

Transforming Grief: Life and Death in a Singaporean Funeral Parlor

Ruth E. Toulson

Assistant Professor, Division of Liberal Arts
Maryland Institute College of Art

In Singapore, in the space of a generation, attitudes towards death have been near entirely transformed. In this paper, which draws on fieldwork in Singaporean Chinese funeral parlors, where she worked as both anthropologist and embalmer, Toulson examines a revolution in what is considered appropriate grieving. How did discrete tears come to replace the amplified laments of professional wailers? Why should “modern” Singaporeans, now “cry like Protestants?” How malleable are intense emotions: grieving, longing, forgetting, love? In Singapore, she suggests, the transformation of emotion is a political project. Tensions that surround the appropriate way to grieve are never about emotion pure and simple, but always about something else: identity, morality, authority, or power. How does grieving become the site – always fraught, tense, and conflicted – for the expression of a particular form of Singaporean personhood?

Ruth E. Toulson is a faculty member in Liberal Arts at Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland. She received her PhD from the University of Cambridge. Her current research examines the relationship between religion and politics in Southeast Asia, particularly in Singapore, and in Mainland China. Broadly, she focuses on processes of religious transformation: why are some ritual practices discarded, seemingly without regret, while others become orthopraxy? And why do state measures designed to transform citizens' religious beliefs so often fail?

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12:00 Noon

Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue