Ancestors Are Watching: Ritual and Governance at Peck San Theng, a Chinese Afterlife Care Organization in Singapore

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Abstract: Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng 新加坡廣惠肇碧山亭 (hereafter PST) is a non-profit organization registered under Singapore’s Societies Ordinance, founded in 1870 by Chinese immigrants from three prefectures of Guangdong province: Guangzhou 廣州, Zhaoqing 肇慶 and Huizhou 惠州. Until the mid-1970s, it managed more than 100,000 graves spread over 324 acres of land. After the Singapore government acquired its land for urban development PST continued its service to the departed by managing a columbarium that accommodates urns and spiritual tablets. PST’s governing body is formed by regional associations of the three prefectures although these associations receive neither dividends nor shares from PST. Besides annually celebrated activities such as ancestral worship at halls, grave sweeping at tombs every spring and autumn and the Hungry Ghost festival PST has, since 1922, organized irregularly a Grand Universal Salvation Ritual (the Wan Yuan Sheng Hui 万緣勝會) for both ancestors and wandering spirits. The ritual was held not only to generate income but was also designed to serve the afterlife of the homeless overseas migrants and also as an informal sanction to regulate the behavior of committee members. Based on PST’s institutional archives and participant observations, this paper analyzes the ritual over a period of 90 years. It argues that formal institutional behavior is checked and balanced by informal sanction constructed in the form of ancestors watching from above. This paper further argues that while filial piety is an essential Chinese cultural value, the Chinese people of Singapore rely on institutions such as PST to integrate their ancestors with individual characteristics into collective ancestors taken care of by the institutions, releasing them from the burden of daily ancestral worship. Religious charity and filial piety are equally important.

Keywords: Singapore; cemetery management; salvation rituals; ancestor worship

1. Introduction

In 1963, Singapore Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng 新加坡廣惠肇碧山亭 (PST), a cemetery management organization run by the Cantonese and Hakka dialect groups, submitted a request to the Singapore government asking that they be exempt from income tax. The Prime Minister’s Office determined that PST should apply for tax exemption annually. In 1966, the Revenue Department ordered PST to settle “unpaid income revenue of the years 1962, 1963, 1964 and 1965”.¹ This infuriated six of the sixteen affiliated associations of PST who, with legal assistance, gave instructions to the PST Management Committee to terminate annual applications for tax exemption. The Revenue Department laid down these two conditions for PST to qualify as a charitable organization: (1) it should not make

¹ Unpaid income taxes for the years of 1962 to 1965 were 1730.80, 4296.75, 27,126.0 and USD 28,147.0 respectively. See (Minutes) Oct. 16, 1966.
any donations to organizations not registered with the government or recognized by the government as a charitable organization, and, (2) if dissolved, the assets of PST must be donated to other charitable organizations and not be shared by its own affiliated associations. The six associations decided to maintain PST’s rules and regulations while continuing to explore the possibility of establishing its charity status. In 1971, five years after the dispute, PST’s lawyer recommended that it revise one of its regulations to allocate a part of the cemetery managed by PST to other dialect groups. The hope was that, by expanding burial privilege to other dialect groups, the government would eventually approve their charity status. However, this suggestion was rejected by the PST committee, who preferred to explore new sources of income rather than abandon their dialect-based membership conditions.

Legally, PST is not a charity as its constitution clearly states that if the organization is dissolved, “...it shall put up its property for sale in order to pay off all its legitimate debts, if any, with the proceeds. Any sum left thereafter and the immovable property shall be equally distributed among member guilds or associations of this organization.” Therefore, under Singapore law, PST is registered as a “society” that serves a specific segment of the community, and therefore does not qualify as a “charitable organization.” However, some of the organization’s committee members still felt it was a charity—not just for the living, but also for the departed. As long as the committee members did not pocket any profits for themselves, the organization believed that the definition of charity was rooted in the morality and the conscience of the group, more so than the legal definition upheld by the government.

For Chinese elites, the care of the departed—as a practice of Confucian filial piety, rather than superstition—was an important form of charity. Starting in the 20th century, many Chinese were buried in their adopted countries. This behavior intensified after the 1930s when coffin repatriation became increasingly difficult and costly due to global political instability. With more unmarried single men dying while working in Southeast Asia, the number of unattended deceased also grew.

Arthur Wolf argued that the Chinese spiritual world (or the god-Ancestor-Ghost stratum) is a reflection of Chinese social structure—spirits with descendants are ancestors and those without are ghosts. The spiritual world is a mirror image of the human world. (Wolf 1974) Therefore, death is the other side of the living and should be treated alike. Brenda Yeoh pointed out that “For the Chinese, the idea of the continuity of kinship beyond death and the notion of exchange between the living and the dead were central to their death ritual.” (Yeoh 1991, p. 298). The Chinese believed that the deceased without a caregiver or joss presenter would become spirits without a proper home who would haunt and jeopardize social peace and harmony. Therefore, preventing the unattended departed from turning into wandering ghosts was an important responsibility for elites in overseas Chinese communities. It was believed that proper cemetery management and other forms of care for departed individuals was an essential form of charity—one that was equivalent to serving the living poor and needy (Tong 1987, 2004).

In the 1950s, when field research in Mainland China was not possible, the studies of overseas Chinese communities, including those of Hong Kong and Taiwan, were regarded as the most plausible channel to understand the Chinese way of life. In Singapore these studies include Freedman’s study of the Straits Settlement Chinese marriage customs (Freedman 1970), Topley’s study of religious and working women in Singapore (Topley 1959, 1963) and Comber’s series on Chinese temples, voluntary associations and ritual practices (Comber 1958, 1960, 1963). Following the independence movement and the nation-building process in the post-War period, studies of Chinese religious practices such as

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2 (Minutes), May 23, 1966, Aug. 14 and 28, 1966.
3 (Minutes), June 10, 1971.
4 (Rules 1960) “Item 44, Chapter eleven”.
5 For example, Mr. Cho Nam Foon who was Committee member of the Organization from 1958 to 1980, emphasized that the Organization is a charity for it did not gain any profits from the cemeteries they managed (Cho 1989, reel 24); (Guan 1960).
6 For example, Chinese in Japan stopped repatriating coffins back to China after 1936 (Institute of Zhonghua-huiguan 2000, pp. 311, 351). See also (Yip 2009).
the festival of the Nine Emperors (Cheu 1988, 1993), the death rituals (Tong 2004), cemetery and sacred places (Yeoh 1991) and the Spirit Medium (Chan 2006) have focused on the adaptation of the Chinese into Southeast Asian indigenous communities and the reinforcement of ethnic solidarity of different Chinese dialect groups. In her analysis of the Hungry Ghosts festival in Penang, DeBernardi argued that, since the 1970s and 1980s, the Penang Chinese community leaders used this festival as a political tool to mobilize grassroots supporters, re-strengthen Chinese identity and unify the community, which was divided by territorial and dialect affiliation. However, unlike their predecessors in the 19th and early 20th century, educated Chinese individuals disassociated themselves from this event, as they regarded the ritualized performance as “peasant superstition”. (DeBernardi 2004, p. 180) Traditional Chinese rituals were used by the elites as a political means to acquire grass root support. Zeng Ling, in her study of a Singapore cemetery management association also argued that spiritual rituals practiced by the association were used to re-enhance ethnic unity. (Zeng 2003; Zeng and Zhuang 2000) The studies of Chinese popular religion in Southeast Asia have been focused on its political and economic functions with a particular interest in the interaction among the Chinese ethnic groups as well with other non-Chinese Communities.

Unlike the Pudu salvation ritual, which is organized annually, the Grand Universal Salvation Ritual in Southeast Asia is celebrated irregularly due to special needs. Differing from Buddhist and Taoist Universal Salvation rituals that were run in monasteries, they were usually performed close to cemeteries or crematoriums run by voluntary or charity associations. Moreover, dissimilar to the communities in South China, which organized the ritual as a response to the concurrent anti-supersitious sentiment, the ritual in Southeast Asia is closely affiliated with Confucian filial piety. (Choi 2017) This paper, while recognizing the importance of ritual as a mechanism for cultural adaptation and ethnic solidarity, attempts to investigate the organization and the practices of the Grand Universal Salvation Ritual organized by PST, an afterlife care organization in Singapore. Through intensive archival analysis and extensive anthropological field research, this paper argues that there is a spiritual category, the collective ancestors, between ancestors and ghosts. While Chinese elites emphasize filial piety, the ordinary people rely on religious charity provided by associations to pacify the spirits in between ancestors (to whom they paid respect) and wandering ghosts (to whom they gave offerings and suppressed).

2. PST: Its History and Governing Body

The earliest gravestones found in a PST-managed cemetery were marked 1830 and 1831. A collective grave for seven martyrs who died, likely during the feud between the Cantonese and the Fujianese, was marked 1841 (San 2010). A collective grave (宗墳 zōng fén) for migrants from Guangzhou, Zhaoqing and Huizhou prefectures who died without descendants in Singapore was marked 1873. It is believed that the burial ground was bought in 1871 by a certain Mei Nanrui 梅南瑞. Ten years later, in the early 1880s, many regional (e.g., San Shui regional association 三水同鄉會) and occupational (e.g., Ba He Cantonese opera guild 八和會館) associations and clans (e.g., the Yangs Clan association 楊氏宗親會) also built collective graves for their members. Inscription on an 1890 stone stele states that “a temple was built in the burial ground, roads were paved and a cemetery organization was founded in this year.”

