

9. Self, Culture, and Synodality: Listening to Women’s Voices in the Third Space

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Grief, a universal experience for humans, is the “anguish experienced after significant loss. . . . Grief may also assume the form of regret for something lost, remorse for something done, or sorrow for a mishap to oneself.”¹ The loss of a loved one during the devastating pandemic of COVID-19 certainly added weight to the grief and bereavement. The COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented and global public health event, disrupted the normal process of grief.² Studies have shown that sudden, unexpected, and traumatic loss can aggravate stronger stress, more complications and difficulties in recovering from the natural causes under normal circumstances.³ The bereaved family or individual faces not only the physical separation of the loved one but, as American psychologist Froma Walsh mentions, “the loss of physical contact with family members and social networks; the loss of jobs, financial security, and livelihoods; the loss of pre-crisis ways of life and threatened loss of hopes and dreams for the future; and the loss of a sense of normalcy in the shattered assumptions about our lives and connections with the world around us.”⁴ Studies show

¹ *American Psychology Association Dictionary of Psychology* (2007), s.v. “Grief.”

² Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, “Bereavement in Times of COVID-19: A Review and Theoretical Framework,” *Omega* 82, no. 3 (2021): 500–522, doi.org/10.1177/0030222820966928.

³ Raphael Beverley, Nada Martinek, and Sally Wooding, “Assessing Traumatic Bereavement,” in *Assessing Psychological Trauma and PTSD*, ed. J.P. Wilson and T.M. Keane (Guildford Press, 2004), 492–510.

⁴ Froma Walsh, “Loss and Resilience in the Time of COVID-19: Meaning Making, Hope, and Transcendence,” *Family Process* 59, no. 23 (2020): 898–911, doi.org/10.1111/famp.12588.

that the physical act of cultural rites and psychosocial and spiritual support can lay a foundation for bereaved individuals to cope with the loss.⁵

Women from all walks of life worldwide have encountered grief at the passing away of relatives, friends, and acquaintances during the last six years of the global pandemic. Women in Macao could not escape the reality of loss and grief as well. This study aims to investigate how women grieve the loss of a loved one.⁶ It looks at women's self-resilience, their cultural context, and particularly the way their faith community, the church, as a journeying companion, listens and is with them in their sorrow. Interviews were conducted with women who had lost their loved ones during the COVID-19 period (2020–2023), and apply a hermeneutical dialogue between Homi J. Bhabha's "third space," "synodality" of Pope Francis, and the "ritual theory" of Catherine Bell. This study starts with its methodology framework, followed by presenting the sociological data of the study. Then, it discusses the interdisciplinary perspectives on grief and loss and their correlation with the findings. The study concludes with a vision of women's faith in their "third space."

Methodology

This work employs a methodology of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to study the lived experiences of two women to gain deep insights into their loss and grief. Researchers use IPA to explore

⁵ Gianmarco Biancalani, Cladua Azzola, Raluca Sassu, Cristina Marogna, and Ines Testoni, "Spirituality for Coping with the Trauma of a Loved One's Death During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Italian Qualitative Study," *Pastoral Psychology* 71, no. 2 (2022): 173–185, doi.org/10.1007/s11089-021-00989-8; Paul C. Rosenblatt, "Researching Grief: Cultural, Relational, and Individual Possibilities," *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 22, no. 8 (2007): 617–630, doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2017.1388347; Joanne Cacciatore, Kara Thieleman, Ruth Fretts, and Barnes Jackson Lori, "What is Good Grief Support? Exploring the Actors and Actions in Social Support After Traumatic Grief," *PLOS One* 16, no. 5 (May 2021), doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252324.

⁶ This study was retroactively reviewed by the Ethics Review Board of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of Macao Polytechnic University, which confirmed that the research was conducted in full compliance with the standard ethics protocol.

individuals' meaning-making related to certain significant experience.⁷ Phenomenology studies the meaning of people's lived experiences to describe the meaning of a particular experience by learning how and what an individual experiences or learns.⁸ The rationale of using a phenomenological approach is to set aside the assumptions that women in grief are the same or in a standard process; hence, this study focuses mainly on each woman's unique and immediate experience. As Larkin and Thompson claimed, the outcome of an IPA is "likely to include an element of 'giving voice' and 'making sense.'"⁹

This chapter analyzes the narratives of two Christian women in their mid-50s to 60s—one Chinese and one Filipina—from a multicultural perspective, exploring how their distinct cultural backgrounds shape their unique expressions of grief and mourning rituals. An interview guide was developed for the in-depth interview to capture the interviewees' narratives of every unique woman in our study. The interviews were conducted in December 2023, using semi-structured interviews to provide free space for women to express their experiences related to the loss of a loved one. The objective of this study was explained to the interviewees in detail, and they signed a written informed consent and permission to record the interview content. Each interview was around one to two hours at an interview site of their choice, and pseudonyms are used throughout this study. The interpretation of the interview data, guided by IPA, is conducted from a liminal perspective that consciously negotiates the space between an emic understanding of the participants' lived experience and

⁷ Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a Useful Methodology for Research on the Lived Experience of Pain," *British Journal of Pain* 9, no. 1 (2015): 41–42, doi.org/0.1177/2049463714541642.

