

REVIEW

Thai funeral rites in late modernity

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For at least 700 years, the ancient Siamese and modern Thai people have been conducting funerals. These often end with the cremation of the body. The length of the Buddhist wake depends on the social status of the deceased and his or her wealth. Also, for the descendants of the Tai speakers across Southeast Asia, the words and phrases used in ancient Siamese funerals and modern Thai ones have been deeply intertwined with Tai language, Standard Thai Language, Buddhist rites, and Theravada Buddhist scripture from the Pali canon. The objective of this paper is to convey a narrative snapshot of the nature of Thai funerals as they are practiced today via personal experiences and the existing scholarship by local and *farang* academics. The paper concludes with the meanings that have come to attach themselves to the fascinating world of modern Thai funerals.

Keywords: Thai death rituals, Siam funeral rites, political science, society, religion, culture

Introduction

The overwhelming number of Thai funerals today end in relatively elaborate cremation ceremonies. The wealthier the person, the more elaborate and the longer these ceremonies last. The modern descendants of the Tai speakers across Southeast Asia derive from the Lanna-Tai and Sukhothai as well as Ayutthaya periods. The words and phrases used in ancient Siamese funerals and modern Thai ones have been deeply intertwined with Theravada Buddhist religion; the Tai language, Standard Thai Language (STL); modern Buddhist rites; and the actual Theravada Buddhist scripture from the Pali canon. The objective of this paper is to convey a narrative snapshot of the nature of Thai funerals as they are practiced today via personal experiences and the existing scholarship by local and *farang* academics. This was achieved from various attitudinal surveys conducted by the author between 1986 and 2023; often with the assistance of *farang* and Thai scholars from Prince of Songkhla University; Thammasat Law School; Northern Chiang Mai University; and Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Political Science (in particular, the Institute for Security and International Studies at CUFPS).

Most Thai people profess a Theravada Buddhist faith, and hence all ceremonies in modern Thailand tend to possess several elements of Theravada Buddhism. At least 90% of all modern Thai people are Buddhist with about 3% Christians and Muslims. The surveys and focus group work included views about death rites involving the selection of the day for the wake, the optimal Buddhist Lenten days, National and regional festivals, as well as other commemorations for the deceased such as *Pi Ta Korn* [(1):98–108]. Additionally, the Thai people have embraced superstition and animism for centuries. This was established long before Thailand was even named the Land of the Free in 1946. Since the ascension of Bhumibol Adulyadej in 1946, after his brother was murdered, no one has made any significant contribution to the social sciences scholarship on funeral rites in modern Thailand in-depth as it is presented in this paper even today in the reign of Vajiralongkorn or Rama X. The most intriguing aspect involving the death of Rama VIII, the older brother of Bhumibol (Rama IX), has never been examined. This is because most *farang* and local scholars fear that they would be prosecuted under Article 112 of the Thai Penal Code for even mentioning Rama VIII's name which was King Ananda Mahidol.

Literature review

Rappa perceives that Thai death rites and rituals are dependent on the religion that the deceased believed. This includes the influences of different religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Animism. Islamicist funerals tend to take place mainly in the southern provinces and major cities. As Islamic funeral rites are not considered important in most Thai funerals; it warrants separate treatment outside this paper.

The Chinese in Thailand have had a long history dating back to the migration from Yunan Province in ancient Siam. The modern Chinese in Thailand refer to themselves as Thai first and not Chinese. They do speak in Teochew, Hakka, Hokien, and Mandarin to their co-ethnics. In the 1990s, the Chinese made up the largest ethnic group in Chiang Mai [(2):315]. A famous Chinese proverb says to “forget one’s piety to the ancestors is to challenge the heavens and court the demons” (see Maxwell et al.).

The military-controlled government killed hundreds of unarmed pro-democracy protesters resulting in what has been referred to as a funeral casino (3). Unfortunately, Klima’s contribution is problematic in a negative way because he does not make sufficient acknowledgment of the scholars who were actually present at the killings some 12 years before his book was published. There was insufficient accounting of the strengths and weaknesses of many *farang* scholars of the period by Klima including Dalpino (2011, McCargo and Thabchumpon, 2014), and Cohen’s excellent discussion of the Red Shirt protests (Cohen, 2012), while Wong sees it rather compellingly as a convergence of the past and the present [(4):100–121].

In other parts of the literature, scholars view the rites of Thai funerals as a visual package, materiality amidst cremation ceremonies, and as an extension of spirit cults and physical urban shrines as seen in the following works (5–7, Formoso, 2016) for example.

Naturally, the entire corpus on death, Siamese, Tai, and Thai funerals cannot simply be contained in a single article or book. Nevertheless, we have provided a clear snapshot of the kinds of elements that make up the scholarship on Thai funerals in late modernity so far.

