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A Review of Mourning Rituals' Impact on Grief Processing in East and Southeast Asian Countries

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"Then suddenly, I remembered the words that he had told me before his death—Be tough, and no one can hurt you—I was much relieved and got back the strength to face the difficulties." (Chan et al., 2005)

"I thought it would be helpful to undertake psychological counseling (after the passing of the loved one), but I ended up not taking it as the perception of psychological counseling was quite negative in my country…. I think that is how we managed to overcome the grief of losing our loved one. The bond in the family has become stronger ever since." (Part et al., 2022)

A Chinese Malaysian family lays flower offerings at their ancestor's grave during the annual Qingming Festival (also known as Tomb Sweeping Day) in Karak, Malaysia. (Mohd Rasfan/AFP via Getty Images)

Background:

- Studies in non-Western contexts are scarce, limiting understanding of grief expression, support, and pathologization across diverse settings.
- Cultural and religious mourning practices facilitate grief responses, so emotions may differ based on social function (Mitima-Verloop et al., 2021).
- Improper death rites disrupt spiritual and religious practices, leading to distressing symptoms (Hinton et al., 2020).
  - *In the cultural context of East and Southeast Asia, is there evidence to support the buffering effect of mourning rituals during the post-loss period?*

Methods:

Search Strategy

- Followed PRISMA-ScR guidelines (Tricco, 2018)
- Databases: PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science
- Search terms: bereavement/grief/loss + rituals/funerals/traditions + East/Southeast Asia
- Date: May 2023

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies in East/Southeast Asia
- Bereaved participants
- Ritual content (religious/traditional post-funeral practices)
- Reported bereavement outcomes
- Non-COVID-19 bereavement research
- Peer-reviewed original paper in English

Data analysis:

- Mixed-evidence convergent synthesis (Hong et al., 2017) of 10 studies

Results:

Table 1. Ritual elements

Theme:	Practices:
Peaceful death	• Kawa bath ritual: appease the spirit of the dead and purify pollution • Chanting by priests and monks, viewing the body before covering the coffin, purifying wash, clothed the body, make-up for the deceased, "soul-flag" to guide the spirit
Maintaining connection	• Family altar at home, made offerings of water, food, incense, prayers, and "goodies". • Ashes were either buried or deposited at a temple. Visit to the grave or the temple were kept common • Spirit tablets inscribed with the name of the deceased • Burn offering to the deceased child • Child's belongings: Favorite items were buried or burned along with the body. The remaining possessions were given away. Child's room cleaned and remained untouched
Social image	• Daughters and daughters-in-law kneel, wail, and announce guests. Condolers are served three meals. • Saying prayers to the gods, praying for the child • Burn offering to the deceased child
Long-term practices	• Intensive mourning rituals during the first 7 weeks of bereavement, with further mourning practices continuing for 100 days and sometimes longer. • Yearly ceremonies to honor the deceased after the death. • Children mourn parents for three years

Table 2. Ritual impact

Theme:	Sample passages from included studies
Death as private	"In one household, the grandfather was opposed to a discussion of the dead child, since he did not want everyone to become sad." (Gudmundsdóttir et al., 1996)
Family support	"During that period, we talked about my mother a lot by sharing beautiful memories we had when she was alive, and focusing on the happy times with her made us smile. The bond in the family has become stronger ever since. If we were not there for each other, it would have been hard for us all to deal with the death." (Park et al., 2022)
Mourning as filial piety	"-when your parent dies, are you supposed to pakai baju terbalik (wear your clothes inside out)? P- the terbalik baju is the ritual of dressing the corpse, only the eldest son will wear the clothes meant the for deceased inside out. And then transfer/dress the deceased in the same clothes the correct side up...." (Sankar et al., 2016)
Continuing bonds	"The religious widows…more often sensed the presence of the husband may be a positive sign in helping them adapt to the loss. (Yamamoto et al., 1969)"

Conclusions:

- **Dual role of rituals**: Maintain family responsibilities (as child, spouse, caregiver) while adopting a new identity as memory-keeper.
  - **Confronting loss:** Rituals immerse the bereaved in pain and sorrow, helping them face the reality of death.
  - **Restoration:** Rituals enable reflection on the deceased's life, fostering respect, farewell, and meaning-making.
- **Clinical insights:**
  - Cultural traditions, mourning practices, emotional expression, and social ties should be considered in grief assessment.
  - Religious commitment may not foster post-traumatic growth and can, in some cases, contribute to distress (Pargament & Exline, 2020; Ryan & Ripley, 2023).
- **Future directions:**
  - Further explore the nuanced role of religion and spirituality in grief trajectories.
  - Daily assessment of grief reactions throughout the mourning period

Read full paper here:

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