⁸ Arianne Teherani, Tina Martimianakis, Teresa Stenfors-Hayes, Anupma Wadhwa, and Lara Varpio, "Choosing a Qualitative Research Approach," *Journal of Graduate Medical Education* 7, no. 4 (2015): 669–670, doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-15-00414.1.

⁹ Michael Larkin and Andrew Thompson, "Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis," in *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy: A Guide for Students and Practitioners*, eds. A. Thompson and D. Harper (John Wiley & Sons, 2004), 101.

an etic analytical framework.¹⁰ A transcript was created for the researcher to closely read the interview data, together with several listenings of the audio recording, so that the researcher could immerse herself to reflect the material source and seek connections between the themes emerging from the interviewees.

This study hopes to contribute a vision of an integrated approach to grief in a synodal spirit within the fields of psychology, spirituality, and ritual studies for women of all walks of life, and for those of different cultures and religions.

Internal Monologue: Voices From Self

In 2022, Regina, a Chinese woman in her early fifties and also the mother of a sixteen-year-old teenage girl, lost her father, who was close to eighty and did not have any significant sickness before the sudden death. He passed away while asleep in his favorite armchair at home. Regina was out of town for a holiday together with the families of her other two sisters. Earlier in the morning, her sister woke her up, warning that they could lose their father. Her father was sent to emergency after Regina's mother had discovered his pallid body. Regina was in shock, as she had talked to her father a day before. Regina recalled, "Aside from being shocked, I could not believe this was happening."¹¹ For Regina, the sudden news of her father's unconscious state was overwhelming, and since there was no opportunity to process her own feelings, she claims, "When all of us heard the news, we just pretended to be calm. There was a strong internal turmoil flooding inside me, and we had to wait for further news." After thirty minutes of emergency rescue, the physician declared him dead. Regina felt that those thirty minutes of waiting were torture, and the first one she thought of was the school pastor in her work. She texted the pastor, asking

¹⁰The term "emic" refers to the concepts, statements, and interactions of a researcher's interlocutors in ethnographic research, while "etic" is a term used to specify a researcher's own analytic framework. See Till Mostowlansky and Andrea Rota, "Emic and Etic," in *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, ed. Felix Stein, doi.org/10.29164/20emicetic.

¹¹Interview with Regina, December 27, 2023.

him to pray for her father. Regina was heartbroken as she could not be with her father in the final moments of his life.

Regina is the eldest of five siblings. Two sisters were with her on holiday in mainland China, and her two brothers were with her father in Macao. In Regina's words: "I immediately asked everybody in the hotel to come to my room, with all my young nephews and nieces. I invited them to pray together." Despite being the only Christian in her family, Regina trusted that her non-Christian sisters could understand her intention. She felt the responsibility to contain and take care of everyone in her role as an elder sister. After the collective prayer, she broke into tears. It was the first moment alone when she processed her grief. It took a day to get a ticket back to Macao, and she began to arrange a funeral for her father.

Regina's family chose a Taoist funeral rite, a common practice among Macao's Chinese community. The ceremony involves an altar furnished with food offerings, incense, and joss paper, presided over by Taoist priests and musicians who recite sutras and chants. More than just symbolic, this ritual provides comfort to the bereaved by affirming that the departed is in good hands in the afterlife. It also represents a profound philosophy of life and death.

Regina found in her grieving process that she received good support from her faith community. All the priests in her school attended her father's Taoist funeral. She received prayers from friends, and her usual church group consoled her much during the year by meeting twice a month to share daily life experiences, which helped her to live normally after the sudden death of her father. She claims that it is important for women to ask and search for help actively, particularly in bereavement. She adds, "There is a good number of resources from the church to support us, but the church might need to let the community know about their activities or service on the pro-life, theological meaning of life and death, and pastoral needs of the mourning. It truly depends on us to open our hearts to search for or willingly accept to get help. My church community sojourned with me in this period and gave me much consolation."

Maria, a Filipina migrant worker in her early sixties, has been living in Macao for forty years. She has three grown children, one working as a teacher, the other as a nurse, and the youngest is in college. Maria is a devout Catholic and very active in Filipino pastoral work in Macao. Throughout the years, she has been actively helping new and old migrant workers to settle down and live their lives in Macao. During COVID-19 in 2022, she initiated a food-raising project to support Filipinos who got laid off and trapped in Macao in the severe phase of the pandemic.

A few years before COVID started, Maria's mother in the Philippines got very sick from kidney failure and often needed hemodialysis at the hospital. Maria is the second oldest among twelve siblings. Some are migrant workers aboard, earning a living for their families. Maria regularly sent funds to the Philippines for her mother's prolonged medical treatment. Her mother had been on hemodialysis for six years, outliving her original prognosis. In February 2020, Maria received the news that her mother collapsed after her treatment at the hospital. She stayed at the hospital for one day but wanted to go home. Soon after she went back, her mother passed away. Maria was still shocked, even though she had prepared for her death all those years. Maria recalled, "I just talked to my mother the day before her collapse. My mother asked me if I needed anything from her. I replied, maybe some oil for hair."¹² Immediately, Maria bought the tickets for her whole family to go back to the Philippines for the funeral. Unfortunately, on the day of boarding, Macao had banned entry for some international flights. Maria was worried that they would not be able to come back to Macao after the funeral, so she canceled the flights. In the end, she was unable to attend the funeral in person.

Maria had a good relationship with her mother, and they used to talk every night. Maria related, "Even though I could not go back to pay respect, the live stream mass at home for nine days was very good, a good way for me to mourn my beloved mother." She reported that close to twenty Filipino friends passed away both in Macao and the Philippines

¹²Interview with Maria, December 27, 2023.

during the intensive phase of the pandemic. She complained, “It is not enough, what we have for our Filipino migrant workers here. The Filipino consulates help to arrange flights or transport the corpse back to the Philippines and help the migrant workers radically, but our pastoral center did not do much for us.” Amid helplessness during the pandemic, the migrant workers did not receive much help from the church’s pastoral center, rather some social services such as Caritas had organized various food programs, sponsorship for hospital stays, or significant help for the migrant workers. When Maria’s Macao friends and colleagues heard of the death of her mother, her faith group, the Filipino Legion of Mary, initiated an online rosary, praying for her family. As it was during the strict social distance policy, all the bereavement and rituals were online. Maria thanked those who had supported her during her process of grieving. She wished the pastoral center could take up more responsibilities to help the migrant workers in Macao, as it was difficult for someone to grieve when they could not physically be with the departed loved one.

Internal Roots: Voices Within Culture

Emerging from the interview data, two main themes stand out from our analysis: the significance of the cultural and ritualistic funeral for the dead, and the spiritual support for the griever. According to Catherine Bell, an American scholar in the study of Chinese religions and ritual studies, ritual is a cultural and historical construction.¹³ The funeral of Regina’s late father was full of cultural, ritualistic, and spiritual perspectives relating to the Taoist philosophy of life and death. One of the significant rituals in a Taoist funeral is to perform a ritual known as *Po tiyu* in Cantonese, which means *breaking the hell’s gate*. This ritual symbolizes the soul of the deceased being released from hell and going into rebirth through a series of dances.¹⁴ In this funeral ritual, a Taoist priest brings along a paper tablet of

¹³ Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 2009), viii.

¹⁴ Xiaoyan Ivy Wu, Margo Turnbull, Amos Yung, and Bernadette Maria Watson, “Grief and Bereavement in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 10, no. 7 (July 2022), doi.org/10.4236/jss.2022.107017.

the deceased and circles in fishlike steps with a sword moving around a symbolic gate of hell, made of two paper bridges that could lead to rebirth after death. Alongside the bridge, there is a small pot of boiling oil (the hellfire at the center of the tiles), the hell gate, eggs (hell soldiers), candles, and a joss stick, and the priest uses a sword to break the hell gate (the tiles) to release the spirit into rebirth.¹⁵

Regina mentioned that the funeral rites were a definite help in her grieving process. In her own words, “The funeral rite was chosen by my mother and brother; they had prepared everything before we came back to Macao. If for me, I might not choose this kind of ritual. Even though I am the eldest among the siblings, my brother is considered the firstborn son, a traditional view for Chinese to inherit my father’s position as the head of the family. This is good for my family, and I am willing to follow their way of mourning.”

The collective family ritual gathers family, friends, and acquaintances to experience a communitarian mode of grieving, an important experience for Chinese folk religious practices. As Bell has stated, for the Chinese, incense is a connection with their ancestors on a daily basis.¹⁶ Regina mentioned that in her parents’ house, there is an ancestor altar for the family descendants to burn joss sticks to pay respect to their departed family members, and now her late father was on the altar for her children and grandchildren to remember him in a concrete way.