In 1916, after an internal dispute, an organization, consisting of nine regional associations was founded (San 2010). PST was later joined by seven other Hakka and Cantonese regional associations.

7 The author observed the Grand Universal Salvation Rituals organized by PST in 2007 (June 8 to 10), 2012 (August 31 to September 2) and 2017 (October 27 to 29).
8 The dispute was mentioned in the organization’s memorial bulletin. See (San 2010). According to San, in 1916, the then Committee decided not to allow the free selection of graveyards. All burials would be arranged according to the death application order. This decision angered a group of members who proposed the cemetery be governed by a joint committee with representatives from all occupational guilds. It was eventually approved that the organization and its assets belonged to...
In 1954, to avoid conflicts among member associations, a new governing structure—in the form of an eighteen-member governing committee with two representatives from each association—was set up. The organization is governed by a Board of Trustees made of member association representatives. They rotate their positions on the board to ensure that all member associations have equal influence on the affairs of PST. A standing committee of representatives from six member associations runs its daily affairs. They served two-year terms\(^9\) and, to ensure continuity and avoid malpractices, the following practice was observed:

1. A standing committee consists of: the president of the management committee, vice president, general secretary, assistant general secretary, treasurer, and the chairman of the supervisory committee. At the end of a term, when the president retires, his position will be filled by the vice president and all others promoted to one rank above them. The vacated chairman of the supervisory committee will be replaced by a representative from a new or seventh association. This practice ensured that one representative from a particular member association could serve a maximum of 12 years. A member association will not re-enter the management committee until some 24 years after.

2. The committee member is a representative of his own association and therefore can only be replaced by someone from the same association.

3. Each member will serve an office for up to two years.

4. The standing committee, together with the four-member supervisory committee, forms a management committee that holds regular meetings to discuss and decide PST’s daily affairs and future development. The supervisory committee is made of representatives from the three prefectures.

5. The management committee is supervised by a five-member Board of Trustees: one each from the three prefectures, plus two more who were elected by the General Representative Body, which is made of member associations.

6. Important decisions must be brought to the General Representative meeting.

Since the 1960s, the PST has had two categories of members: 16 basic group members, all regional associations with real estate and, other ordinary members, which are property holding clans or village associations from the three prefectures. The former, basic group members are eligible for election to serve in the committees. PST does not accept individual or non-property holding association as members. There are two key conditions for membership: (1) dialect-defined ethnicity, either Cantonese or Hakka, and (2) ancestral hometown: Guangzhou, Zhaoqing or Huizhou prefectures. To this day, Cantonese is still the common language used at committee meetings.

In 1973, PST owned 324 acres, or 18 plots of burial land. These were divided into 10 pavilions (亭, a resting shelter marking the center of a sub-cemetery). Each pavilion was managed by a team of committee members who inspected the graves weekly. In 1922, PST built a Peck Shan temple (or Da Miao 大廟) dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy. Inside the temple, they established a Chinese primary school for local Chinese children. In 1957, a new school was built and was in operation until 1981 when the residents had to be relocated due to the government requisition of the land. From August 1973, all burials were forbidden in the cemeteries to develop the area into a new town—the current Bishan Town (Figure 1). By 1979, the National Development Board took over all 324 acres of land. PST was compensated with approximately SGD 5 million and given a plot of land of 8 acres for PST to build an office, a cenotaph, an old-folks home and a pavilion. From 1982 to 1983, ashes exhumed from a total of 100,000 graves were accommodated in a new columbarium that had a maximum capacity of more

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9 From 1954 to 1976 the term of office was one year. This change, from one to two years was implemented probably because of the closing of the cemetery. Committee members did not need to inspect the cemeteries, hence lessening their burdens.
than 100,000 urns and tablets. The nursing home was never occupied as I was told no one wanted to
live next to the columbarium. The aims and objects of PST, as stated in Chapter Two of its Rules and
Regulations, are as follows:

(1) To manage and develop all properties belonging to the Singapore Kwong Wai Siew Peck San
Theng and to promote the welfare of, and foster better friendly relations among, the people
of the Three Prefectures of Kwong Chow (Guangzhou), Wai Chow (Huizhou) and Siew Heng
(Zhaoqing)
(2) To establish a crematorium, to provide services to all communities in the Republic.
(3) To construct proper buildings for the storage of the ashes of the dead.
(4) To acquire properties and or establish a company or companies jointly with others.
(5) To utilize all profits made by this organization for social, education, medical and charitable
purposes (to be decided by the General Representative Body Meeting of Members).

