

Grateful dead

Unwed Chinese who struggle to meet their perfect match on Earth can find luck a little further beyond the life cycle. **Michael Franco** unearths details on 'ghost marriages'



Around Town

At the Seng Wong Beo Temple in Tanjong Pagar, families gather to see their children begin a life of wedded happiness. Gifts are brought, incense is lit, offerings are made, blessings are bestowed. But unlike other weddings, at the end of the ceremony, the young couple doesn't get to head off to a romantic destination for a love-drenched honeymoon. They can't. They're dead.

The wedding services conducted at this 103-year-old temple dedicated to the Chinese City God are part of a tradition that dates back thousands of years – the Chinese ghost marriage. Traditionally, there are many reasons why such a service would take place: a woman could wed a deceased fiancé, thereby marrying into the support network of her husband's relatives; families could pay a woman to marry their dead son and then adopt a baby for her to continue their son's lineage; and sometimes an eldest son is made to tie the knot with a corpse bride to clear the way for a younger sibling who can't marry until his fickle older brother does so.

Speaking of corpse brides, in 2007 a case in a rural village in China's Shaanxi province made world news. The tradition there, dating back to the Ming Dynasty, dictates that husbands and wives must share a grave – and

in essence, the journey to the afterlife. But if a bachelor dies, what are the bereaved parents to do? Dig up a bride for him – literally. This custom created quite a demand for dead female bodies, with 'wet' (recently deceased) merchandise selling for around US\$5,000 (S\$7,155) and 'dry' (long gone) bodies fetching only \$100 (S\$143). Unfortunately, this led an enterprising man named Song Tiantang to murder six women because he claimed it was an easier way to make money than by digging up the bodies – which, of course, he had also done.

At our own Seng Wong Beo Temple, the ghost marriages performed are much less sinister. Here, the matrimonial couple is purely spiritual – no bodies of evidence involved. In theory, family members with deceased children are led through dreams to other families in the same situation. In practice, temple-keeper Madame Tham acts as something of a spiritual matchmaker, keeping a list of eligible – albeit, invisible – young men and women, and proposing unions when the time seems right. Once the spirits are joined through the ceremony, which involves Taoist priests, paper effigies, and plenty of things being burned, the newlywed ghosts are free to die together happily ever after.



Grave concerns Corpses have been exhumed to honour centuries-old customs

15 minutes from the MRT

An afternoon in a heartland 'hood



IKEA



Tampines Mall

Tampines

Get acquainted: Tampines – named for the large number of 'tampinis', or ironwood, trees that used to be in the neighbourhood – is the largest residential area in Singapore. The colourful HDB blocks and smart design of the district earned Tampines the United Nations World Habitat Award for Excellence in Housing Design in 1992.

Make a deal: Just outside the MRT exit, bargains abound in 513 Tampines Central 1. Get cheap clothes at CK Discount, then wander around the building clockwise until you hear the carnival soundtrack and come to stall No 152 – Three Stars Buy 1 Free 1. Just like the name says, when you buy one of the household goods on sale, you get one free. Along the way, keep your eyes open for discount underwear and a jewellery pawn shop.

Eat: On the third floor of the Tampines Mall (4 Tampines Central 5, and ground zero for mainstream shopping in this area), peek in the window of Din Tai Fung and watch dim sum masters rolling out dough and turning it into divine dumplings...okay, enough watching. Time to grab a seat and eat! For what could possibly be Singapore's best dining bargain (a major claim), head to block 823A on Tampines Street 81 and find stall No 820 in the Food Park for a plate of \$1.30 chicken rice.

Get fit: After all that chicken rice (at those prices, you know you'll get seconds), you'll need a workout. The Tampines Sports Hall (495 Tampines

Ave 5 S) offers 19 badminton and table tennis courts where you can play with your birdies and balls. If that doesn't burn enough calories, head to the second floor of the Tampines Swimming Complex (\$1 Mon-Fri; \$1.30 Sat & Sun) next door, where you'll find a ClubFITT gym with an entry fee of just \$2.50.

Get smart: The Tampines Regional Library (31 Tampines Ave 7) is a delightful haven of knowledge. Actually, it's just a great spot to soak up the ice-cold air-con while cruising the DVD and CD section where you can get your weekend's entertainment for free. For reading material, the place to go is Book Affair on the third floor of Century Square – the other mall in the area (2 Tampines Central 5). Buy a paperback for \$14, then return it within two months and get \$9 back.

Bless you: Amid all the HDB blocks the Poh Ann Keng Taoist Temple (150 Tampines St 21) comes as an unexpected surprise. Adorned with sinuous dragons, hundreds of red paper lanterns, ornate statues and with incense filling the air, this impressive oasis is sure to turn your thoughts to matters of the spiritual kind.

Catch the bus to Sweden: Okay, it's really just IKEA, but they serve up one hell of a Swedish meatball dish there. For the free shuttle that takes you to the complex (which also houses a Courts megastore and Giant hypermarket), head out of the turnstiles, take the first exit to the right and turn right. MF