Narratives of the dead

The author attended several modern Thai funerals. He noted that even if the deceased was a baptized Christian or Catholic, there would be elements of Thai Buddhism at the wake or during the funeral ceremonies. This was observed at a Catholic funeral service at Assumption Cathedral in Bangkok, Thailand, which is located near the Chao Phraya River itself. The Catholic Cathedral was first mooted to be commissioned in 1809 and finally built in 1821, but a fire destroyed the cathedral and a new one has stood in its

place since 1989. The Cathedral can be located in Bang Rak (on the Eastern Bank of the Chao Phraya River) and is the primary church of Bangkok for the Catholic archdiocese. The elements of Thai Buddhism that were observed by the author included the following facts: (1) the service was conducted in STL; (2) the music was in Thai-Isaan; and (3) the Homily referred to the various aspects of Thainess in Bang Rak, Bangkok. Therefore, location, language, and culture remain critical aspects of Thai funeral rites.

In 1986, a young *farang* officer from Singapore was posted to Thailand’s rural northeast to work at a military camp owned by the Royal Thai Armed Forces Special Forces Group. He met a young Thai farmer’s daughter at *Sayok* Camp 1 day while on leave, and the two started a relationship that lasted 10 years. The *farang* officer returned home and sent part of his monthly salary to maintain his wife and child in Chiang Rai. Unfortunately, the news of his daughter falling ill with a high fever and dying from that fever did not reach the *farang* officer in time. The officer had to return to his Special Forces camp, apply for leave, and book the plane tickets, and, when he finally reached the village, his daughter had already been cremated by the mother. The (*farang* and local) couple decided to go their own separate ways soon after the funeral was over. That was when the young *farang* officer began his journey into understanding Thai culture through proper Western methods of research. In the 1990s, the same *farang* who used to be an army officer was in Bangkok on his way to Chiang Rai to pay homage to the remains of his daughter. When he arrived in Chiang Rai, he was greeted by a call from Singapore. His younger brother’s girlfriend had passed away, and the *farang* was asked to attend the wake on his behalf. His brother could not attend the wake as he was busy working. The *farang* officer paid his respects to his daughter’s ashes at the *Wat* and flew back to Bangkok where his brother’s girlfriend’s wake was being held. Not having anything to do that evening, and not questioning why his brother could not take leave (after all it was his girlfriend), he attended the wake at a village *Wat* just outside Bang Na where her family lived. Her nickname was Garfield. She was an exotic dancer with a high-class G-club. A G-club is a private men’s club where under-23-year-old girls would dance provocatively very much in the western Coyote style. Garfield was under-23. The *farang* then noticed someone he thought looked familiar. It was the mamasan of the G-club where Garfield worked. The mamasan of her club told the *farang* attending the wake on his brother’s behalf that his brother was the ex-boyfriend. Because she was so beautiful and young, she had many boyfriends. One of her boyfriends, a Thai movie star was also there—apparently more for the cameras than the Buddhist prayers. When the *farang* asked the mamasan why there were two coffins instead of one, she replied that Garfield’s grandmother died suddenly of a heart attack when she heard the news of her granddaughter’s death. Garfield spoke excellent English. She was an undergraduate at Ramkhamhaeng University in Mass Communications.

Apparently, after dancing one early morning, she got into her car and drove either home or to meet some friends. Near a big klong, her car swerved for some reason or other and plunged into the klong. The people who dived in could not save her as the seat belt of her Toyota was stuck and could not be unbuckled. She must have died from drowning. Because it was a two-wake funeral, the decorations were relatively elaborate. As it was so sudden and certainly painful for the relatives, the entire village showed up to pay respects.

Conclusion

The grandiose cremation of King Bhumibol Adulyadej the Great (Rama IX) in 2016 took 2 weeks to complete—there was much construction, and local and foreign news outlets reported that at least US\$70 million had been spent on funeral construction and arrangements alone. There were also various accommodations that had to be made because many foreign diplomats, local members of the diplomatic corps, and separate funeral visitation rights were to be made by the current king (Rama X) as well as his immediate family members. In fact, Rama X visited his father's gigantic death vase several times a day for 2 weeks offering prayers in front of attending courtiers and generals. All outside the Grand Palace where the funeral took place, there were thousands of Thai and farang people offering their prayers and sadness to a highly beloved monarch who reigned for over 75 years. Modern Thai funerals exist for a single purpose. The purpose of modern Thai funerals is to usher the deceased from the present world into the next. This is true even though most Thai people are Buddhist and most Thai Buddhists believe in reincarnation. Therefore, one must conclude that Thai funeral rites in late modernity involve the movement of the deceased to the next level of Enlightenment. Thai funerals on average do not last more than 5 days and include the bathing and cleaning of the deceased's

body all the time while Buddhist monks are chanting holy scripts while holding masks in Theravada-style funerals. Cremation almost always takes place in the afternoon to late evening and never at night. That would be a very rare case. The author has never heard or read of a midnight cremation ceremony in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia. Due to time, resource, and space constraints, this paper has not included the kinds of music played at Theravada Buddhist funerals nor the kinds of funeral instruments that tend to be used. Neither has this paper covered the kind of food that is served at funerals, the kinds of burn offerings made for the deceased's journey in terms of being reincarnated, and the intermixture of non-Buddhist rites with Christian, Catholic, and animistic practices. Perhaps those can be reserved for another time? Nevertheless, this remains a relatively comprehensive snapshot of the nature of modern Thai funeral rites in mid-2023.

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