![Map of Bishan District in Singapore](image1)

**Figure 1.** Location of Bishan District in Singapore.

3. From Individual to Collective Ancestors

As the numbers of Chinese who settled and eventually died in Singapore increased, so did the
need for burial grounds. To prevent wandering spirits and ensure there was a home for deceased,
the PST:

1: Confined burial rights to members of affiliated associations.
2: Increased the number of burial plots.
3: Cleared and emptied old, unattended graves for the newly dead.

To accomplish its mission of establishing membership, managing the spirits of departed members
so that the living can live in peace, PST conducted salvation rituals periodically from 1922. Until 2018,
14 large and five small-scale salvation rituals were conducted. These rituals were typically paid for by
families with presented ancestral tablets, which provided an additional source of income for PST, while
also converted individual remote ancestors into collective ancestors. Among the unattended souls
were (i) those whose bodies were not repatriated to their native homeland, (ii) those who died or went missing during the war and, (iii) those remote ancestors whose descendants failed to take care of them.

When the “free-selection” of plots was introduced, the clearing of old graves had to accelerate, leading to concerns about the growth in unattended ancestors. For example, in 1968, when the graves at Banyan Tree Hill were cleared, it was found that “... 90% of the 185 graves held bones. Two of them had dog bones. Only six of the 185 graves had worshippers. Two of these six graves were cleared by their descendants.” Therefore, the proportion of unattended graves was large (Minutes, 3 July 1969).  

A survey of the second, fourth and seventh pavilions the following year similarly revealed that many of the graves were unattended, while some were just grave stones without any human remains (Minutes, 24 August 1969).  

Unlike the regular practice of ancestral worship every spring (Ching Ming), autumn (Zhaoyang) and summer (Hungry Ghost Festival), the Grand Salvation Ritual was mostly conducted after extensive clearance of old graves and before the ashes, tablets or names were merged into a collective tablet or grave (mai ping 埋屏). One of its key purposes was to transform individual ancestors into collective ancestors who would then be looked after by an organization rather than individual families.

4. Care for the Deceased: Spiritual Affiliation

The history of PST can be broadly divided into the period of cemetery management and the period of columbarium management. Before 1973—the cemetery management period—PST managed three categories of graves: (1) collective graves managed by the PST; (2) the graves of the associations from the three prefectures; and (3) individual graves. First, graves managed by the organization included a collective grave for martyrs killed at feuds with other ethnic or dialect groups and charitable graves for bones exhumed from unattended graves. Second, the graves of the associations: property holding associations of the three prefectures could apply to buy plots of burial land for their members. Many of these associations also had their own collective graves for members whose graves were unattended when exhumation was conducted or for those who died without any descendants. Not all applications were approved as the management committee’s decision is determined by the financial stability of the association concerned. A plot of burial land was also reserved without charge, for those who died in the Kwong Wai Siew Charitable Hospital 廣惠肇留醫院. Finally, individual graves. Before 1916, people who could afford it could choose relatively large (108 square feet) pieces of burial land with good fengshui (Minutes, 22 August 1968). When the need for burial plots increased, PST imposed a new “pai zang” (排葬) policy in 1916, which required all burials to be arranged according to death registration. In the 1960s, when PST was financially constrained, a new type of individual graves, zi ze fen di (free-selective grave 自擇墳地), was introduced. This new type of individual grave allowed relatives of the newly dead to choose a plot of their choice, contributing to PST’s income but also heightening the pace at which unattended graves had to be exhumed. This increased pace resulted in the need to “resettle” the “disturbed spirits.” Only individuals who could provide evidence of ancestry from one of the three prefectures were allowed to buy an individual plot. In 1971, a suggestion was made to allocate some plots to other dialect groups; however, it never materialized as the cemetery was soon taken over by the government.

Association affiliation was important as it not only enabled a new immigrant to adapt and settle into his/her new home more easily but it also provided their spirit with a home after death. In 1955, as the demand for burial plots increased, an ad hoc committee was formed to determine the graves that

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10 In fact, there were many unattended graves in cemeteries owned by the Chinese in Singapore. For example, in 1950 when the Singapore Chaozhou dialect group, Ngee Ann Gongsi, exhumed one of their cemeteries, Guang'en shan 廣恩, 5790, or 95%, of the 6186 tombs were unattended. (Nanyang Shangbao (Business Newspaper of the Southern Sea), 23 April 1951, p. 5, and 13 June 1951, p. 6).  
11 In the second pavilion, 1235 graves had bones and 37 without. In the 4th pavilion, 1057 had bones and 433 without tablets; therefore, the names and hometown affiliation of the dead were unknown. In the seventh pavilion, 312 had bones and 446 without. (see Minutes, 24 August 1969)
could be exhumed. It was decided that (1) exhumation will start from the first pavilion, (2) descendants of the deceased could relocate the exhumed bones (at their own cost) to their association’s collective grave,12 (3) bones in unattended graves would be collected and relocated to the PST’s collective grave, (4) collective graves belonging to associations and clans would be exempted from exhumation (Minutes, 20 May 1955 and 25 May 1956). In 1960, PST further clarified that charitable graves (“yi zhong” 義冢) were treated as collective grave (“zong fen” 總墳) and should be exempted from exhumation (Minutes, 15 May 1960). Therefore, affiliation with one of the three prefecture associations was important, not only because it guaranteed a place for the dead to rest, but it also guaranteed that the spirit would remain in good hands if there were no descendants or if the descendants failed to take care of the deadmitigating the risk of the deceased becoming a “wandering spirits.”

In the columbarium period, urns and tablets replaced graves, but the former conditions for housing the dead still applied. A memorial monument was erected for the martyrs and another for unattended, nameless spirits. PST also conducted rituals from time to time to “merge” unattended individual tablets into a collective tablet (shen zhu mai ping 神主埋屏). In 2011, there were 32 collective tablets for unattended “ancestors”13. The columbarium is divided into several sections: There were niches for individual tablets and urns. Member associations bought collective spiritual halls (lingting 靈廰) to accommodate association-affiliated individual and collective tablets and urns (some of which were exhumed from collective graves). Like the cemeteries, only member associations are allowed to own collective spiritual halls. Although other dialect groups are now allowed to enshrine their ancestor’s tablet or urns in PST, in practice, only the Cantonese or Hakka dialect groups worship their ancestors in PST.14 Continuing the tradition of the cemetery management period, PST continues to conduct special rituals to ensure that the unattended ancestors enshrined in its columbarium do not become wandering ghosts.

5. Salvation Rituals: Wan Yuan Sheng Hui 萬緣勝會 and Chao Du You Hun 超度幽魂

Unlike the Pudu salvation ritual, which is organized annually, the Grand Universal Salvation Ritual (Wan Yuan Sheng Hui 萬緣勝會) is celebrated only when required. While Buddhist and Taoist Universal Salvation rituals are performed in monasteries, the Grand Universal Salvation Ritual is usually conducted close to cemeteries or crematoriums run by voluntary or charity associations. The ritual was “invented” in South China in the late Qing period as a response to the concurrent anti-superstitious sentiment (Choi 2010, 2017). In the ritual, the principle objects of offering (zhu jian 主薦) always included tablets of national martyrs who died in various wars, general collective ancestors of the associations or the communities as well as spirits of the universe. Like their countrymen in South China, organizers of the ritual in Southeast Asia always associate the ritual with Confucian filial piety. It is, as stated in PST’s 1922 announcement of their first ritual, “a commemoration (ji nian 紀念) like the commemoration of national heroes and of ancestors at home.”15 The elites’ emphasis on welfare and commemoration distanced this ritual from superstitions associated with unlawful secret societies and the uneducated poor.

Chao Du You Hun is a small-scale salvation ritual that usually lasts two days and one night. On the other hand, Wan Yuan Sheng Hui, the Grand Universal Salvation Ritual organized by PST is a four-day

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12 For instance, Mr. Cho relocated his ancestors’ bones to collective graves of the Cho clan as well as the Ningyang regional association. (Cho 1989)

13 Members carefully distinguished zhu xian 祖先 and xian ren 先人 (or xian xian 先賢). The former were ancestors having descendants to take care of and the later were remote ancestors, many unattended.

14 An exception is Li Weinan (Lee Wee Nam 1881–1964), one of the wealthiest and most prominent Theng Hai Chaozhou merchants in Singapore, whose ashes was relocated at PST after the Guangxiao shan Chaozhou cemetery was evacuated by the government in 2008. For Li’s biography, see (Singapore Infopedia 2007).

15 “Commemoration of the Peck San Theng’s Grand Salvation Ritual” (bishan ting wan ren yuan jinian bei) Stone stele of 1922. Part of the inscription was reprinted in (Singapore Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng 1976, p. 86).
event, usually performed by Buddhist monks, nuns and Taoist priests. The Buddhist rituals consist of two main parts: (i) daily chanting repentance and offering to all spirits; and (ii) a salvation ritual to open the gate of the underworld and give offerings to the hungry ghosts to help them crossover and be reborn. Most of the Buddhist rituals are attended only by committee members and some Buddhist devotees. While many of the Buddhist monks speak Mandarin, only Cantonese-speaking Taoist priests are engaged. Besides daily offerings and repentance, other rituals are performed, including one to liberate the dead’s previous grudges (jie jie 解結 or untie the knot), to change the living’s fortune (zan xing zhuan yun 贊星轉運 or to praise the dippers and change luck), and the most important of all—breaking the hell, crossing the golden and silver bridges, sending the spirits away for rebirth—is performed on the last evening. A highlight of this final ritual takes the form of an “impersonated reality show”, where the ancestors’ effigies or tablets are saved and released. Not many people attend the rituals on the first few days, but on the last night, participating descendants may have the Taoist priests perform an offering ritual for their deceased ancestors and carry their tablet or paper effigy to cross the bridges after the priests have performed the spectacular breaking hell ritual.

Offerings are presented to two categories of spirits: zhu jian or major offering and fu jian 附薦 or auxiliary offering. The former refers to general tablets for the spirits of those who died during the war, natural disasters, accidents or any unattended souls in the area, and collective tablets of remote ancestors (xian xian 先賢) of the 16 member associations. These zhu jian tablets were attended by both PST and the member associations. Individual families could also buy paper made tablets or impersonate effigies for their ancestors.

At PST’s 118th Anniversary in 1988, Singapore’s second deputy prime minister, Mr. Ong Teng Cheong, stated, “Charity and religious organization always regard caring of the poor, the old, the deceased and the desolates as their responsibility. As community leaders, members of the PST are enthusiastic in promoting public welfare … complementing what the limited power of the government … ” (Singapore Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng 1988, n.p.). With a mission to care for the dead, members of the PST had to carefully defend themselves from being seen as promoting superstition. Committee members of PST who concurrently held offices in their own regional associations are community elites who share strong feelings against traditional religious practices but vigorously protect Confucian ethics. They denounced superstition but promote filial piety. It is for this reason that PST celebrates the annual Qing Ming (spring) and Chong Yang (autumn) ancestral worship festivals but distanced themselves from the hungry ghost festival (summer). Grand Universal Salvation Rituals were organized since the 1920s to placate spirits without worshippers.

6. Placating Spirits and Generating Income

Before the 1970s, the ritual served two major purposes: to placate the spirits and to generate income to expand the burial grounds as well as for charity and social welfare. In the 1970s and 1980s, the income received was used to fund the construction of the new columbarium. For organizers, the ritual satisfies Confucian values for filial piety, charity and anti-superstition. Committee members had a duty to serve the unattended and forgotten “ancestors”. A kind of “gongde” (功德 “public morality”), which PST had to treasure and continue (Minutes, 28 May 2006).

PST had a separate bank account for income from the Grand Universal Salvation Ritual. Until the 1960s, income from these rituals was used for charity and to purchase new burial grounds. From

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16 In 1987, when the government prohibited the burning of large effigies and offerings, the Taoist took that as a decision by the committee and a move against Taoist rituals. They thus refused to participate. That year, only Buddhist rituals were performed. See minutes …

17 I was told that until 1976, impersonated human-size paper figures were made. However, since that year, the PST could not find any craftsman in Singapore to make these human-size effigies and the practice was abandoned.

18 Reels 27 and 28, (Cho 1989).
1971 to 1987, PST organized a total of eight salvation rituals, with one taking place once every two years. During this period, PST closed the cemeteries and converted them into a columbarium. A new columbarium with a capacity for about 100,000 niches was built, with temples and memorial shrines under the same roof. In 1998, some eleven years after the columbarium was built, PST began to organize the Grand Universal Salvation Ritual regularly (see Table 1). By establishing a regular cadence for holding the ritual, PST hoped to generate a regular source of income and become a center for ancestral worship and a place to promote Chinese culture and charitable activities for the living (Shi 2008, p. 5).

Table 1. Salvation rituals organized by Kwong Wai Siew Peck San Theng 新加坡廣惠肇碧山亭 (PST).

| Year | Type * | Interval (all) | Interval (WY) | Decade | No. of WY & CD |
|------|--------|----------------|---------------|--------|---------------|
| 1922 | WY     | 0              | 0             | 1920s  | 1             |
| 1943 | WY     | 21             | 21            | 1930s  | 0             |
| 1946 | WY     | 6              | 6             | 1940s  | 2             |
| 1952 | WY     | 6              | 6             | 1950s  | 2             |
| 1958 | WY     | 6              | 6             | 1960s  | 1             |
| 1964 | WY     | 6              | 6             | 1970s  | 4             |
| 1971 | CD     | 7              | –             | 1980s  | 4             |
| 1974 | CD     | 3              | –             | 1990s  | 1             |
| 1976 | WY     | 2              | 12            | 2000s  | 2             |
| 1978 | CD     | 2              | –             | 2010s  | 2             |
| 1980 | WY     | 2              | –             | 2015   | 4             |
| 1982 | CD     | 2              | –             |        | 5             |
| 1985 | WY     | 3              | –             |        | 5             |
| 1987 | CD     | 2              | –             |        | 5             |
| 1998 | WY     | 11             | 13            |        | 13            |
| 2003 | WY     | 5              | –             |        | 5             |
| 2007 | WY     | 4              | –             |        | 4             |
| 2012 | WY     | 5              | –             |        | 5             |
| 2017 | WY     | 5              | –             |        | 5             |

* WY = Grand Salvation Ritual (wan yuan sheng hui). CD = salvation ritual (chaodu youhun). Sources of information: stone steles in PST, participant observations (2007, 2012 and 2017), and (San 2010, pp. 82–89).

Table 2 shows that funds collected from the rituals allowed PST to purchase more burial land, construct buildings for both religious and social functions and, to fulfill its charitable duty to the living (e.g., donations to hospitals). The additional income from the performance of the ritual also enabled PST to purchase a mansion in 2006.

Table 2. Interval, profit and purposes of salvation rituals organized by PST.

| Year | Interval | Net Profit (Unit.SGD Dollar) | Events | Purposes: How Is the Profit Used? |
|------|----------|------------------------------|--------|----------------------------------|
| 1922 | 0        | 10,444.39                    | 1916 restructuring of organization. 1921 new temple | Renovation of pavilions and temple. PST office and charitable school |
| 1943 | 21       | 63,396.27                    | 1941–1945 Japanese colony | Market |
| 1946 | 3        | 54,553.68                    | 1945 End of WWII | Bought 7 new plots of burial lands (175 acres). New office and school |
| 1952 | 6        | 75,026.25                    | 1951 introduced free-selective graves. Cleared old graves | Bought new cemetery lands, cleared old graves |
| 1958 | 6        | 76,677                       | Clear old graves | Bought new cemetery lands |
| 1964 | 6        | 38,624.55                    | Collective grave (merged tablets mai ping), cleared 8000 old graves | Cleared old graves. Fundraising for the Kwong Wai Siew Hospital. |
Table 2. Cont.

| Year | Interval | Net Profit (Unit.SGD Dollar) | Events/ Purposes: How Is the Profit Used? |
|------|----------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| # 1971 | 7 | 15,331.04 | 1968–1969 cleared old graves, merged unattended tablets in the side halls of the temple |
| # 1974 | 4 | 20,092.76 | 1973 burial prohibited, donations: Kwong Wai Siew hospital (3000), Zhonghua hospital (1000), Tongji hospital (1000), Kampong Theng Tiong association (500) |
| 1976 | 2 | 120,000+ | Planned to build crematorium and columbarium |
| # 1978 | 2 | 45,503.68 | From 1978 scholarships for students from families of the three prefectures, 1977 new year pocket money for the elders of the 16 member associations |
| 1980 | 2 | 3697.32 | 1979 government requisition of 316 acres of cemetery lands (April 7 gazetteer), building of the kampong Mansion School closed down New money god celebration since 1980 |
| # 1982 | 2 | 19,226.40 | Construction of the New Peck San Theng (1983–1986) |
| 1985 | 3 | 55,248.91 | 1982–1983 exhumed more than 100,000 graves, 1983–1985 of the 31,700 unclaimed exhumed bones exhumed by the National Development bureau, 30,300 were from PST cemeteries |
| # 1987 | 2 | 4489.75 | July 21 1986 ashes of the 30,300 unclaimed bones were spread on the sea, new money god celebration since 1980 |
| 1998 | 11 | 13,0012.11 | 1997 installed Huan Yin as the main deity of the Peck San Temple |
| 2003 | 5 | 72,488.29 | 2003 July Monument for the 7 martyrs, bought 2 Properties in Chinatown 2003 cultural festival 2004 renovation of the Earthgod shrine |
| 2007 | 4 | 55,938.52 | New cultural policy |
| 2012 | 5 | 72,488.29 | 2003 July Monument for the 7 martyrs, bought 2 Properties in Chinatown 2003 cultural festival 2004 renovation of the Earthgod shrine |
| 2017 | 5 | 50,632.41 | 2003 cultural festival 2004 renovation of the Earthgod shrine |
| total | 19 | 86,0750.92 | 2003 cultural festival 2004 renovation of the Earthgod shrine |
| average | 5 | 7 | 50,632.41 |

# = chaodu youhun (small scale salvation ritual). Total events (1922–2007) 19: wanyuan shenghui (grand salvation ritual) 14; chaodu youhun: 5. Source of information: (Minutes) various years.

