

Urns, bones and burners: overseas Chinese cemeteries

TERRY ABRAHAM AND PRISCILLA WEGARS

The death of a Chinese person while away from the home village complicated the natural order of ritual and worship. For those who had gone far afield in search of riches, extraordinary measures were taken to bury them in an appropriate manner, to return their bones to China, or to make accommodations with the host culture. One physical manifestation of these activities is exhibited in Chinese cemeteries and burials throughout the world. Tombstones, ritual burners, altars and artefacts help document the lives of the overseas Chinese.

The essential continuity of traditional customs is often as surprising to researchers as the inevitable changes that take place. Continuity and change are the hallmarks of tradition. This is as much the case with practices relating to death and dying as it is with the pre-eminent tradition marker, foodways.

Chinese cultural practices related to death have long been studied and described (for example, see Ahern 1973; Crowder 1999; Ma 1988; Potter 1970; Watson, J. L. 1982; and Watson, R. S. 1988; their sources include much earlier research). Increasingly, scholars have tackled the continuation of those traditions among the expatriate, or overseas, Chinese. Traditional practices among expatriates are often productive of insights about the underlying ritual as new conditions force changes. In other cases, traditional practices have persisted long after they have disappeared in the homeland, much as Appalachia was once proclaimed a "pure" remnant of long-vanished English speech patterns.

Complicating the evaluation of change and continuity of "traditional practices" in China or out of China is the immensity of the culture and the term's concealment of the vast diversity of cultures that exist and have existed in China. Accordingly, any statement about China incorporates the seeds of its own refutation. In part because of this metonymy, references here to China will be generally limited to the area around Guangzhou (or Canton, as it was called in earlier times). During much of the period of heavy Chinese out-migration, most emigrants came from Guangdong Province in southern China. However, even this region includes different dialects and different customs, suggesting even greater caution in making generalisations.

Although overseas Chinese (or *huangxi*) were to leave China in large numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, earlier graves have been identified in far-off lands. For instance, Brunei has a thirteenth-century tombstone of a Chinese official (Pan 1999:138). Some areas relatively close to China, such as Malaysia and the Philippines, have significant Chinese cemeteries that are several hundred years old.

The draw of gold discoveries in California and other western North American sites precipitated one of the largest migration experiences. Successive gold rushes followed, in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. Other extractive industries, such as tin mining; rubber, coffee, and sugar plantations; fishing; and guano collection, required large labour pools and also attracted Chinese labourers. Many of these activities were part of the colonial mode of economic development wherein the benefits flowed to the major powers, who remained heedless of injury to both the environment and the labourers themselves. Such hazardous conditions meant that not all who planned to return home would in fact be able to do so. Many died on foreign soil and were buried in it.

Burial practices of the overseas Chinese tended to follow familiar rituals. The lack of close family and other keepers of

the ritual meant that not all practices conformed to what would have been necessary at home. Accordingly, from the beginning of the overseas Chinese experience, individualised variations appeared from place to place. Still, there was often a basic core of ritual and practice that was consistently applied. It was not until years had passed and connections with "home" had attenuated—loosely called 'assimilation' or 'acculturation'—that practices evolved towards those followed by the general society.

Western observers of Chinese funeral practices saw these rituals as an exotic manifestation that particularised the "otherness" of the Chinese. Although their accounts are interesting, our effort here will be to concentrate on the physical manifestations of ritual and practice, not the ritual itself. In addition, this paper does not begin to discuss all the 'issues which need to be explored', as outlined in Ian Jack's preliminary comparative study (1995:300), but it does concentrate on the major physical features of overseas Chinese cemeteries.

CEMETERIES IN CHINA

Burials in China tended to follow a three-stage process, which is only briefly described here (for more complete accounts, see Ahern 1973:130–131; Potter 1970:144–146; Watson, J. L. 1982:155; Watson, R. S. 1988:208). An adult dying in the fullness of years in the bosom of the family would be buried relatively quickly, according to the proper rituals, on a special burial hill outside the home village. It is important to note that all of these stages were directed and paid for by the descendants, who were the ultimate beneficiaries of the influence the deceased would have on the living. They were also demonstrating family wealth and position that was made possible by the ancestors.

This initial interment was considered a temporary but cleansing first step. The body (and any accompanying evil spirits) was removed from the village and, over time, the flesh (the worldly part) became removed from the bones (the spiritual part). After a period of time the body was exhumed, and the bones were ritually cleaned and reinterred in a large ceramic vessel (called a *kam taap* or *chin 'a*, the latter translated as 'golden pagoda'), which was placed on the open hillside outside the village.

The third interment stage was to move the urn containing the deceased's bones to a family vault in a good geomantic (or *feng shui*) location. This is where families gather during Qingming (the spring festival) to clean the family tomb and to pay respects to the ancestors. This ritual also involves leaving food and drink offerings.

Not all deceased were accorded the full three-stage process; circumstances—financial or consequential—might prevent the fulfilment of the programme. As an ideal or pattern for the proper handling of the deceased—in order to insure the benefits of propitiating the ancestor spirits—this

was subject to innumerable changes and variations in the overseas environment. But the underlying pattern persisted, even if not fully realised in all cases.

OVERSEAS CHINESE CEMETERIES

In China, the responsibilities for managing the interment of the deceased belong to the family. James Watson notes the importance of the ritual in a culture where 'the world order and the social structure of the living have meaning only through the manipulation and preservation of the dead' (Watson 1982:157). For overseas Chinese, family involvement, at least at first, was often not an option. Most nineteenth-century overseas Chinese were single men who were pushed by circumstances in China and pulled by the promise of employment in other lands. They would leave behind their parents, wives, and children, and depart in the hopes of not only earning a living but of supporting those left behind. The big dream was to be able to return as 'a Gold Mountain Man', one who had grown wealthy in the gold fields. Unfortunately for many, the dreams of riches remained dreams. Hard work in often appalling conditions was more likely the norm. Many died under these circumstances. Their death overseas required accommodation to normative practice. Rituals must be held, even in the absence of family, and steps must be taken to restore the deceased to the home village. In addition, the host community had certain expectations regarding death and burial that also had to be accommodated. Jan Ryan noted that in isolated areas far from a Chinese population centre (her examples are from Western Australia) 'funeral rituals and the organisation of burial sites were profoundly compromised' (Ryan 1991:9).

