

# *Funeral Rituals in Rural Anhui*

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**Keywords:** Funeral Rituals; Rural Anhui; Religious Influence; Local Customs

**Abstract:** China's funeral rituals have a long history. A multitude of studies have centered on the hierarchy within ancient Chinese funerals and the transformations that funerals have undergone, but little research focuses on funeral rituals in rural Anhui. My research question is: how do ideas from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism influence funeral rituals in rural areas of Anhui, China. A review of relevant literature revealed that Confucianism emphasizes filial piety, Taoism believes in heaven, and Buddhism supports reincarnation. For my field research in Xu's village, I recorded the entire funeral ritual and explored the meanings of different parts through interviews. Rural Anhui's funeral rituals have local characteristics that are absent in other places, such as the Lotus Lantern Ceremony, the presence of traditional musical plays in the ceremony, Heavenly Maiden Blooming Flowers, etc. I found that the three religions cannot fully explain the funeral rituals in Anhui's rural areas. Many details in the funeral are impacted by local customs, the business practices of the funeral industry, and the local history of every village. Thus, my conclusion is that funerals in Anhui are not only influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, but also by various social factors and history.

## 1. Introduction

China's funeral rituals have a long history. Many studies have focused on the hierarchy in ancient Chinese funerals and the historical changes in funerals [1]. However, few studies have focused on funerals in rural Anhui. Anhui rural areas are usually located on mountains, so these villages were once isolated from the world. Therefore, the funerals here are very different from those in other places, which is worth studying. Moreover, three key thought systems—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—profoundly influence the perceptions of death in China. Confucianism emphasizes filial piety and ancestor worship. Buddhism contributes concepts of reincarnation, while Taoism adds soul-guidance rituals. Their interplay in shaping rituals remains underexplored in region-specific contexts like rural Anhui, where agrarian traditions intersect with these ideologies.

Thus, my research question: how do ideas from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism influence funeral rituals in rural areas of Anhui, China. I want to explore how these ideologies integrate together to impact funeral rituals, and how ideas from various religions dominate ritual stages such as preparation, mourning, and burial. I hope to understand the value and significance of Chinese funerals from the perspectives of the three ideologies using rural Anhui as an example.

My findings reveal a fusion: Confucianism's idea of filial piety, Taoism's belief that the living can still communicate with the dead, and Buddhism's idea of reincarnation are all central themes of many ceremonies in funeral rituals. Nevertheless, funerals in rural Anhui have not only been influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, but they are also shaped by various social factors and folk beliefs. The conclusion will argue that the interplay of three ideologies in Chinese funeral rituals reinforces community values and social cohesion. By highlighting this interplay, the study contributes to understanding traditional ideologies' role in contemporary rituals.

## **2. Methodology**

Firstly, I conduct a literature review. I searched for articles in China National Knowledge Infrastructure and databases using "Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian rituals", "Chinese funerals", "death in China", and "religious ceremonies" as key words. While searching on google, I used keywords like funeral rituals in Anhui, Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian rituals and Buddhist funeral, Taoist funeral, and Confucian funeral. I have read around 30 papers and selected around 15 with high relevance to include in the literature review. When selecting literature, I screened from the perspectives of whether the article cited other papers, whether the publication channels of the papers were standardized, whether the content of the article was in line with my research direction, and whether the author of the article was a professional scholar or professor.

Secondly, I conduct both in-depth interviews and several shorter, simpler interviews. For the in-depth interview, I found someone who grew up in rural Anhui and has attended many rural funerals in Anhui (attending funerals in different rural areas of Anhui), and who knows some histories related to funeral rituals. For other interviews, I interviewed two people who attended the funeral, one who grew up in a rural area of Anhui and the other who was attending a rural funeral for the first time in Anhui. I hope to understand the different perspectives of different people on funerals through their different backgrounds.

Lastly, I conducted a field survey in August last year. Specifically, I attended a funeral in a rural area of Anhui province. In that ritual, not only the deceased's close relatives, but also all those who stayed in the village and participated in the funeral. The main locations for funerals are the house where the deceased lived in the countryside (if the house is not there, a simple house will be built on the foundation of the original house), the ancestral hall in the village, and the burial site (because rural Anhui is usually located on the mountainside, it is usually on higher slopes around the village).