For the worshippers, participation in the ritual relieved them from their duty to visit graves, urns or tablets of their deceased annually. Just as they worshipped their ancestors during Qing Ming in Spring and Chong Yang in Autumn, the Chinese in Singapore also offer prayers, food, incense paper and joss sticks, among other offerings to both ancestors and wandering ghosts in the seventh lunar month. Many of them contribute large sums of money to the salvation rituals organized by PST (see Table 3). In 1998, PST sold a total of 1480 tablets (category A: 145; B: 153; C: 801 and D 381) (Minutes, 3 May 1998). However, during the “breaking the hell” ritual, family members of more than 300 tablets or 27% of categories A, B and C were not present. They had to rely on PST committee members and employees to carry the tablets to complete the crossover ritual. In contrast, remote ancestors are dutifully worshipped at ancestral halls in their native hometowns, but, as data collected by the PST has shown, many graves and tablets of the overseas Chinese were unattended. To fulfill their duties to their deceased, the overseas Chinese have two options, either (1) participate in the ritual (specifically, the Taoist ritual that saves them from purgatory, facilitates their rebirth, and hence wards off any evil)

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19 Reel 33, (Cho 1989).
20 Category D is yellow paper tablets posted on a large board, not individual tablet.
or (2) build affiliation with regional associations and PST so that their ancestors—if not reborn—would at least become a part of collective ancestors worshipped with respect on a regular basis. Affiliation with regional associations allows descendants to rest with the knowledge that their deceased ancestors are properly “homed,” and remembered. Regular offerings of joss sticks, food, etc., and other rituals prevent the deceased from becoming wandering ghosts.

Table 3. Price of ancestral effigies and tablets.

| Categories               | Name in Chinese | 1974 | 1976 | 2012 |
|--------------------------|-----------------|------|------|------|
| Impersonated effigy      | 真身 (zhen shen) | 155  | 200  |      |
| Large tablet             | 大龍牌 (da long pai) | 80   | 100  | 400  |
| Medium tablet            | 中龍牌 (zhong long pai) | 55   | 80   | 300  |
| Small tablet             | 小龍牌 (xiao long pai) | 35   | 50   | 200  |
| Yellow paper (lotus tablet) | 黃紙 (黃紙 or 黃紙) | 20   | 30   | 100  |

Sources: (Minutes, 20 June 1974, 7 March 1976); Field notes, 31 August to 2 September 2012. Currency: Singapore dollar. Exchange rate then was around USD 1 = S1.7.

7. Concluding Remarks

Wan Yuan Sheng Hui was a ritual invented in the late 19th century in Guangdong province from the anti-superstition movement. The ritual, which consists of both Buddhist and Taoist rituals performed in Mandarin (Buddhist ritual), Cantonese (Taoist) and Hakka (Nunnery), was designed as a “ritual instrument” to ease class tension and integrate ethnic differences (Choi 2009, 2017). In Southeast Asia, it is also a ritual charity for the overseas Chinese, who do not have an ancestral hall to enshrine “inconvenient” ancestors. The ritual prevents the spirits of these “inconvenient”, unattended deceased from becoming wandering ghosts and is performed to pacify those spirits—not yet wandering ghosts—whose descendants no longer wish to (or are unable to) pay their respects regularly. The ritual re-grouped these spirits, transformed them from individuals to collective, institutional spirits.

If the spiritual world is an extension of the living, attending to the dead is as important as attending to the living. Committee members of PST are volunteers whose only compensation is a meal every Sunday after their meeting. Service without personal gain, for them, is a charitable “gongde.” To ensure this “gongde” was not abused, they developed a governance system where no one association or individual could hold office for an extended period of time. Yet, despite having this governance system in place, the organization does not have any legal power to denounce or dismiss members who misbehaved, as all members are representatives of member associations. Only associations have the power to discipline their own representatives.21 Zeng Ling argued that PST is a supreme organization uniting all regional associations of the three prefectures of Guangdong province. However, PST, unlike Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong (Sinn 1989), was and still remains an organization without any political voice. It does not represent its member associations to claim political influence, nor does it have the power to influence internal politics of member associations. The link between PST and member associations, if not purely from ethical consensus, is the ancestors they served—first in the grave and now in the columbarium. While the associations are agencies serving unattended ancestors, PST, run by a collective of association elites, emphasizes the commemoration of martyrs and universal salvation, which correspond to the “da tong” (大同 universal harmony) ideology. Their behavior is overseen by the spirits of the ancestors. As for the commoners, worshipping ancestors is an obligation. However, there are times when such obligation cannot be fulfilled—due to migration, neglect, or fading memories with the passage of time. To ensure that these once attended ancestors do not become wandering ghosts, affiliation with an association is an option that satisfies the needs of both elites and

21 According to my informant, only one such case occurred in the history of the PST since 1920s. In that case, the misbehaving member’s association replaced him with another. No penalty was imposed.
commoners. For the elites, caring for the dead is a form of charity consistent with Confucian teachings, while, for the commoners, the duty of ancestor care is respectfully delegated to the institution.

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