Exhumation

In the early days, a sojourning Chinese labourer travelled on a credit-ticket and repaid his passage through several years of work. In addition, he paid a fee to a name affinity or regional association that, if necessary, would manage his burial, removal, and shipment back to the home village. Alternatively, the overseas Chinese community, as represented by the local association, would take up a subscription for this purpose (Ng 1995:42). Once he was reinterred at home, the family responsibilities for managing ritual and obeisance would take effect.

The physical remains of this practice are widespread in western North America. In remote Pierce, Idaho, a once thriving gold-mining camp now reduced to a former logging village, a city park is the site of an early Chinese cemetery. Regular depressions from the exhumations of a hundred years



Fig. 1: Exhumation depressions, as seen from picnic table, Pierce, Idaho. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1997.

ago surround the picnic table (Fig. 1). A helpful sign at the entrance identifies the location as a former cemetery (Fig. 2).

The U. S. Forest Service has identified and provided interpretative signage for another such cemetery in the now nearly extinct community of Warren, Idaho. In Baker City, Oregon, the once nearly abandoned Chinese cemetery on the edge of town shows evidence of the exhumation depressions. It also holds the burial of one Lee Chue, complete with a marker (Fig. 3).

Approximately seven to ten years after burial—although shorter periods have been recorded (*Spokesman-Review* 2002)—an agent of the family association, or later its successor, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA), transliterated as Zhonghua, Jung Wah, or Chung Wah Association, would appear in the community and direct the exhumation. While forensic archaeologists have noted that it generally takes about six to seven years for a body to become fully skeletonised (Pollard 1996:141), scraping and washing the bones was an accepted part of the job (Crowder 1999:34).

Local newspapers often reported on this practice. For example, a 1905 newspaper story described the exhumation of 40 Chinese from the Walla Walla, Washington, cemetery (*Spokesman-Review* 1905). Of particular concern was the obligation to count all the small bones to make sure none were missing. Beverley Jackson has observed that traditional beliefs required that all the bones remain together, so they would be together in the afterlife (Jackson 1997:134, 137; see also Ng 1995:44). Often the bones were grouped together in

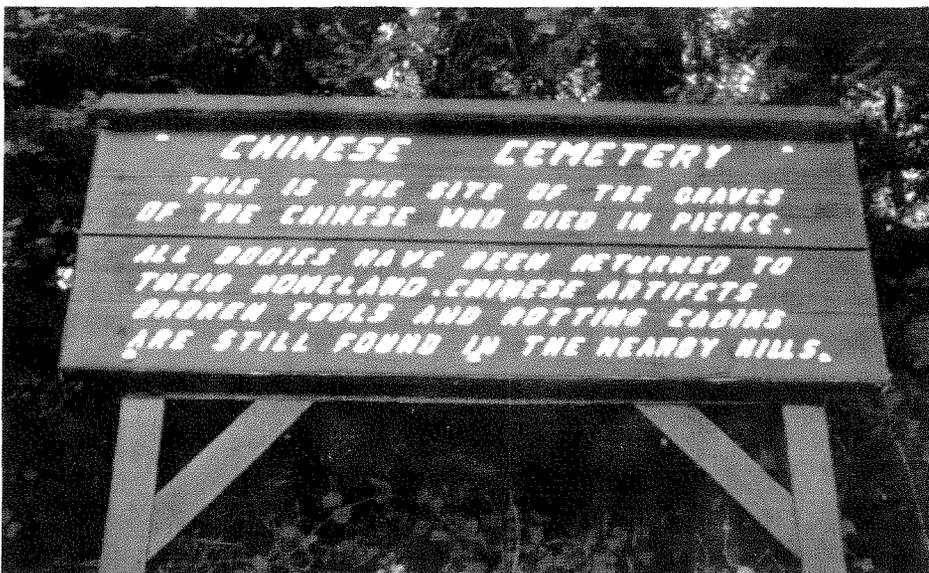


Fig. 2: Public park sign, Pierce, Idaho. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1997.

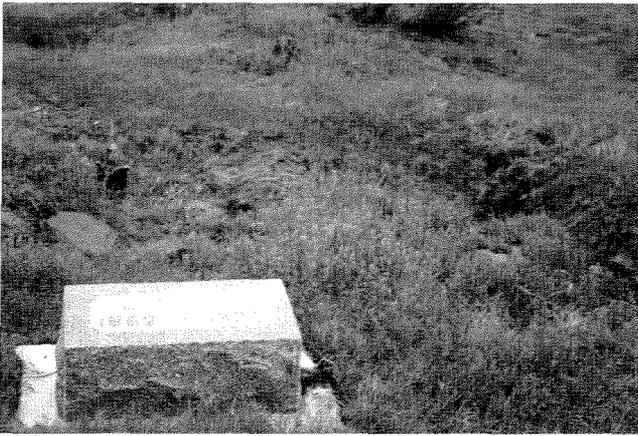


Fig. 3: Lee Chue marker and exhumation depressions, Chinese Cemetery, Baker, City, Oregon. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1996.

separate bags: arms, legs, body, head. Valued belongings, such as eyeglasses, might also be included.

In Croydon, Queensland, Australia 13 exhumations are recorded in the Shire Burial Register, which has been maintained continuously since 1889. Four were single exhumations. The other nine were exhumed in a single event in 1913. All the exhumations were conducted five to twenty years after their initial interment (Burials Register, Croydon 1889).

In Baker City, Oregon, in the mid-1930s, ironworker Herman C. Webb was contracted to make sheet metal boxes for the exhumed bones. He constructed about thirty 10 x 12 x 30 inch (approx. 25 x 30 x 76 cm) boxes of 0.28 gauge metal. After they were filled he soldered them shut and delivered them to the agent for shipment to China through San Francisco (Wegars 1995:19).

Invasions, banditry, and civil war in China made it increasingly difficult to manage such shipments to the home village. The onset of the Second World War effectively put a stop to the practice. In addition, restrictive immigration policies, in North America and Australia, meant that fewer and fewer Chinese were still around who desired the return of their bones upon death.

The effect of this removal activity is still apparent in many locations throughout the West, since once exhumed, the graves were not backfilled. These exhumation pits are clearly visible in Warren, Pierce, and Florence, Idaho, as well as in Baker City, Oregon. Exhumation is also documented in the cemetery records of Australia's Ballarat New Cemetery (Brumley et al. 1992:7) and is visible in Sydney's Rookwood Cemetery (Jones 1998:152). The empty graves could thus more easily be reused as necessary (Maniery & Baker

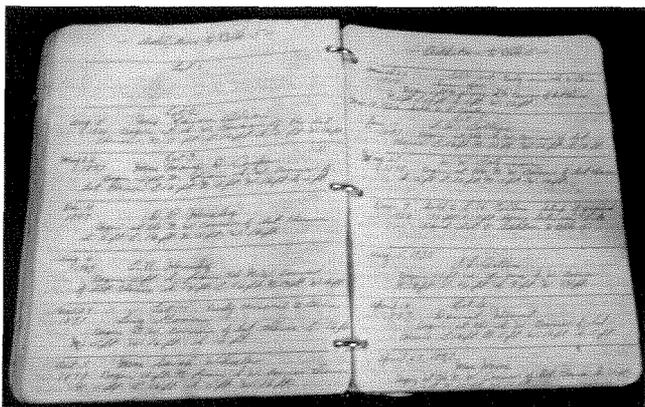


Fig. 4: Deed book, Moscow Cemetery, Moscow, Idaho. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1997. Note upper right, Sam Kee, "Body removed to China" and lot resold.

1995:[6]), a practice that meant Chinese cemeteries could be smaller than Euroamerican ones serving similarly-sized populations (Baker & Maniery 1995:16). Except where forced by local health concerns, burials in Chinese cemeteries were shallow, eighteen inches (approx. 0.5 m) rather than the more usual six feet (approx. 1.8 m), permitting easy exhumation (Minnick 1988:293).

In Moscow, Idaho, the cemetery deed book lists Chinese burials and notes subsequent removals. The handwritten entries also indicate that empty gravesites were resold for reuse by Euroamericans (Moscow Cemetery Deed Book 1897-1930: 'Addition to Block 5') (Fig. 4).

Because not all Chinese sojourners paid the fee for exhumation, or like Lee Chue were no longer desirous of being moved, Chinese cemeteries may contain additional human remains. Customarily female burials were less likely to be exhumed, a situation discussed later. Also, the effects of time, erosion, and vandalism have frequently erased what markers may have existed, leaving little trace of their presence. This suggests that sites that are locally identified as Chinese cemeteries may very likely still be Chinese cemeteries despite their current appearance to the contrary.

An example was recently reported from northern Idaho. A local service club proposed enlarging a parking lot. Residents identified the site as a known burial location for Chinese railroad workers even though there were no markers on the ground. A public uproar after the site had been bulldozed (effectively destroying whatever archaeological evidence might have been found on the surface) led to an examination by a geophysical research team which found evidence of subsurface anomalies similar to those existing in a marked cemetery. The service club, notified of state laws regulating cemeteries, has relinquished plans for a parking lot on that site (Shireman 1999).

That most Chinese labourers, in the early days, were gold miners suggested to some villains that Chinese burials were a possible easy source of buried gold. Ng (1993:67, 69) reports specific cases in New Zealand where gold or silver was placed in the deceased's mouth prior to burial. This may have led some to prematurely exhume the body seeking easy riches (Ng 1993:67). Similarly, rumours persisted that containers of exhumed bones being sent back to China were used as a vehicle for smuggling gold. Contradicting this idea is the Chinese belief that, save under specific ritual circumstances and taking extraordinary precautions, the dead were not to be trifled with. In addition, there were a number of mechanisms available to the Chinese to remit funds to China, all considerably safer than antagonising the spirit world.

Organisation

Family-name or village associations administered cemeteries for the overseas Chinese, like so much else in their lives. Without actual family nearby, the Chinese labourers relied on these associations (who also managed disputes, built temples, and cared for the indigent) to ensure that the proper funeral rituals were performed. In addition, the association was the agency that would return their bones to their home village for reinterment.

Land for such burial spaces was originally selected away from Euroamerican burial sites. In Baker City, Oregon, the Chinese cemetery was located east of town, far removed from the town centre, but now the city has developed right up to the cemetery. After years of neglect, county officials recently sought to trade some of the cemetery land to a local developer. After an investigation, representatives from the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Portland, Oregon, as successor to the regional association, asserted its ownership of the property and affirmed its existence as a cemetery (Wegars 1995:20).

In the nearly abandoned mining town of Silver City, Idaho, the Chinese cemetery (which still contains one burial) is located on a hillside in Slaughterhouse Gulch outside of town (Derig 1959:4). Silver City also has a separate and more populated Euroamerican cemetery north of town.

In Lewiston, Idaho, it was 'Chung Wah' (a misattribution for the representative of the CCBA) who signed a 99-year lease with the mayor and representatives of Euroamerican fraternal organisations to provide space for Chinese burials within the grounds of the Euroamerican cemetery; the burials were being transferred from land wanted for other purposes (Nez Perce County Leases 1891). Looking ahead 99 years, the signers probably expected that there would no longer be any Chinese burials remaining in the cemetery due to exhumation. This did not, in fact, take place; the present city cemetery still has a substantial Chinese section. As the end of the lease drew near, the City Council assured the Chinese community that the graves could remain in the cemetery forever (Wegars 1993:26).

The Chinese cemetery in Cooktown, in far North Queensland, Australia, has been completely reclaimed by the 'bush' (tropical growth) even though it is on the edge of the European cemetery. All that remains are a large and impressive altar and two simple burners. Neither grave markers nor exhumation pits are visible.

In appearance, the Chinese cemeteries were not "land-scaped" or park-like as western cultures expect; they more often retained a "natural" look (Maniery & Baker 1995:[6]; Knapp 1977:7; Wegars 1996:15). This was likely the result of the avoidance of death and mortuary remains except under certain ritual occasions, such as Qingming, when the front of the tombs would be swept (Ma 1988:139, 144). An exception that proves the rule is the Manoa Chinese Cemetery on the island of Oahu in Hawaii where two brothers, in caring for their father's grave, have "improved" the appearance of the cemetery; a neighbour noted: 'I remember when there was tall grass everywhere' (Burlingame 1998).

Feng Shui

Although we are seeing the impact of a global interest in feng shui principles for commerce (a recent lease sign seen in Melbourne's Chinatown promised 'Good Feng Shui Site') these have grown from very specific beginnings. The original purpose was to identify the balanced elements (*feng shui* means wind and water) of propitious geomantic sites for aristocratic burials.

Burials continue to be subject to *feng shui*, as geomantic influences on one's ancestors can have powerful consequences for individuals and for the family, but *feng shui* is also applied to other structures in the village. Potter (1970:143) noted that even road construction in Hong Kong's New Territories was constrained by the impact on the village's *feng shui*.

Modern cemeteries catering to the overseas Chinese often advertise the propitiousness of their sites by promising excellent feng shui (*Northwest Asian Weekly* 2000). Historically, there is some evidence that overseas Chinese used *feng shui* to site their cemeteries (Couch 1996; Lai 1974; Peters 1998). However, since one aspect of *feng shui* is the amelioration of unpropitious sites through realignment of objects, it is unlikely that *feng shui* principles were the sole determinants of cemetery location. Charles Belanger, a Washington, DC, funeral home director, noted that some land purchased by the local association for cemetery purposes was chosen because it was undesirable by Euroamericans and thus inexpensive (1999). A description of using geomantic compasses for the identification of a site with excellent *feng shui* characteristics is provided by the historian of the Lin Yee Chung Society in Hawaii (quoted by Purnell 1993:197); the Manoa Valley location is not only beautiful but ritually correct.

It might seem likely that *feng shui* principles would have a lessened effect for those cemeteries where it was expected that all inhabitants would be disinterred within the decade and returned to China for reburial in a proper *feng shui* site. As we have seen, this was not always the case. The conclusion, then, is that not all overseas Chinese cemeteries necessarily exhibit *feng shui* characteristics, but many do, so this is one element to anticipate.

Chinese buried in non-Chinese cemeteries were not always provided with good *feng shui* either. Many of the examples, such as Lee Mann's site at the Grangeville, Idaho, cemetery, may result from non-Chinese selection. In other cases, the Chinese community apparently had a role in choosing the site for the Chinese burials. A notable example is the New Cemetery in Ballarat, Victoria where the separate Chinese section slopes away from the main cemetery. Improvements in recent years seem designed to enhance its propitious geomantic aspects.

Markers

Markers serve the specific purpose of identifying the deceased for those who come after. In the Chinese context the marker serves two differing but related uses: as a marker for those who come to disinter the bones and as a marker for the descendants practising ritual observances. For the overseas Chinese, at least in the early days, the first was dominant. Only after years of acculturation did the second become more prominent.

In cemeteries where the bones have been disinterred there are seldom markers remaining. The practice was to identify the grave with a wood (or other material) marker to ensure proper identification (*Asian American Comparative Collection* 1986; also see Dicker 1979:83; Ng 1993:64). The transitory nature of many of these markers (often subject to vandalism or wildfire or other destruction) led to the practice, in some instances of burying a more permanent marker with the deceased. Inscribed bricks have been found that are apparently grave goods (Farkas 1998:back cover; *Marysville (California) Appeal-Democrat* 1998:C1; for date see *Asian American Comparative Collection* 1999; see also Ng 1993:72). Another attempt at preserving identification for later exhumation is a wooden slat placed in a bottle, found at a northeastern Oregon cemetery (Meek 1997). Bottles were also used to protect linen or paper slips containing written information about the deceased (Hagaman 1998:[6]; Minnick 1988:292; Hall 1998:205).

The text on the marker has, as a minimum, the name of the individual, the date of death, and the name of the deceased's home village (Blake 1993:63). One writer noted: 'A tombstone would not be a Chinese tombstone if the name of the deceased's native county did not appear on it' (Pan 1999:24). Usually the name is in the centre with the date on one side and the village identification on the other (Blake 1993:65). Kok Hu Jin reports that information about Chinese secret societies might be encoded within the calligraphy, at least he contends this practice is evident on some headstones on Chinese graves in New South Wales (Kok 2000).

In some places, we see the incised characters painted as well, usually in red and green pigments. In Ballarat, Australia, for instance, the painting looked fresh and it was explained as being the work of the Chinese association in Melbourne (for more on the two Ballarat cemeteries, see Brumley, Lu & Zhao 1992; and Brumley 1995) (Fig. 5).

The green and red colours (green for the given name and red for all else) also have symbolic meanings. Fred Blake, describing Chinese burials in St. Louis, Missouri, explains:

The color green is added to the three characters...in order to signify the "yin," i.e. the mortal or finite aspect of individual being. These green-colored characters of



Fig. 5: Grave marker and burner, Chinese section, Ballarat Old Cemetery, Victoria, Australia. Photograph by P. Wegars, February 2000.

personal identity are bracketed by the red symbols of structure, i.e. the characters for “ancestor,” the maiden surname and the husband’s surname – and indeed the character for the tangible “grave” itself. These are painted red to signify the “yang,” i.e. the immortal or transcendental aspect of being – the aspect of being that incorporates the ancestors and their descendants as members of a family (Blake 1993:86 n. 34).

Permanent markers tend to follow local practice. This is often a characteristic of acculturation but the acculturation may be that of the person ordering the memorial, not that of the deceased. Permanent markers can be stone, metal, brick, or cement. One extraordinary example found in Australia’s Northern Territory was a sheet-metal marker from a remote mining camp (McCarthy 1995:198–199). Probably intended as a temporary marker, the more accessible and durable sheet metal was possibly used in the place of scarce wood.

