Despite, or perhaps also because of the 1997 return of Hong Kong to China, Hong Kong peoples’ identities remain ambiguous. While postcolonial Hong Kong generally seems to be unaffected by hybridized cultural identities in everyday lives, when it comes to funeral rituals, many lean towards “traditional Chinese” style, which, in Hong Kong, general means adopting Taoist ritual traditions.

The Cantonese operatic tune, “Yi-ding-jin” (錘金), is the most important piece in the Taoist funeral ritual musical repertory in Hong Kong. With the increasing participation of non-local musicians from Mainland China in these rituals, musical practices have changed, resulting in hybridized styles of funeral music, which incline towards Western music aesthetics, such as using the 12-tone temperament and focusing more on precise pitch and rhythm. This hybridized form is widely practiced in Hong Kong.

How does the involvement of non-local musicians from Mainland China in funeral bands, and the playing of “Yi-ding-jin” in equal temperament with pitch and rhythmic precision—aesthetics not associated with traditional Chinese music—become part of the formative processes of local Hong Kong traditions and identities?

Using the performance practice of “Yi-ding-jin” as a case study, I explore the widespread significance of this hybridized ritual form in Hong Kong and argue that the music played in a Taoist funeral is a central part of defining what it means to be a Hong Konger. Despite changes in musical practice, Taoist funeral ritual music remains as a core symbol of Hong Kong cultural and historical identities. I posit that the timbre of funeral music, correlates to the structural characteristics of Taoist funeral ritual to provide sonic and visual signifiers to produce a liminal context, which allows participants and the broader Hong Kong community to reflect upon, and to re-enact diverse meanings and values of Hong Kong identities.