrs. Liu's funeral, 27 pastors and preachers participated in the service, most dressed in their pastoral vestments. Such a show not only gave "face" to the family in the eyes of society at large, but also enhanced the status of the family within their local church and the Christian community in the region. Considering that Mrs. Liu's father and husband were very influential members in the Hui'an church, the leaders of the Hui'an two committees (*Lianghui*, or the Three Self Patriotic Committee, and the local Christian Council) were given prominent place during the service, and this in turn gave prestige and elevated the position of the family in the church.

### **Protestant Funeral Processions as Celebrations**

Chau has recently highlighted the importance of *renao*, or what he describes as "red-hot sociality," the lively, loud, colorful excitement generated at communal gatherings in rural China.<sup>42</sup> While funerals may not offer the same platform for *renao* as the temple festivals Chau investigates, the chance to assemble together, socialize, perform, and commemorate, all in a public setting furnished by Protestant funeral processions should not be overlooked. Though church membership dictates that some activities are off limits to the Protestant community, this does not mean that a desire to socialize or celebrate is in any way diminished. Outside of the religious symbolism and communal identity provided by funeral processions, these activities are part of the experiential and performative nature of ritual life in rural South Fujian.<sup>43</sup> Christian communities would be remiss if they failed to embrace such observances.

Christian funerals are often attended by or at least witnessed by non-Christians and things like blaring church bands, bright decorations of crosses, or flamboyant funerary wreaths and banners are like a vibrant, grassroots advertisement for the church or the Christian faith in general. Furthermore, such ornaments and lively music aid in the creation of an overall festive or social atmosphere. The story of the church team dancing to *Gangnam Style* is just one example of how Christian funerals attempt to generate a boisterous ambience. In fact, in most instances, the more rambunctious the ceremony, the more successful it is thought to be.<sup>44</sup> In addition to invited bands and dance teams, most Protestant funerals also incorporate congregational singing. I have witnessed a few funerals in which hymn books or copies of songs were passed out for all those in attendance to participate in the ceremony.<sup>45</sup>

Two pastors in Hui'an commented to me that Protestant funerals in their districts tended to be much more *renao* than non-Christian funerals. Their explanation for such a phenomenon was that Protestant funerals relied upon more extensive ties to gather people. Many religious celebrations in South Fujian are large and lively because of the various temple alliances and *fenxiang* (incense sharing) networks in which new temples align with established temples through gathering incense given to the deity worshipped there. Funerals, on the other hand, are usually limited to lineage and village ties. For Protestant families, though, funerals often include extra-village/lineage connections through church networks.



Though this was never mentioned in my discussions with church leaders and rural Protestants, one also wonders if the size of Protestant funeral processions and the *renao* generated by such events, which are clearly disproportionate to the population or influence of Protestants in society at large, are in some ways compensatory for the “non-rituals” exhibited. Church members may feel that the excesses in terms of numbers and pomp of Protestant funerals help offset or counterbalance the absence of some practices.

In recent years it has become popular for funerals to be recorded and DVDs of the ceremony passed out to family members. Oxfeld recounts how this practice was beginning to occur in the 1990s among wealthy families.<sup>46</sup> Today, in South Fujian, it is a common element of many rural funerals. In fact, one preacher in rural Anxi has started a small side business videotaping Christian funerals. For a small fee, this church worker will video the wake and funeral procession and edit the content, inserting occasional Bible verses and background Christian hymns into the final production. For families of the deceased, holding an appropriate funeral (which often means, among other things, large and vibrant) is a major event.<sup>47</sup> It entails expense and reliance on vast social networks. Recording this event is simply a reflection of the importance a correct funeral celebration holds for the family.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, Christian funerals in South Fujian offer a platform to publicly celebrate the faith, but they also are looked upon as opportunities for the Protestant community to promote their faith. In this way, Chinese Protestant funeral processions are viewed not simply as obligatory, but rather as favorable circumstances to demonstrate the faith of the deceased and their family, and to exhibit the community and strength of the church, as well as the status of the family.