In general, permanent grave markers for overseas Chinese in non-Chinese-specific cemeteries follow the local pattern. A noteworthy exception can be seen at Croydon, Queensland. Here the grave markers in the Chinese section are made of local sandstone into which the deceased’s name and other information has been carved, whereas the gravestones of non-Chinese are made of granite and marble.

A survey of markers in cemeteries in Walla Walla, Washington; Grangeville, Idaho; Moscow, Idaho; the Mount Hope Cemetery in Baker City, Oregon; the Morris Hill Cemetery in Boise, Idaho, as well as cemeteries in Australia and New Zealand, show similar characteristics and patterns. The text on the markers ranges from all Chinese through a combination of English and Chinese to all English. Physically, the markers range from rectangular blocks set flat in the ground, to upright slabs, to slabs on pedestals. These variations are little different from those in European burials. It can be observed, however, that in many locales, the Chinese grave markers, particularly the earlier ones, are thinner in composition, which may indicate a less expensive alternative. The thin markers appear to be more subject to vandalism, disturbance, breakage and removal.

Burials of overseas Chinese in cemeteries in other parts of the world show similar congruencies. Markers, save for the Chinese characters, follow the same patterns as others in the cemetery. This may be a function of the available resources at the local monument dealer.

Twentieth-century Chinese cemetery markers are often enhanced with a photographic representation of the deceased. Folklorist Ann Hitchcock, using examples from Tucson, Arizona, asserts that this is a continuation of traditional practice. She notes that ‘photographs...were aids which the living used

to remember and venerate the dead’ (Hitchcock 1972:15). Similar usages include the presence of photographs on family memorial altars and the inclusion of a photograph in the funeral service and after, when it is transported to the home and business of the deceased (Crowder 1999:39).

In Chinese cemeteries, grave markers may retain specific Chinese cultural characteristics. Prominent among these is the omega-shaped tomb (Fig. 6). This may be for one person or for an entire lineage. These characteristic Chinese markers have been seen in locales ranging from Hawaii to Thailand, although the inscription on the latter does not appear to be Chinese (Fig. 7). During spring and fall “memorial day” celebrations, family members congregate before the tomb’s apron, sweep it clean and perform rituals.

Many locales in the United States have no evidence of the omega-shaped tomb. In Baker City, Oregon the Chinese cemetery holds one marker, that of Lee Chue, and a large number of exhumation pits. In the Mount Hope Cemetery, the main Baker City cemetery, the markers for Chinese burials are like Lee Chue’s; that is, they resemble most of the other gravestones in the cemetery. The retention of traditional forms has, in these instances and in many other locations, not prevailed.

Funerary Structures

There are three characteristic funerary structures often found in Chinese cemeteries. These are the altar or memorial shrines, the “bone house”, and the “burner”. Other structures, such as gates, mausoleums, and feasting areas, are found primarily in larger, more established cemeteries.

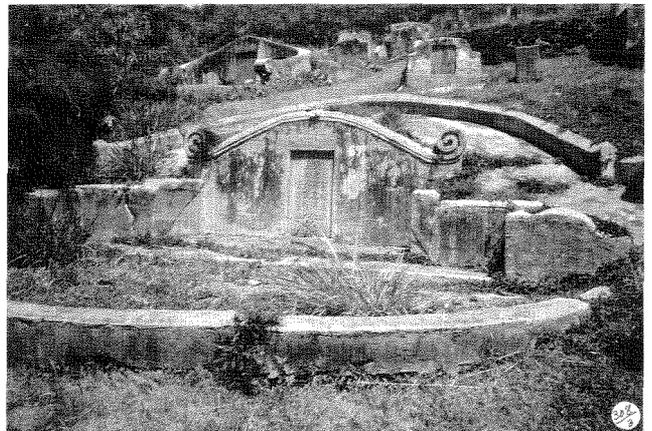


Fig. 6: Omega-shaped tomb, Ket On Cemetery, Honolulu, Hawaii. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1998. AACC #308/3.



Fig. 7: Chinese cemetery, Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1998.

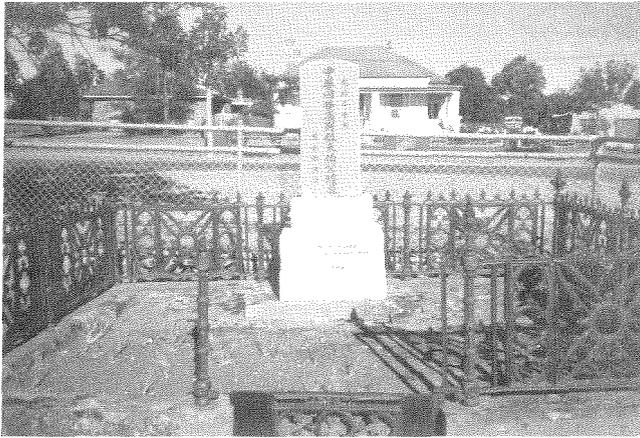


Fig. 8: Altar tablet, Chinese section, Ballarat Old Cemetery, Victoria, Australia. Photograph by P. Wegars, 2000.



Fig. 9: Altar tablet, Chinese section, Ballarat New Cemetery, Victoria, Australia. Photograph by P. Wegars, 2000.



Fig. 10: Altar and burners, Cooktown, Queensland, Australia. Photograph by P. Wegars, 2000. AACC slide #175.

Altars

Altars (or memorial shrines) are highly individualistic structures and to date there has been so little information gathered about them that it is difficult to generalise on their constituent characteristics. Altars appear to be more predominant in larger cemeteries and may be a generic marker for unmarked graves or a charity marker. Chow and Teather (1998:139–143) describe these two concepts. Ma (1988:144) mentions 'an impressive stone temple with altar located in San Francisco's Lincoln Park, formerly a Chinese cemetery'. An altar with two matching twelve-foot high burners has been refurbished in Los Angeles' Evergreen Cemetery (Chinese Historical Society of Southern California 1998). Memorial tablets were identified at Ballarat (one in each cemetery, Fig. 8 and Fig. 9) and Beechworth in Victoria, Australia (Jack 1995:302).