Aside from the communitarian grieving with a spiritual form other than her own religion as a Catholic, Regina considers going to mass a ritual to offer her grief to God. She recalled the first mass she went to after receiving the news of her father, “When I just entered the church, I burst into tears. Glancing at the crucifix at the center of the church, I wondered where the soul of my father would be. My father had worked hard and was

¹⁵ “Breaking the Hell’s Gate,” *Winde Cantonese Taoist Ritual Services*, taoistrituals.com/breaking-the-hells-gate-破地狱/.

¹⁶ Catherine Bell and Alfred Benney, “Dr. Catherine Bell Engages with the Question: How Do You Define Religion?,” DigitalCommons@Fairfield, April 15, 2002, digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/asrvideos/82.

humble in his life, and now he could rest and I have a sense of peace in my heart. I offer and entrust everything to God.” Regina’s father passed away more than a year ago. She goes often to his grave and prays the rosary for him while her other family members burn joss paper and joss sticks. This ongoing and frequent performative ritual induces connectedness with her father.

In his formative contribution to the study of culture and ritual, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926–2006) claimed that “religion is a cultural system,” and culture is “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols.”¹⁷ In the tradition of Maria’s town, they usually place the corpse at home. A priest visits the deceased’s home to celebrate mass. In Maria’s mother’s case, mass was celebrated for nine days at home. Maria claimed that family and friends gathered around to grieve in groups, rather than privately and individually. She said, “Filipinos are a close society. We often gather together for festivals, baptisms, and funerals.” Maria continued, “Even though I did not have a chance to attend my mother’s funeral, my friends in my hometown, like my high school friends, went to pay respect to my mother. They have helped me when I was not around. I was consoled by my friends paying respect to my mother physically.” While in Macao, Maria could not perform any rituals or ceremonies. She just followed the live stream of the funeral mass. It was only after three years of waiting until the travel ban was lifted that Maria could visit the Philippines to pay respects at her mother’s grave. Maria says, “We need to accept the situation as it is, not only you, just accept the fact that life is like that.”

Funeral rituals are different in religions, cultures, societies, and persons; however, the physicality of the funeral ritual provides psychological maturation, which could help the bereaved to accept and face the concrete loss, and promotes a grieving process, which could allow the bereaved

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (Basic Books, 1973), 89.

survivor to manifest their grief publicly.¹⁸ To face and accept the loss of a loved one is one of the five steps of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's grief model, which are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.¹⁹ Furthermore, culture plays a crucial role in shaping funeral rites. As exemplified by the Taoist and Catholic funerals described by our interviewees, the symbolic aspects of these rituals are profoundly connected to each faith's distinct philosophy of life and death. The goal of a Taoist funeral is to facilitate "a peaceful transition for the departing soul," which is embedded in the cosmic principle of living in harmony with the Tao (the way).²⁰ Although every funeral rite is unique, the core of the funeral is always communitarian. As one can see from the interviewees, the presence of family, friends, and acquaintances is important to acknowledge the earthly life of the dead and the companionship of the bereaved.

Studies have shown that restricting grief rituals and funerals during COVID-19 could prolong symptoms of grief and cause complex bereavement.²¹ Mourning practices—such as crying before the corpse, bowing, and making offerings—serve as crucial liminal and communal acts. They form a non-verbal process of acceptance, which aligns with a key stage in Kübler-Ross's grief model. These rituals function as a rite of passage for both the living and the dead, a concept articulated by

¹⁸ Christiane Pantoja de Souza and Airle Miranda de Souza, "Funeral Rituals in the Process of Mourning: Meaning and Functions," *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa* 35, no. 22 (July 2019): 1–7, doi.org/10.1590/0102.3772e35412.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Routledge, 1969), doi.org/10.4324/9780203010495.

²⁰ "Taoist Funerals: An Overview of Taoist Philosophy of Life and Death," *Funeral Services Singapore*, funeralservicessingapore.com.sg/taoist-funerals-an-overview-of-taoist-philosophy-of-life-and-death/.

²¹ Huibertha B. Mitima-Verloop, Trudy M. Mooren, Maria E. Kritikou, and Paul A. Boelen, "Restricted Mourning: Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Funeral Services, Grief Rituals, and Prolonged Grief Symptoms," *Psychiatry* 13 (2022), doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.878818; Francesca Diolaitui, Donatella Marazziti, Maria Francesca Beatino, Federico Mucci, and Andrea Pozza, "Impact and Consequences of COVID-19 Pandemic on Complicated Grief and Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder," *Psychiatry Research* 30 (2021): doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2021.113916.

anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner.²² The rite of passage includes three stages: stage of separation, marginal/liminal stage, and stage of reincorporation. In the final stage, the individual reintegrates into society with a new social role. For our interviewees, Maria and Regina, the funeral rites constituted a process of separation from their beloved parents. They now navigate the liminal stage of grief, processing their loss through ritual. Ultimately, these funeral practices are designed to facilitate their reincorporation into society with a new identity—one that must reconcile the profound absence of their mother and father. In Regina’s own words, “After my father passed away, I just feel part of me is gone, and I am not the one I used to be, but my life still needs to move on without my father, a new start now.” In this process of liminality, one learns to transform oneself.