Chau’s research suggests that scholars have overlooked some key elements of funerals and rural rituals in general by focusing too much on the religious acts or beliefs of participants. Instead, he argues that viewing funerals as social events rather than religious rituals may yield more fruitful analysis. For example, Chau states that funeral guests do not pay “too much attention to the intricacies of symbolic actions conducted or orchestrated by the ritual specialists,” but they do readily notice and evaluate such things as the size and festiveness of the funeral.<sup>48</sup> This article maintains that for Protestant funerals in South Fujian, religious aspects are integral. It is not the mere absence of certain components that delineate Christian funeral processions from non-Christian ones, but the addition or transformation of other elements that aids in this expression of a distinct identity. Funeral processions, replete with Christian-inspired banners and signs, church bands, and conspicuous crosses, help the Christian communities form a new identity. However a more nuanced look at such activities reveals how funerals exhibit the importance of social networks and demonstrations of power. Many attendees of Protestant funerals view such activities as a chance to strengthen group identity, for they offer an opportunity for communal celebration. The social exchange, even *renao*, that funerals provide are important ways for Christians to celebrate.

**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> Kenneth Dean, "Local Communal Religion in South-East China," *China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 338–58; 342.
- <sup>2</sup> This article will only focus on Protestant funerals and follows the Chinese convention of using "Christian" and "Protestant" interchangeably.
- <sup>3</sup> Chris White, "Family Matters: Ancestral Grave Rituals and Protestant Identity in Southeast China," paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies in Asia conference, Singapore, July 17–19, 2014.
- <sup>4</sup> The Dutch sinologist J. J. M. de Groot, who lived in Xiamen for many years, meticulously recorded the customs related to death and funeral practices in the area. See de Groot (1892–1910) and (1884). In addition to de Groot's work on funerals in South Fujian, later scholars also researched the rituals surrounding death and burial in this area of China. A review of this literature is not provided here, but the reader is directed to footnote 8 in Kenneth Dean's article for a somewhat dated but nevertheless helpful summary of other sources discussing funeral rites in South Fujian. Kenneth Dean, "Funerals in Fujian," *Cahiers d'Extreme-Asie* 4 (1988): 19–78.
- <sup>5</sup> James Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds.), *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), ix.
- <sup>6</sup> David Cheung, *Christianity in Modern China: The Making of the First Native Protestant Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).
- <sup>7</sup> The first Chinese Protestant to die in Xiamen was Wu Tu, who had a stroke in an LMS church on Christmas day, 1848. He died in the church the following day. According to a missionary report, the funeral was "entirely in harmony with the Christian profession of our deceased friend." However, the report goes on to explain that while the ceremony was Christian, it was also Chinese: "The mourning-dresses, the coffin, the manner in which it was borne to the burying-ground, and every other circumstance, were all thoroughly Chinese, only with the exclusion of everything connected with idolatrous rites and observances," in "China: Death of a Native Christian," [LMS] *Missionary Magazine* (November 1849): 63.
- <sup>8</sup> Some personal names in this paper have been changed.
- <sup>9</sup> Most of the information regarding Liu Yinglin is from conversations with her children, particularly Mr. Zhuang Honghua. The author is grateful to the Liu/Zhuang family for allowing him to attend the funeral of Mrs. Liu and providing him with information about the family history.
- <sup>10</sup> For more on the political campaigns of the 1950s that affected churches, see M. Searle Bates, "Churches and Christians in China, 1950–1967: Fragments of Understanding," *Pacific Affairs* 41.2 (1968): 199–213. Although the Zhuang family home, where Mrs. Liu had lived since leaving Wangchuan, is in Shanyao, a small village in Quangang, a part of Quanzhou City, this area historically belonged to Hui'an.
- <sup>11</sup> Mrs. Liu's age was calculated in *sui*, the Chinese reckoning for years.
- <sup>12</sup> Watson and Rawski, *Death Ritual*, 15.
- <sup>13</sup> Though relatively rare, a recent phenomenon in South Fujian is the construction of Christian ancestral halls. Some of these are built specifically as places for funerary rites to be carried out for lineage members. See White, "Sacred Dwellings: Christian Ancestral Halls and Homes in Southern Fujian," in Yangwen Zheng (ed.), *Sinicizing Christianity* (tentative title) (forthcoming).
- <sup>14</sup> During Mrs. Liu's funeral procession, a few of the younger descendants were already wearing white shirts, so saw no need to put on the white mourning garments.
- <sup>15</sup> Watson and Rawski, *Death Ritual*.
- <sup>16</sup> Richard Madsen, "Secular Belief, Religious Belonging in China," *Review of Religion in Chinese Society* 1 (2014): 13–28; 15.