Cooktown, in Northern Queensland, Australia, has an impressive altar structure 'erected in 1887 by the Chinese community of Cooktown as a collective monument to the dead' (Bell 1992:7). 'Collective' is perhaps the operative word, with the altar providing a central locus for ceremonies that cannot, because of circumstances, be properly targeted for individual graves (Fig. 10).

Both the Ballarat New Cemetery and the cemetery at Walla Walla, Washington, have modern monuments recognising the achievements of the Chinese. These were erected by either the Chinese community (as in Ballarat) or by the dominant host society (as in Walla Walla).

Memorial shrines serve as generalised markers acknowledging the sanctity of the site for the entire community. The dominant association usually erects such shrines in commemoration of its members (see also Kok 2000:8–10). A catalogue of these structures would be the first step towards a proper study of them.

Bone Houses

One aspect of exhumation is the necessity for a container of some sort to transport the deceased's bones back to the home village in China. There, the first secondary inhumation often made use of a brownware storage jar. Large enough to encompass the longest of the leg bones, these jars were commonly used to repackage the bones for temporary storage until a proper burial site could be chosen. The jar would then be sited on a nearby hillside outside the village.

Overseas Chinese were often able to make use of the jars that were commonly used to ship bulk foodstuffs overseas. One example is in the James Cook Historical Museum in Cooktown, Queensland, Australia (Fig. 11). In other cases, alternative containers, wooden boxes, even suitcases, were pressed into service. Examples of such were identified in the Manoa Chinese Cemetery on Oahu, Hawaii (Fig. 12).

Once the bones were removed from the grave and packaged for shipment, it was necessary to store them until transportation was available. Up until the Japanese invasion of China in the late 1930s, transportation was unencumbered. The dual disruptions of war and political upheaval halted the process for several decades. In the meantime, more permanent storage facilities were required. At first these were at the docks and other transshipment points, but as the war dragged on, it became clear that ports in China were not going to be able to receive these exhumations (Lai 1987:32, 35–39).

Bone houses were therefore constructed or reconfigured to manage the problem. In one Hawaiian cemetery, an old garage has been converted to a makeshift bone house. The more substantial Manoa Chinese Cemetery has a purpose-built structure for storing the bones. This structure also provides an enclosed space for cleaning the bones.

Burners

The most common singular feature of Chinese cemeteries and of the Chinese section of host community cemeteries is the "burner." Where present, this brick or masonry structure, usually over seven feet tall (approx. 2.1 m), serves as a safe place for the ritualised burning of spiritual tributes. These objects, often paper and cardboard facsimiles of money, clothing, possessions, and houses, for example, are to serve the deceased in the afterlife. Burning these simulacra passes them to the spirit realm.

In addition to replica artefacts, burning the deceased's personal effects was also common. This practice was noted by Father Blanchet in southern Oregon about 1873: 'the Chinese offer all the provisions to the dead and dispose of them by burning it on the graves, as the whites or the savages would otherwise steal it' (Blanchet 1937:71). At Folsom, California's Chung Wah (CCBA) Cemetery, a large depression near the entrance served as a burner. In central Folsom a 'brick oven with steel doors' near the temple was used to burn the belongings of the deceased (Baker & Maniery 1995:17). Historian Nancy Wey observed that the Nevada City, California, Chinese Cemetery 'is one of the few [in California] which still has a burner for paper money and offerings' (Wey n.d.; Hagaman 1998:8 and illustration on inside front cover). Wey also listed a vandalised burner at Auburn in Placer County and another, presumably intact, in the San Jose cemetery 'which although only 6 feet by 6 feet (approx. 1.8 m x 1.8 m) is monumental in its simplicity' (Wey n.d.; Santa Clara County, San Jose). Ma notes that a 55-gallon steel drum was used for this purpose at the cemetery in Fresno, California (Ma 1988:144).

Vacaville, California, resident Yee Ah Chong noted the transition from burning in an open pit to using an incinerator:

Somebody would go with the coffin and burn the person's belongings. In the old days, this custom of burning a person's belongings caused a problem, because the cemetery was surrounded by grain fields and all the grass and weeds would go up in fire. So the Chinese were run out of Vacaville. They went to Fairfield with the provision that they would burn in an incinerator. You can drive there and see the old brick incinerator yet (Chong 1998).

Similar problems were reported at Nevada City, California (Hagaman 1998:2). In parts of China, and particularly Hong Kong, "accidental" wild fires from graveside rituals are a continuing problem (Teather 1998:8). Ian Jack, however, has suggested that burners must have a function beyond fire suppression, as that cannot be the only reason for their prevalence in places with damp climates (Jack 1995:303). In one such damp climate, on the island of Oahu, ritual burning takes place in a temporary wire frame tube; this is illustrated in Nanette Purnell's essay on Hawaiian cemeteries (1993:202).

The burner in the Chinese section of the cemetery in Walla Walla, Washington, is a large square red-brick-faced structure with a sloping concrete cap. A course of protruding bricks gives it the appearance of an undersized two-story building. The south face has a large circular opening, while two smaller arched openings appear in each of the other three faces (Fig. 13). Inside one can see the concrete block core of the structure and a metal grate, on which, in 1997, were several burned or rusted tin cans.

The burner at the elegant Morris Hill Cemetery in Boise, Idaho, is also brick but painted white. The faces are smooth and rise to a sloping, white concrete cap. Only the south face is blank. The north face contains a tall, narrow opening nine courses high with a triangular "shoulder" and rounded top. The east and west faces are identical; bricks have been omitted leaving a cross-shaped opening. This structure contained



Fig. 11: Characteristic barrel jar used as bone urn, James Cook Historical Museum, Cooktown, Queensland, Australia. Photograph by P. Wegars, 2000. AACC #144.