Internal Spirituality: Voices From the Church

As women in grief, both Maria and Regina are grateful for having a faith community to support them during their loss. The notion of a *communitas* is vital in the grieving process.²³ All those who supported our interviewees in the funeral and grieving process are companions during this transit stage of their lives. A *communitas* is part of a synodal process—a new process launched by Pope Francis in 2021, reflecting the theme *Towards a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*.²⁴ The word “synod” comes from the Greek words *syn* (together) and *hodos* (way),

²² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Aline Publishing, 1969); Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2019).

²³ *Communitas* is a Latin term developed by Victor Turner to indicate a society living together during a liminal period that is “relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders” (Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 96).

²⁴ Pope Francis, “Address to the Faithful of the Diocese of Rome,” September 2021, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210918-fedeli-diocesiroma.html).

which Francis uses to mean journeying together.²⁵ Explained in his own words, “Celebrating a Synod means walking on the same road, walking together. Let us look at Jesus. First, he encounters the rich man on the road; he then listens to his questions, and finally, he helps him discern what he must do to inherit eternal life. Encounter, listen, and discern.”²⁶

The synodal process invites Catholics from all over the world to participate in a reflection process to discover how the church can be a journeying companion. This process symbolizes an inverted pyramid, not from the top down but bottom up. Francis stresses, “The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness and proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds. . . . And you have to start from the ground up.”²⁷

Grounding the synodal process in reality necessitates a difficult examination: to what extent did our faith communities embody synodality by authentically journeying with women in sorrow during the COVID-19 crisis? From the verdicts of Regina and Maria, the faith community has been a consoling companion during their losses. Families, friends supporting with prayers, initiating praying with the rosary together online or by gathering together, and actual pastoral support are often initiated by women. Regina, even though shocked and grieved for herself, gathered her younger sisters to pray for their father. Maria’s high school friends at home in the Philippines went to the nine-day mass liturgy when they knew Maria could not go back to her mother’s funeral. Women possess an

²⁵ “The Synod of Bishops: An Introduction,” *Holy See*, vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_01011995_profile_en.html.

²⁶ Pope Francis, “Opening of the Synodal Path: Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis,” October 2021, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html.

²⁷ Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: An Interview with Pope Francis,” *America: The Jesuit Review*, September 30, 2013, americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis.

extraordinary capacity to gather, listen, and accompany. In our narratives, they embody the synodal spirit—journeying together as companions to heal wounds and care for the sick in the church’s “field hospital.” Thus, they are not merely participants in the synodal process; they are actively enacting it.

Self, Culture, and Synodality

This chapter examines the intricate aspects of grief experienced by women, highlighting how the psychological, cultural, and spiritual facets are intertwined in the complex process of grieving. The unique challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the typical grieving process, with disruptions to funeral rituals by the lockdown policy, the enforcement of social distancing, and the overwhelming number of deaths occurring simultaneously. Beyond the pandemic, women’s grieving experiences are further shaped by their social and cultural role. These roles are often defined by cultural logics that alienate and marginalize women, silencing their grief and limiting their support networks. A traditional Chinese proverb goes, “It is a woman’s virtue to be ignorant” (女子無才便是德), while another counters, “A woman can hold up half of the heaven” (婦女能頂半邊天), illustrating both the subjugation and strength expected of women.

In Chinese culture, Confucian teachings traditionally dictate that women must be obedient to men, including fathers, husbands, and sons.²⁸ This concept of male superiority remains embedded in society today. Women are often seen as nurturers, expected to care for their families constantly, embodying the idea of “holding up half of the heaven.” Moreover, the role of Chinese mothers is heavily influenced by Confucian

²⁸ Xie Zhenming, “Regarding Men as Superior to Women: Impacts of Confucianism on Family Norms in China,” *China Population Today* 11, no. 6 (1994): 12–16.

ideals of family harmony,²⁹ where a mother's *self-identity*³⁰ is sacrificed for the family. During bereavement, women may be expected to suppress their own emotions to prioritize nurturing others. In Chinese society, family needs often take precedence over those of women. Despite the rise in women's education and increased influence within the family, traditional household roles still dominate modern life.³¹ In contemporary settings like Macao, women frequently experience a sense of fragmentation, juggling family duties, such as caring for children or elderly parents, alongside work responsibilities and community involvement.³²