- <sup>17</sup> While this article will not discuss the economics of funerals, it should be noted that most bands (whether church or “secular”) are paid for their services. One pastor emphasized to me that when the band from his church performed at a funeral, they did not receive money *and* would not stay for the funeral banquet, so as to avoid gossip that the church members were simply looking to profit from participation in the band.
- <sup>18</sup> In more urban areas, wreaths are usually not burnt (and coffins do not have paper mache covers) at the end of the service. In these cases, wreaths are simply rented and the names of the sending parties and their message to the family are written on ribbons that are replaced.
- <sup>19</sup> Actually, the deceased was only the “father” of four generations, but it is the local custom in this village to add one more generation to the youngest male generation.
- <sup>20</sup> In South Fujian, at least some missionaries before the founding of the PRC disapproved of using photographs of the deceased in the procession. The RCA’s monthly mission magazine, *The Mission Field* records the funeral for one pastor in Tong’an in 1917. The missionaries attending the procession note that following the funerary wreaths and banners “there came a small model of a sedan chair all decked up with flowers and fancy ornaments and at the back a large picture of the deceased. (This we were not particularly pleased to see for it seemed to be quite an evident compromise with the heathen custom—the only difference being that the latter have the ancestral tablet instead of the picture.)” Lyman A. Talman, “A Chinese Funeral,” *The Mission Field* 30 (1918): 494–95.
- <sup>21</sup> In this instance, although she was a church deacon, the deceased’s husband and some of her children (as well as many in attendance) were not Christian, making it more imperative and timely for the pastor to give such a message.
- <sup>22</sup> This video, self-produced in 2007 by the Dongyuan Church in Hui’an, is entitled *huansonghuijia* (Farewell Homecoming).
- <sup>23</sup> Much Western media attention has been given to the campaign of tearing down church buildings in Wenzhou. For example, *The Economist*, November 1, 2014, “Cracks in the Atheist Edifice.” <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21629218-rapid-spread-christianity-forcing-official-rethink-religion-cracks> (accessed January 20, 2015).
- <sup>24</sup> Bram Colijn, “Christians Do not Perform Traditional Rituals” (paper presented at Christianity in Asia summer school, Munster, Germany, September 23, 2014); Donald Sutton, “Ritual, Cultural Standardization, and Orthopraxy in China: Reconsidering James L. Watson’s Ideas,” *Modern China* 33.1 (2007): 3–21; also see Herman Abraham Colijn, “Protestant Death Ritual Negotiation in Fujian: The Effects of Protestant Conversion on Chinese Funerals” (MA thesis, Amsterdam University, 2011).
- <sup>25</sup> This is in agreement with Chau, who suggests that local officials “are not interested in cracking down on superstitions because they do not derive any benefits from doing so.” See Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 215.
- <sup>26</sup> See Mark McLeister, “A Three-Self Protestant Church, the Local State and Religious Policy Implementation in a Coastal Chinese City,” in *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. F. K. G. Lim (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank, “Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China: An Introductory Essay,” in *Making the Religion, Making the State*, ed. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David Wank (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
- <sup>27</sup> Robert P. Weller and Adam B. Seligman, “Pluralism and Chinese Religions: Constructing Socials Worlds through Memory, Mimesis, and Metaphor,” *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 1 (2014): 29–47.
- <sup>28</sup> Chau, “Hosting Funerals and Temple Festivals: Folk Event Productions in Rural China,” *Asian Anthropology* 3 (2004): 39–70; 45.
- <sup>29</sup> Nicolas Standaert, *The Interweaving of Rituals: Funerals in the Cultural Exchange between China and Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2008), 21.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

- <sup>31</sup> Watson and Rawski, *Death Ritual*, 203. In the first quote, Watson is referencing Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, introduction to *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, ed. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 6.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.
- <sup>33</sup> Standaert, *The Interweaving of Rituals*, 9.
- <sup>34</sup> White, "Family Matters."
- <sup>35</sup> Francis Hsu, *Under the Ancestor's Shadow: Chinese Culture and Personality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 211.
- <sup>36</sup> C. Hartwell, "Questionable Practices Connected with Marriage and Funeral Ceremonies," in *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China*, ed. M. T. Yates (Shanghai: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1877), 391.
- <sup>37</sup> C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 36–37.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* Standaert, *The Interweaving of Rituals*, 134.
- <sup>39</sup> Jessie Lutz, "China and Protestantism: Historical Perspectives, 1807–1949," in *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, ed. S. Uhalley and Wu Xiaoxin (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 182.
- <sup>40</sup> Ellen Oxfield, "'When You Drink Water, Think of Its Source': Morality, Status, and Reinvention in Rural Chinese Funerals," *Journal of Asian Studies* 63.4 (2004): 961–990; 975.
- <sup>41</sup> Linda Sun Crowder, "Chinese Funerals in San Francisco Chinatown: American Chinese Expressions in Mortuary Ritual Performance," *Journal of American Folklore* 113.450 (2000), 453.
- <sup>42</sup> Chau, *Miraculous Response*. Chau also uses the Chinese term *honghuo* to express this idea. In South Fujian, this term would be *laujiat* (or *lau-jiet*).
- <sup>43</sup> Part of the reason why funeral processions are such performative events is because they are public; but they are also so public because they include performative aspects.
- <sup>44</sup> Chau, "Hosting Funerals and Temple Festivals: Folk Event Productions in Rural China," *Asian Anthropology* 3 (2004), 39–70; and Chau, *Miraculous Response*.
- <sup>45</sup> The standard hymnal used in South Fujian (which is in the local *Minnanhua* dialect) has a few funerary songs that some churches have copied into a small booklet that can easily be carried by church members to funerals.
- <sup>46</sup> Oxfield, "'When You Drink Water, Think of Its Source.'"
- <sup>47</sup> Chau, "Hosting Funerals and Temple Festivals."
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

**Glossary**

brother	<i>dixiong</i>	弟兄
Canaan	<i>jianan</i>	迦南
die	<i>si</i>	死
grieve	<i>dao</i>	悼
holy music	<i>shengyue</i>	圣乐
homecoming	<i>huijia</i>	回家
Farewell Homecoming	<i>huansonghuijia</i>	欢送回家
incense sharing	<i>fenxiang</i>	分香
Minnanhua dialect	<i>Minnanhua</i>	闽南话
praise	<i>zanmei</i>	赞美
red-hot sociality	<i>renao</i>	热闹
respect	<i>zun</i>	尊
rest in the Lord	<i>anxi zhuhuai</i>	安息主怀
sister	<i>jiemei</i>	姐妹
two committees	<i>lianghui</i>	两会
worship	<i>jingbai</i>	敬拜
years	<i>sui</i>	岁

**Geographic Places**

Anxi	安溪
Chongwu	崇武
Dongyuan	东园
Hui'an	惠安
Quanqang	泉港
Quanzhou	泉州
Shanyao	山腰
Tongan	同安
Wangchuan	辋川
Xiamen	厦门

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