## **3. Results**

### **3.1 Literature Review**

#### **3.1.1 Religions Help the Living to Recover from Their Emotional Sufferings**

Religions like Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism hold a central idea that funeral rituals should help the living recover from the loss of their loved ones and move forward in their lives. The tradition of death rites serves several purposes: it justifies the loss and gives direction for the next steps, and it provides a set of rituals that help the family to mourn, grieve, and continue the relationship with the deceased [2]. Similarly, the research and clinical literature reveal that, in Chinese culture, the rituals are more for the living than the deceased [3, 4]. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism collectively shape Chinese citizens' attitudes toward death rituals.

According to Confucianism, the feelings of grief are the essence of funeral rituals, relatives express the deep sorrow in their hearts to the fullest through this channel and let their emotions be vented; if this channel is missing, the emotions in a person's heart cannot be vented; and if the grief

is suppressed in the heart for a long time, it will make one ill [5].

Moreover, from the Buddhist perspective, funeral rituals should offer immediate assistance and psychological appeasement, and thus Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns help “mainly with chanting and performing ritual” [6].

At Taoist funerals, the monk recites classics such as the “Du Ren Jing” and the “Yu Huang Jing” to appease the living through the power of sacred texts. For example, the teachings in the “Du Ren Jing” provide spiritual comfort to the living that “the dead have not truly disappeared but exist in another form” [7].

### 3.1.2 Religions Help the Living to Express Filial Piety

Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism all emphasize filial piety, which allows the living to express ancestor worship towards their beloved ones. The definition of filial piety includes four aspects. The first is caring for and respecting parents; the second aspect is obeying parents; the third aspect is continuing the family bloodline; and the fourth aspect is mourning and venerating parents [8]. In addition, ancestor worship is an “expression of filial piety toward deceased family members [9]. In the context of funeral rituals,” the most important expressions of, and exercises in, filial piety were the burial and mourning rituals to be held in honor of one’s parents, to display sorrow for their sickness and death; and to bury them and carry out sacrifices after their death [6].

Confucianism showcases filial piety through the Lingyang ceremony and the concept of pursuing many offspring. “Filial piety is one of the core components of Confucian thought [10].” According to Confucian ideas, it is children’s obligation to make sure their parents and grandparents leave the world without regrets. If the deceased passes away with regrets, it means that the children are not filial enough. To be specific, the meaning of the “Lingyang” ceremony (which is a part of some funeral rituals) is to express “unfulfilled filial duties and inquiring about any remaining wishes or unfinished business from the deceased’s lifetime [10].” Specifically, in the ceremony, family members will choose a castrated ram [10]. The host first burns incense and wine to pay tribute to the deceased, and then burns paper money [10]. Therefore, in the lingyang ceremony, after the soul possesses the sheep, people will communicate with the sheep to identify the deceased’s wishes, thereby helping the deceased fulfill their final wishes. People believe that the soul of the deceased will attach to the sheep [10]. Family members ask the sheep questions in order of seniority and judge whether the deceased’s soul is peaceful and has unfulfilled wishes based on the sheep’s reaction (such as whether it is trembling); this is also seen as a symbolic evaluation of the filial piety behavior of family members [10]. Apart from the “Lingyang” ceremony, Confucianism also believes that filial piety is reflected in having more offspring, so at funerals, mascots such as cotton, cottonseed, straw, millet, and vermicelli are often used [11]. Those things symbolize the continuity of descendants [11]. Through using such things in funeral rituals, people hope their ancestors can bless their descendants [11].

For Taoism, the connotation of funerals gradually highlights the theme of filial piety. Emphasis is placed on the practice of Taoist priests, which enables the deceased to ascend to heaven early and enables their deceased ancestors to escape the suffering of the underworld as soon as possible [7]. For example, when children perform the repentance ceremony at a funeral, it is to pray for the forgiveness of the deceased’s past faults, so that they can ascend to heaven early or be reborn into a good life [7].

From Buddhism’s point of view, one specific ritual is called the seven-seven memorial ceremonies for the salvation of the soul. Within forty-nine days after the death of the deceased, memorial ceremonies are held in seven stages. This is a grand Dharma assembly for the salvation of the dead person’s soul. Through rituals such as monks chanting sutras, performing repentance ceremonies, and providing vegetarian feasts, it aims to eliminate sins and avoid disasters for the

deceased, have them chant sutras and practice Buddhism, and hope that they can be reborn into a good family and be reincarnated soon [12]. In this ceremony, children spare no effort to pray for the deceased, demonstrating their filial piety to their parents and demonstrating their wholehearted responsibility to society and the family.

### **3.1.3 Religions Help the Living to Continue Communication with the Dead**

Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism embrace the concept of immortal souls and encourage continued communications between the living and the dead.

Scholars have documented the concept of immortal souls and continued communications between the living and the dead among various religions, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Confucianism, one religion that perpetuates Chinese life, pursues spiritual immortality and the value of life [13]. The “Lingyang” ceremony mentioned above is also used to help people communicate with the dead once again. In the ceremony, “sheep serve as the key medium connecting the living with the deceased, symbolizing the transfer of the deceased’s soul [10].” Specifically, “the word ‘Ling’ means to connect with the deceased’s spirit [10].”

The connection between the living and the dead is not exclusively emphasized by Confucianism, however. Taoism advocates that “Life of the living is still subject to the impact from another world through various kinds of spiritual connections, or vice versa [14].” Specifically, “Ancestors are viewed as having the power to influence, protect, bring good luck, help friends, and harm enemies [15].” Thus, many rituals are designed based on this perception. For instance, Taoist funeral rites include chanting performed by Taoist monks to guide the deceased onto the right path and into Paradise; this is done so that the soul is not left to wander around [16]. Chinese people believe that a soul wandering in the human world will turn into a ghost, causing harm to others.

There are also multiple instances of continued communication with elders in Buddhist funerals. The seven-seven memorial services mentioned earlier can reflect this viewpoint. The living participates in rituals, offers sacrifices, and has regular conversations with the deceased - both to pray for forgiveness and to maintain emotional connections through continuous commemorative activities.

### **3.1.4 Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism Have Different Beliefs about the Afterlife**

While Taoism and Confucianism share similar beliefs that people enter another world after death, Buddhism delineates the “after death” as reincarnation.

“Taoists regard death as a natural component of life, or another phase of life to be exact [17, 18].” Because of this belief, Confucianism and Taoism both have ceremonies that advocate burning paper money and paper houses after death, so that ancestors can live a good life in another world. On the contrary, “Buddhism thought that death is a way of reincarnation (buddhist views of life and death focus on seeking rebirth), death is to enter the next life cycle [13].” This is also reflected in Buddhist funerals. For example, it is taboo for animals such as cats and dogs to appear in the mourning hall and approach the deceased; it is taboo to use animal fur to make the shroud for the deceased and to make the bedding for the deceased, etc [11]. These are to avoid the soul of the deceased attaching to animals and being unable to be reincarnated as a human [11]. Because Buddhism believes that people will reenter the current world rather than live a fairly long time in the nether world, Buddhism does not advocate for burning money that can be used in another world.

Furthermore, Confucianism has always emphasized that the dead should be laid to rest in the earth and attached importance to the preservation of the corpses of the deceased [19]. As the saying goes, “The body, hair, and skin are received from one’s parents.” Protecting one’s own body and the bodies of one’s ancestors are both manifestations of filial piety. Moreover, land is an extremely

important condition for people's survival, production, living, as well as the growth of all things [20]. Therefore, it is natural for Taoism and Confucianism to advocate for burial rather than cremation. In contrast, Buddhism did not care about the physical body of the deceased [12]. With the spread of Buddhism in China, influenced by the concepts of death, such as "reincarnation and rebirth", cremation also spread accordingly [12].

### 3.2 Observations

In around August 2024, a family funeral in Xu's Village, Anhui, was personally experienced. The funeral included the entire process of transporting the urn from another city to Xu's Village, conducting the ceremony there, and finally burying it. A relative of theirs had passed away, with nearly 30 close relatives and all villagers attending the ceremony. Their experience has been summarized as follows:

Firstly, when transporting the ashes back to their hometown from another city, the number of vehicles used to carry family members must be odd. If an even number of vehicles is necessary, they must be split into two groups—each with an odd number of vehicles—and the two groups must take different routes. Secondly, as people approached the village, the first person in the car was about to sprinkle yellow paper money, indicating a good journey on the Yellow Spring Road. After arriving at the deceased's house in the countryside, the oldest son among the deceased's relatives holds the urn, the second oldest son holds the portrait, and the third oldest son holds an umbrella - ensuring that the light does not shine on the portrait and urn. After placing the portrait in the house, paper money should be burned in the house, during which all relatives should come and kneel down. Afterwards, transfer the urn to the paper house (this paper house should be the biggest, including paper human, paper dog, paper horse, etc.) in the clan hall. After the event, every person should come outside the house and burn another paper house with a head of a dead pig nearby. During the burning, firecrackers should be set off, and everyone should kneel down. At this point, everyone has to wrap a white gauze around their heads, and those who can write calligraphy in rural areas will write the deceased's loved ones on the prepared wreaths. At this point, all the preparations for the funeral have come to an end.