A 2017 report on the status of women ranked Macao tenth globally in the gender inequality index.³³ The report highlighted that nearly 70 percent of local women hold full-time or part-time jobs, 46 percent manage family finances, and 80 percent are responsible for domestic chores. Agnes Lam, an ex-member of Macao's Legislative Assembly and an advocate for women's equality, identifies traditional ideologies as a major obstacle to gender equality. She explains that although many women in Macao have the freedom to choose their own paths, some give up their careers to conform to cultural norms that expect mothers to remain at home. She argues that this mind-set perpetuates itself over time.³⁴ Consequently, women are often caught between their family obligations

²⁹ Li Chenyang, "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony," *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 4 (2006): 583–603.

³⁰ "Self" in Jungian psychology refers to the integration of psyche, which includes conscious and unconscious part of the personality; see more in Joseph Campbell, ed., *The Portable Jung* (Penguin Books, 1972), 23–46.

³¹ Liu Jane and Marilyn Carpenter, "Trends and Issues of Women's Education in China," *The Clearing House* 78, no. 6 (2005): 277–281; Zhao Jiayi and Karen Jones, "Women and Leadership in Higher Education in China: Discourse and the Discursive Construction of Identity," *Administrative Sciences* 7, no. 3 (2017): 21, doi.org/10.3390/admsci7030021.

³² Claire E. Wolfteich, *Navigating New Terrain: Work and Women's Spiritual Lives* (Paulist Press, 1989), 129.

³³ "Women's Report Indicates Improved Gender Equality," *Macao Daily Times*, November 22, 2018, macaudailytimes.com.mo/womens-report-indicates-improved-gender-equality.html.

³⁴ Mariana César de Sá, "Founded on Inequality," *Macao News*, April 13, 2017, macaunews.mo/features/founded-on-equality/.

and professional commitments, leading to exhaustion, while cultural expectations continue to suppress their needs and voices.

In addition to the sociocultural expectations that shape women's roles, women today continue to face oppression, injustice, and the deprivation of rights and dignity. In many parts of Asia, women are still compelled to leave their homes to become migrant workers, often becoming the primary breadwinners for their families. Unfortunately, migrant workers are often subjected to domestic abuse, and many find themselves over-staying their visas, leading to illegal status. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation by agents and, in some cases, forces them into prostitution.³⁵ According to data from the United Nations, before the pandemic, an alarming 243 million girls and women aged 15–19 experienced sexual and/or physical violence at the hands of intimate partners in the previous year.³⁶ Since the onset of the pandemic, violence against women, especially domestic violence, has intensified. In response, the UN launched the “Shadow Pandemic Campaign” to raise public awareness about the global surge in domestic violence during the pandemic.³⁷ Furthermore, some studies have indicated that the pandemic has disproportionately worsened the economic situation for women.³⁸ For instance, in Macao, domestic helpers—the majority of whom are women—faced job insecurity during

³⁵ BILA on Women II, “Summary of Country Reports on the Status of Women,” in *Discipleship of Asian Women at the Service of Life*, ed. Virginia Saldanha (Claretian Publications, 2007), 105.

³⁶ “The Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women During COVID-19,” *UN Women*, unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19.

³⁷ “The Shadow Pandemic.”

³⁸ Jade Cornnor, Sarina Madhavan, Mugdha Mokashi, Hanna Amanuel, Natasha Johnson, Lydia Pace, and Debora Bartz, “Health Risks and Outcomes that Disproportionately Affect Women During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Review,” *Social Science & Medicine* 266, (2020): 113364, doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113364; Naila Kabeer, Shahra Razavi, and Yana van der Meulen Rogers, “Feminist Economic Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Feminist Economics* 27, nos. 1–2 (2021): 1–29, doi.org/10.1080/13545701.1876906.

the lockdown. Some risked losing their jobs if they refused to remain with their employers, and many saw a reduction in wages.³⁹

Women frequently find themselves in a “third space,” a concept introduced by post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha to describe the in-between space created by cultural collisions. Bhabha argues that this liminal space is a “fantastic location of cultural difference,” where new cultural identities emerge and boundaries are realigned through performative acts.⁴⁰ For many Asian women, they often navigate the daily tension of being the primary caregiver expected to manage household duties—a role ingrained by tradition—while also being an ambitious professional pursuing a demanding career. This liminal existence is a constant negotiation between filial duty and personal ambition. In the context of grief, a bereaved woman occupies this liminal “third space,” which anthropologist Victor Turner describes as “betwixt and between.” This space represents a transition between the realms of the living and the dead, placing the mourner in a position outside normative social roles. As Regina narrates, during a Taoist funeral, the first-born male traditionally takes charge of decisions. Regina, who was used to making her own decisions, found herself following the lead of her brother and mother during her father’s funeral, illustrating how this third space reshapes roles and identities.