Fig. 12: Interior view, bone house, Manoa Chinese Cemetery, Oahu, Hawaii. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1998. Left: AACC #311/4; Right: AACC #313/4.



Fig. 13: Burner, Walla Walla, Washington. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1997.

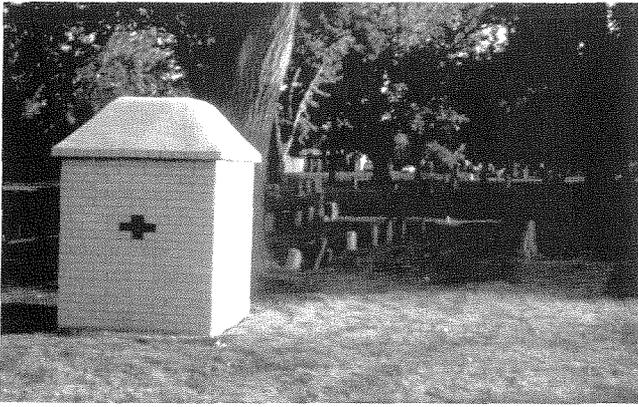


Fig 14: Burner, Morris Hill Cemetery, Boise, ID. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1997.



Fig 15: Burner, Ballarat New Cemetery, Victoria, Australia (note modern Moon Gate designed to "orientalize" this portion of the cemetery). Photograph by P. Wegars, February 2000.



Fig. 16: Burner, Ballarat Old Cemetery, Victoria, Australia. Photograph by P. Wegars, February 2000.

debris that may or may not have resulted from funerary rituals (Fig. 14).

The burner at the Baker City, Oregon, Chinese cemetery is a reconstruction since vandals destroyed the original some time ago. It is based in part on the reminiscences of an 88-year-old Chinese American native of Baker City. The new burner, now some 8 feet tall (approx. 2.4 m), is of thick masonry construction measuring 7 feet (approx. 2.1 m) square by 6 feet 3 inches (approx. 1.9 m) high. The gabled masonry is topped by a corrugated iron roof on a framework of cast-iron pipe, based on remains of the original found at the site.

Another vandalised burner is at Olney Cemetery at Pendleton, also in eastern Oregon; Chinese are known to have performed memorial rites there (Bellomo 1980:23–24; Frink, Woodroffe & Reese 1992:3–5). Here the upper brick courses have been removed and a flat concrete cap placed on top. This burner presently measures 6 feet (approx. 1.8 m) square by 5 feet (approx. 1.5 m) high.

In other locales, burners range from modest to elaborate. Ian Jack, comparing burners in California, Macao and Australia, noted 'The most striking feature of Chinese Australian practice is the lavishness of the best burners...astonishing by world standards' (Jack 1995:303–304).

Some of the less elaborate burners in Australia include those at Ballarat's New and Old Cemeteries in Victoria, Australia. These are quite similar to those found in the western United States. The burner in the New Cemetery is of masonry construction, about seven feet tall (approx. 2.1 m) and elegant in its proportions (Fig. 15). The Ballarat Old Cemetery burner is also masonry; its top protected from the weather by a substantial sheet-metal cover that gives it a distinctive appearance (Fig. 16).

These and other funerary burners are included in a recent effort to describe and illustrate their variety and commonalities. The list, entitled 'Chinese Funerary Burners: A Census' is available at <<http://www.uidaho.edu/specialcollections/papers/burners.htm>>.

Other Structures

There are other structures associated with Chinese cemeteries that should not be overlooked. These also require more study and more attention as it is difficult to ascertain how common or uncommon they might be. A particular example is the columbarium structure at the Chinese section of a cemetery in New Orleans, Louisiana. Cemeteries in New Orleans are famous for their elaborate sarcophagi; the high water table requires that burials be above ground. This may have influenced the 1904 Chinese structure, which is an enclosed concrete structure with funerary niches on either side of an unobstructed aisle (Fig. 17).

In a similar context, a Chinese cemetery amidst a Roman Catholic host society, the Chinese cemetery in Manila, Philippines includes elaborate tombs like miniature mansions (Wickburg 1999:198). Like the cemeteries in New Orleans, the Manila Chinese cemetery has become well known as a tourist site. Similar structures also exist in Lima, Peru (illustrated in Pan 1999:260).

Both the Manoa Chinese Cemetery in Hawaii and the New Cemetery at Ballarat, Australia include gate structures. The "spirit gate" at Manoa is the main entrance to the cemetery and crosses the roadway. It is 'not to keep the living from coming into the cemetery, but rather to keep the spirits of the dead from wandering out of it' (Purnell 1993:194; the gate has apparently been rebuilt and relocated, see Burlingame 1998). The New Cemetery at Ballarat includes a "Moon Gate" at the upper end of the slope, whereas at the bottom of the slope facing the street, there is a locked gate which is decorated with

memorial plaques documenting the recent refurbishment of the Chinese section.

Another structure sometimes seen in Chinese cemeteries is an open-air covered dining area. Such structures, some more or less covered while others are more or less open, are the site of Qingming group festivities, particularly feasting. Among the largest and most elaborate of these is the Pavilion at the Chinese section of Sydney's Rookwood Cemetery (illustrated in Ah Ket 1999:29, 33).

Women's Burials

In Cantonese belief, while deceased females received much the same initial burial rituals as men, they did not benefit from the extremes of ancestor reverence that honoured the males. Women were outside the lineage and 'do not become ancestors' (Watson, J. L. 1982:178). The bones of women were exhumed, cleaned, and reinterred as a mark of respect, but this produced no spiritual benefits to the living.

In the overseas community, particularly in the United States, where women were restricted from entry quite early (see Peffer 1999), it is not uncommon to find that while male remains were exhumed, female remains were not. Women's graves were often unmarked as well, more likely for those who were unmarried (Blake 1993:72). The U. S. Forest Service has placed an interpretative sign relating to a female burial among the exhumation pits at the Chinese cemetery at Warren, Idaho (Fig. 18).