The first step in the official start of the funeral is for everyone (except for the deceased's daughter and daughter-in-law) to take a lit lotus lamp from the ancestral hall to the cemetery and circle around. The lotus lamp held by our children symbolizes the extradition lamp of the Yin-Yang world. One lamp needs to be placed at the place of the cemetery, and others need to bring back their lamps. During this period, the fire of the lotus lamp cannot be extinguished. During the walking process, Taoist priests recite the Sutra of the Past Life and the Sutra of the Transcendence. After returning, everyone laid a long cloth at the entrance of the ancestral hall, with the deceased's belongings underneath. At one end of the cloth, a pair of shoes and a basin of water should be placed. This symbolizes letting the deceased wash their feet and set out on the road. Everyone else knelt on either side of the cloth. This is the beginning of a unique melody from Taoist priests, mainly consisting of "filial sons, filial grandchildren, filial daughters, and filial daughters-in-law's blessings to the deceased". After the end, everyone enters the ancestral hall for a brief rest. After the end, everyone enters the ancestral hall for a brief rest. This is 3-4 pm in the afternoon. At the beginning, everyone knelt in the ancestral hall, and the Taoist began to repeat the melody many times. Every time, the content is a little different. Every time it is sung, it means that the deceased has passed a level after entering the underworld, such as the Mengpo Bridge. After each repetition, everyone had to circle around the ancestral hall. When people arrived at the place where the urn was placed, everyone had to bow three times. Every bow symbolizes the children's retention of the deceased, urging them not to leave this world and enter the underworld so quickly. This session will

continue until the next morning.

The next day, everyone will depart from the ancestral hall and arrive at the burial site. After arriving, set off firecrackers first, and then everyone will kneel facing the excavated tomb, and the Taoist priest will sprinkle rice below. Each person will use their own clothes to fetch rice. Then, the urn was placed in the excavated grave, and the funeral was roughly over.

### 3.3 Interviews

To more fully understand complex funeral rituals and overcome the language barriers around the Anhui dialect, an in-depth interview was conducted with a local resident who was familiar with Anhui rituals. Moreover, individuals of varying genders and social identities are assigned to participate in distinct segments of the funeral proceedings, which precluded my attendance at the entirety of the rituals. Therefore, I briefly interviewed two other attendees to supplement my understanding of the overall process and the meaning behind the rituals.

Through the in-depth interviews conducted, it was observed that funeral rituals have undergone a process of simplification over the years, according to an Anhui native who has experienced multiple funerals in the past 20 years. Firstly, in the past, when returning home and encountering relatives who needed to set off firecrackers at their homes, after the firecrackers were set off, the deceased's close relatives would need to get out of the car and kneel. Twenty years ago, funerals in most places lasted for three days. Due to the Taoist singing for three nights, there will be interludes of local opera in the normal melody, which is usually related to the difficulties on the way to enter the underworld. Whereas the existence of plays serves the function of relaxing. The frequently appearing plays include Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, as well as splitting Mount Hua to save his mother. Moreover, in the past, funerals for women and men were different. Because women may experience dangerous situations such as heavy bleeding during childbirth, and thus they encounter more difficulties when entering the underworld, resulting in more kneeling at funerals. Finally, when burying the ashes in the urn, the oldest man in the family needs to shred all the bottles and jars in the house, keep one piece of clothing, and burn all the other clothes.

What's more, according to another elderly person who has lived in that village for many years, funeral rituals are also influenced by many folk customs and local beliefs. In the past, graves were mainly dug by people rather than directly using excavators. So, when digging graves in winter, you may come across animals. If a frog is found, it is considered very auspicious. To be more specific, this symbolizes that the family of the deceased will have a "purple star" in the near future.

Lastly, some aspects of the funeral rituals have economic purposes. Another person from the deceased family claimed that in the middle of the night, there is a step called 'Heavenly Maiden Blooming'. Essentially, it is the family members of the deceased who scatter money to the Taoist priest. The key to this stage is that the more money is given, the more Taoist priests will sing, and the more they sing, the better it will be for the deceased to atone for their sins and pray for blessings.

## 4. Discussion

Taoism played a leading role in the funeral of Xu's village. The most obvious manifestation is that this funeral was presided over by a Taoist priest. What's more, other details can reflect the influence of Taoist ideologies. For instance, the taboo of not allowing the urn to see sunlight during a funeral can be explained by the following content. The theory of Yin Yang and Five Elements in Taoism is the core basis for this taboo. Taoism holds that yin symbolizes such attributes as darkness, stillness, weakness, and internality, while yang represents qualities like brightness, movement, strength, and externality. However, the two are not absolutely opposed; instead, they undergo mutual transformation within a dynamic balance, as exemplified by the alternation of day and night

and the rotation of the four seasons. The ancients believed that urns for ashes carried the remains of the deceased and were extremely dark objects; sunlight is the pure yang energy, and direct contact between the two will trigger a “clash of yin and yang”. Similarly, Taoism believes that death is a state of “yin flourishing and yang declining”, which requires ritual adjustment of yin and yang. During a funeral, setting off firecrackers with a loud noise is considered a “yang energy shock” that can dispel the yin and evil energy in the underworld. So, when burning paper houses, it is necessary to set off firecrackers at the same time. Moreover, the behavior of scattering paper money on roads, burning paper houses, and preparing a pig head is also mainly influenced by Taoism. Because Taoism believes that heaven exists. After death, people will enter heaven, so it is necessary to prepare the deceased for a life in another world (a paper horse for living, money for buying, and a pig for eating). Moreover, this funeral ritual also embodies the Taoist understanding of the underworld. Taoism advocates that the deceased must pass through multiple places, such as Guimen Pass, Huangquan Road, Wangchuan River, Naihe Bridge, and Wangxiangtai. In the melody of the Taoist priest, each of those can be regarded as a checkpoint. When the Taoist Melody sings these checkpoints, everyone should stand up and bow to pray for the deceased to pass smoothly.

The influence of Buddhist ideas on this funeral is relatively small. However, due to the fact that many elderly people in the village believe in Buddhism, some rituals are explained by the elders based on Buddhist concepts. In addition, the custom of using lotus lanterns at funerals has appeared in both Buddhism and Taoism. In Taoism, lotus lanterns illuminate the dark path of the deceased’s soul to the underworld. In Buddhist philosophy, the lotus flower is created by the power of Amitabha Buddha. After the death of those who practice chanting Buddha, their souls can rely on the lotus flower to be reborn in the beautiful Pure Land. Therefore, the lotus flower has become a symbol of this beautiful destination.

Confucianism has also had many influences on funerals in rural Anhui. The kneeling ceremony that begins after 3 or 4 o’clock not only reflects the Confucian emphasis on filial piety, because all descendants must kneel for one night and retain the deceased from entering the other world through bowing. This ceremony is to embody the care and respect contained in Confucian filial piety. In addition, during the ceremony, it is necessary to wrap white gauze around the head and wear plain clothes. This is also a part of filial piety, expressing sadness through simplicity and showing respect.

However, some parts of the funeral ritual cannot be explained by the three religions. For instance, only vehicles with an odd total can reach the village at the same time. This is because in Chinese belief, “even numbers signify completeness and odd numbers belief continuity [21]. Hence, an odd number of vehicles is selected to signify” the deceased loved one will continue to ‘live’ on and perform important roles in the family [21]. Also, the customs of throwing rice cannot be explained by any single religion. In traditional Chinese culture, rice grains represent abundant harvests, and scattering rice is a ritual that symbolizes the worship of the deceased or gods, expressing the respect and gratitude of the living towards the deceased. Catching a grain of rice symbolizes inheriting the blessings of the deceased, hoping to receive the protection of ancestors, and living a prosperous and peaceful life. Lastly, the game of ‘Heavenly Maiden Scatters Flowers’ is essentially a part that Taoist priests join in order to gain economic benefits.

## 5. Conclusion

To address the research question of how Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist ideas influence rural Anhui funeral rituals, this study confirms that these three traditions indeed influence such practices—manifested in Confucian filial piety norms, Buddhist notions of reincarnation, and Taoist’s belief in heaven. Nonetheless, the findings further reveal that these rituals are not mere reflections of religious ideologies alone; they are dynamic constructs shaped by the interplay of

these traditions with local folk customs, social structures, and social norms. This study highlights the complexity and uniqueness of funeral rituals in Anhui's rural area, specifically.

The significance of this conclusion lies in its illumination of how "tradition" in rural contexts is a living, hybrid entity—religious ideas provide conceptual frameworks, while folk practices and social needs give them tangible form. For future research, comparative studies with other rural regions could explore whether the combined influence of the three ideologies is widespread or specific to Anhui, offering broader insights into Chinese rural cultural dynamics. Practically, recognizing this complexity encourages nuanced preservation of such rituals as integral to cultural heritage, avoiding oversimplified interpretations that overlook their multifaceted roots.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you for the guidance of Xia Zheng mentor from University of Chicago in the development of this research paper.

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