The liminal third space allows for negotiation of roles, identities, and ways of being. As the Oxford reference explains, the third space is a “creative space” where the discourse or position of the ruling subject and the subaltern meet.⁴¹ Women, often in the role of the subaltern, must navigate this space while contending with power dynamics, whether they

³⁹ “Domestic Workers Renew Calls for Wages Protection as Their Earning Falls,” *The Macao News*, September 6, 2023, macaonews.org/news/city/macau-macao-domestic-workers-helpers-wages/; Isabelle Cockel, “I Am Sad That I Had to Try to Feed 400 Migrant Workers in Macau,” *International Institute for Asian Studies Blog*, April 21, 2023, blog.iias.asia/migrants-biographies/i-am-sad-i-had-try-feed-400-migrant-workers-macau.

⁴⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 219.

⁴¹ *Oxford Reference*, s.v. “Third Space,” oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803103943993.

are from authority figures, policymakers, or societal structures. This concept is relevant to the experience of migrant workers, such as Maria's account of Filipino workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, who lacked pastoral and practical support. Migrant workers, as a global minority, often face neglect or exploitation in terms of labor protection, living conditions, and the right to practice their faith. According to United Nations data, women make up 74 percent of domestic migrant workers globally, totaling 8.5 million, and 40 percent of countries lack national labor laws that safeguard domestic workers' rights.⁴²

Today's "field hospitals" are still filled with women facing hardship, bereavement, imprisonment—both physically and mental—and the cultural subjugation of men. In light of the synodal spirit, it is essential to explore how we can empower these diverse women, addressing their various needs, such as physical and mental wellness, spiritual companionship, and at times, even basic survival. However, it is equally important not to view women merely as vulnerable or in constant need of help. Women are actively seeking to live out the synodal spirit within their communities, and they want their feminist voices to be heard and contribute meaningfully.

The synodal process, now in its fourth phase, could serve as a "creative third space" to bring healing, empowerment, and companionship to women in various circumstances. The methodology of triangulation—encountering, listening, and discerning—can be a framework for embodying the synodal spirit. First, it is necessary to go out to the "battlefield" to seek and encounter those of who are wounded. This is a departure from a hierarchical or paternalistic approach, in line with Pope Francis's vision of an "open-door" church. As he expressed, "The Lord also opened before them [Peter and Paul] the doors of evangelization . . . so they could have

⁴² "Migrant Domestic Workers," *UN Women*, interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explain-er/migration/en/index.html.

the joy of encountering their brothers and sisters in the fledgling communities and bring the hope of the Gospel to all.”⁴³

The Church must open its doors and meet people where they are in their daily lives. The first step in synodality is *encountering* others in need and entering into dialogue with them. Pope Francis emphasized that every encounter requires openness, courage, and a willingness to be challenged by the presence and stories of others.⁴⁴ Such dialogue is not about trying to change others but about respecting and learning from their experiences. As Cardinal Robert W. McElroy has noted, “Encounter proceeds from the recognition of the grace within the life and reflections of our partners in dialogue. It seeks not to overpower or convince, but rather to discover the wisdom that lies in the heart of the other.”⁴⁵ This approach is particularly relevant to women, whose wisdom and lived experiences are profoundly valuable yet far too often overlooked. How often, in various social and cultural contexts, are women truly respected for their wisdom and dignity? Ensuring that women are not exploited or abused, that they are treated equally and respectfully, and that they have the same educational and professional opportunities as men is vital.

A mutual and authentic encounter requires the second key element of the synodal spirit, which is *listening*. Attentive listening is extremely crucial, especially to the often-overlooked voices of women in their liminal or “third space” experiences. As Pope Francis emphasizes, “True encounter arises only from listening.”⁴⁶ This form of active listening calls for an openness of heart, as Francis reflects: “Do we allow people to express themselves, to walk in faith even though they have had difficulties in life, and to be part of the life of the community without being hindered,

⁴³ Pope Francis, “Homily for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul,” June 29, 2024, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20240629-omelia-pallio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20240629-omelia-pallio.html).

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, “The Homily for Opening the Synod Path,” October 10, 2021, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2021/documents/20211010-omelia-sinodo-vescovi.html).

⁴⁵ Robert W. McElroy, “Synodality and Dialogue: Fostering a Culture of Encounter,” *Catholic News Service*, May 31, 2022, [angelusnews.com/faith/synodality-and-dialogue-fostering-a-culture-of-encounter/](https://www.angelusnews.com/faith/synodality-and-dialogue-fostering-a-culture-of-encounter/).