Others are marked in the traditional fashion. A Chinese woman named May Den died in Hope, Idaho in 1925 and is buried in the small town's Euroamerican cemetery. Hope also had a separate Chinese section in another cemetery at that time. As is often the case, Chinese characters on May Den's tombstone give her Chinese name and that of her birthplace in China (Fig. 19). Translation of names is subject to the hazards of transliterating women's gravestones described by Emma Woo Louie (1998:170-171; see also Blake 1993:71-76).

In October 1909, Moy Shee married Soo Kee, a Bonners Ferry, Idaho, laundryman, in an English ceremony performed by a Euroamerican clergyman. May Soo Kee, as she then became known, had several children in the next few years, and was pregnant again when her much-older husband died in 1916. By late 1919 she was married again, to Lewis (also known as Louie) Den of Hope. While married to Louie Den, May Den had at least three more children, the oldest of whom was just five years old when May Den committed suicide, by hanging, aged only 35 (Wegars 1991:366-373).

Funerary Rituals

One component of the material remains of Chinese funerary rituals is the presentation of offerings to the deceased's spirit.

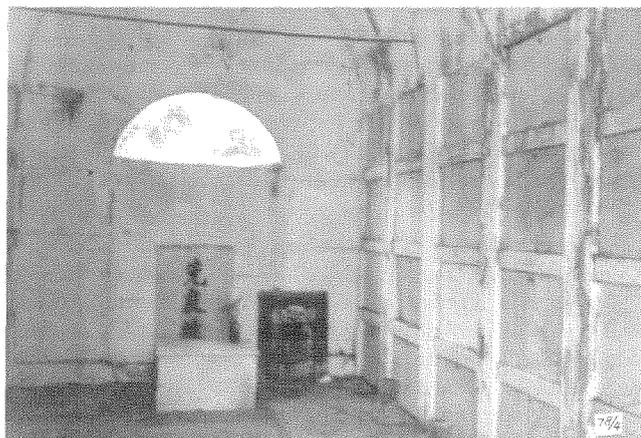


Fig. 17: Interior, Chinese mausoleum, New Orleans, Louisiana. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1993. AACC #78/4.

This activity is the responsibility of the descendants and is institutionalised in spring's Qingming festival. On this occasion, and also during fall's Chongyang festival, the graves are swept and offerings of food are made while paper offerings are burned. These rituals may also be performed on other occasions (Fig. 20).

One consequence of the food offerings is that containers may be left behind or be broken leaving material objects for archaeologists. Glass and ceramic fragments can frequently be found on or near the non-grassy ground surface at many relatively undisturbed Chinese cemetery sites (Schumacher 1979:21) (Fig. 21). Such fragments can often be identified as specifically overseas Chinese wares, such as 'Bamboo' or 'Four Flowers' patterns.

CONCLUSIONS

It is easy to deduce that any region with a high concentration of Chinese will have an accompanying burial site. This site may or may not be identified as a cemetery. It may not have grave markers or tombstones, and even if it exhibits signs of exhumation, not all bodies may have been removed.

Those with markers, burners, altars, or bone houses are quite clearly Chinese in character. In some areas, such as we have seen in eastern Thailand, traditional Chinese omega-shaped tombs are inscribed with non-Chinese characters, an indication of ethnic Chinese acculturation. Other cemeteries may hold Chinese remains and exhibit more of the host society's memorial artefacts than traditional Chinese objects. Still, the markers may continue to include the name of the deceased's home village.

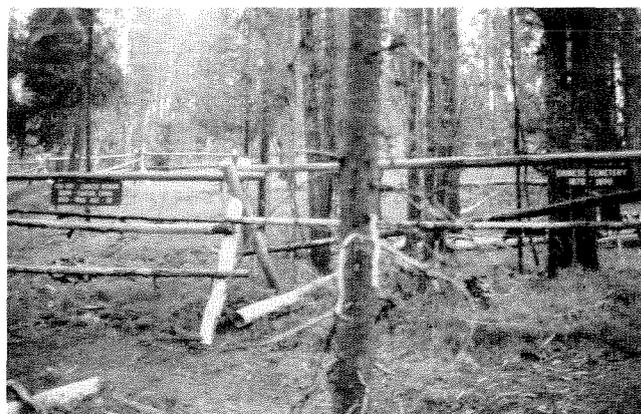


Fig. 18: Chinese cemetery, Warren, Idaho. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1997.



Fig. 19: Tombstone of May Den, Hope Cemetery, Hope, Idaho. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1989.



Fig. 20: Ritual offerings, East London Cemetery, England. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1993. AACC #69/1.



Fig. 21: Ceramic fragments, Baker City Chinese Cemetery. Photograph by P. Wegars, 1997.

Shapes and forms reflect conceptual ideas, ideas modulated through interaction with the host community. Over time, we see a melding of concepts from different parts of China expressed slightly differently in overseas locations; each of these moulded by the passage of time and changes in acculturation.

Graveyards, markers, burners, and tombs are objects representing manifestations of relationships between this world and the spirit world. They are also an accommodation to the realities of life in the present. Traditional beliefs persist over long periods of time, yet beliefs can change quickly as circumstances make them untenable. Material objects provide one highly developed way of looking at culture; grave goods and monuments are an important expression of that culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Fred Blake and Gertrude Perkins for sharing hard-to-find articles, and to Jennifer O'Laughlin and the staff of the Interlibrary Loan Department, University of Idaho Library, for their assistance. Particular thanks are due Mike and Marilyn Godley, Jim Quinn, Gordon Grimwade, and Jim and Eva Ng for providing on-site introductions to cemeteries in Australia and New Zealand. Thanks also to the Asian American Comparative Collection, Laboratory of Anthropology, University of Idaho, for permission to reproduce photographs from their collection. This paper is based in part on a presentation at the Symposium on Temples and Tombstones: The Archaeology of the Overseas Chinese Dead in conjunction with the Workshop on the Chinese in Australian and New Zealand History, held at the University of New South Wales on Thursday, 10 February 2000. Henry Chan is to be congratulated for organizing this highly successful symposium and workshop.

NOTE

The web addresses used in this paper were correct at the time of publication, September 2003.

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