⁴⁶ Francis, “Homily for Opening the Synod Path.”

rejected or judged?”⁴⁷ In every corner of the world, women’s voices, often silenced by societal and cultural expectations, are frequently ignored. Across the world, women are constrained by roles that prevent them from voicing their needs and desires. Authentic listening is thus a foundational step in cultivating the synodal spirit. In his 2016 address to the International Union of Superiors General, Pope Francis highlighted that “women see things with an originality different to that of men; and this is enriching, in consultation, and decision-making, and in practice.”⁴⁸ This recognition of women’s unique perspectives offers a powerful opportunity to unite the church. By embracing these differences, the synodal spirit can foster new and creative ideas.

Third, accompanying women in *discerning* actions can help eliminate the oppression or stereotyping they face. As Pope Francis notes, “Encountering and listening are not ends in themselves.”⁴⁹ He urges the faithful to progress in our journey by emptying ourselves, freeing ourselves from all that is worldly, including our inward-looking and outdated pastoral models; and to ask ourselves what it is that God wants to say to us in this time and the direction in which he wants to lead us.⁵⁰ Discernment within a synodal community requires genuine dialogue characterized by authentic thoughts, honesty, and openness of hearts. Robert W. McElroy emphasizes that this type of honesty—forthright but not hurtful, informative but not overpowering, and communicative and not stylized—is vital for dialogue at every level, from family life to religious communities to political and governmental institutions.⁵¹ Honest dialogue necessitates that both sides set aside their stereotypes and biases, confronting their own truths. Ignatius of Loyola often encouraged retreatants to engage in self-

⁴⁷ Francis, “Homily for Opening the Synod Path.”

⁴⁸ “The Role of Women in a Synodal Church—Building the Civilisation of Love,” *CatholicTT*, February 16, 2024, catholictt.org/2024/02/16/the-role-of-women-in-a-synodal-church-building-the-civilisation-of-love/.

⁴⁹ Francis, “Homily for Opening the Synod Path.”

⁵⁰ Francis, “Homily for Opening the Synod Path.”

⁵¹ McElroy, “Synodality and Dialogue.”

honesty during the discernment process. The female Ignatian scholar Vinita Hampton Wright reminds us to be open about our emotions, thoughts, and assumptions.⁵² Respectful encounters, active and authentic listening, and honest discernment are crucial for fostering dialogue and building unity in our world, empowering women in all aspects of life.

In Taoist philosophy, the dynamic interplay of yin and yang symbolizes a harmonious balance that emerges from difference. This serves as a powerful metaphor for the synodal spirit, which seeks to bridge dichotomies—such as clergy and laity, men and women, or hierarchy and grassroots. This spirit generates a new force of unity and companionship. Our vision, therefore, is to embody this principle through a ground-up approach that fosters genuine companionship and support for women navigating the challenges of their “third space.”

Conclusion

This study sought to voice the importance of synodality, a way of listening and journeying with each other from the ground, particularly among grieving women. This work employs a methodology including qualitative phenomenological research to study the lived experiences of two women to gain deep insights into women’s experiences of grief. Every grieving woman is not stereotypical to the same degree in bereavement. Each woman’s unique and immediate experience is her lived experience that could contribute to a vision of an integrated approach to grief in a synodal spirit within the fields of psychology, spirituality, and ritual studies. The triangulation of the synodal spirit—encounter, listen, and discern—could serve methodologically as a mode of approaching bereavement, oppression, and deprivation, particularly for women struggling in their everyday lives (physically, mentally, and spiritually).

⁵² Vinita Hampton Wright, “Praying the Truth,” *Ignatian Spirituality*, August 14, 2023, ignatianspirituality.com/praying-the-truth/.

Pope Francis in his address at the opening of the Sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod on Synodality declared, “If, in this Synod, we end up with an identical statement, everybody the same, without nuances, the Spirit is not there; he is left out. He creates that harmony which is not synthesis, but a bond of communion between dissimilar parts.”⁵³ To listen to women in the “third space” is to encounter the Holy Spirit, the source of communion-in-diversity. This encounter obliges us to accompany women in the “field hospital” of their grounded realities, with a profound respect for their socio-cultural distinctness. Embarking on this synodal path is what makes it truly life-enhancing: it ensures that for every woman walking her own road to Emmaus, the journey culminates in a personal and transformative meeting with Christ, who offers hope and love.

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⁵³ Pope Francis, “Opening of the Works of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops ‘For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,’” October 4, 2023, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231004-apertura-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231004-apertura-sinodo.html).