

Chinese funeral
Customs

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Funeral traditions and burial practices other than in one's own culture have always piqued curiosity. In the 1920's, many Caucasians witnessing Chinese funeral processions in California were unaware of the meaning behind what seemed to have been interesting but peculiar customs. They did not inquire about them out of politeness because of the sensitive nature of the subject and because the Chinese found it difficult to share this part of their culture with outsiders. But, with increasing awareness, sensitivity, and appreciation of ethnic differences by both Chinese and western societies, the explanations sought revealed that many early Chinese burial practices in America were attempts to retain and reinforce their cultural values.

In China, traditional burial customs stemmed from a belief in ancestor worship, in the existence of spirits which was complicated by superstitions, and a need to "save face". The Confusian principle of filial piety, the basis of ancestor worship, creates a dependency of children on parents. A two-way bond, natural during the development of the child, becomes a one-way bond in later years when the adult, out of a sense of obligation, remains emotionally bound to his parents, grandparents and any other preceding

progenitors. Grateful for his existence, the adult dutifully venerates ancestral members in his lineage. This subjective tie is reinforced by fear instilled during childhood years; he is warned that if filial, piestic duties were neglected, displeased ancestors may return to haunt or bring ill fortune to the living descendents. The possibility of ghosts of one's many ancestors, as well as evil spirits hovering in the environs, made it difficult to tell ghosts, spirits, and demons apart. Colloquialism in the Cantonese dialect is full of references to demons and spirits; for example, *Fan Kwei* (foreign demon-Caucasians), *Huk Kwei* (dark demons-Blacks). When misfortune and sickness occur, Chinese believe it is the living who have offended the dead. Success, good fortune, and long life are attributed to ancestors' efforts.

Perhaps, the word "worship" in ancestor worship is a misnomer. Chinese do not deify their ancestors nor do they pray to them as individuals. The intent of ancestor worship is to placate and impress ancestors of one's worthiness, generosity, and dutifulness. The main activity in ancestor worship rites is to offer food and burn incense, punk, and paper money in front of ancestor tablets in the village ancestral hall, at the family altar at home, and at the graves. By burning paper money, and paper clothing, the items are transmitted to the spirit world for the ancestors' comfort.

Chinese society, like most eastern cultures, suppresses individualism for the sake of the group. From childhood, a Chinese is taught never to bring disgrace to the family name and to enhance the family reputation whenever possible. Weddings and funerals are two occasions when families spend beyond their means to impress friends and relatives.

Type of funerals in China varied according to sex, age, and status of the deceased. The least expensive funeral was that of a girl child and the most expensive that of a man. In

many poor families, dead infants were wrapped in matting and laid on certain street corners to be collected in the morning for mass burials. Contrariwise, one of the best gifts a dutiful son can give his parents while they are alive, is a pair of handsome coffins. This assures the parents of their son's filial piety, an act they assume will continue after their death.

The majority of the Chinese who came to California during the Gold Rush days came from Kwangtung Province in China. Leaving their families behind, the Chinese sojourner sought economic opportunities in this land, intending to stay for only a short while. Strangers in a land where speech, food, and the total way of life was foreign, the Chinese, whenever possible, worked and lived with other clansmen or fellow villagers. Safety in numbers was secondary to the comfort of sharing similar diet, tongue and cultural habits.

Chinese merchants immigrated to California at the same time the masses of Chinese workers ventured into gold mining and railroad and delta levee construction. As labor contractors and interpreters, the merchants served as the link between the white man's world and their countrymen. Throughout the major towns in California, these merchants formed a close-knit organization to coordinate local activities affecting Chinese in the area; each merchant represented his own clan or district village. To this day, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (also known as the "Chinese Six Companies"), the parent organization, coordinates activities from its headquarters in San Francisco.

In outlying areas the merchants served as heads of family associations. New arrivals sought out their family associations to aid them through the early adjustment period. They received temporary shelter, funds, and em-

ployment leads. In return each new arrival was assessed a tax payable upon arrival or collected prior to returning to China. Included in the tax was a fee, set aside in a community pool, for the return to China of the remains of any Chinese who died in America. An important philosophy of Chinese migrating overseas, especially the Cantonese from Kwangtung Province, is that of “. . . falling leaves returning to the root.” Chinese feared that when they died, their spirits would not rest until their remains were in a proper grave at home, because in a foreign land without kin, there was no one to tend their graves and placate their spirits. Westerners can understand the desire to be buried in one’s hometown.

Limited in funds, the early Chinese burials were simple and swift, particularly in the outlying areas. The funeral procession consisted of a few friends following the coffin to the cemetery. At intervals the sounds of firecrackers and metallic clanging of a gong interrupted the mournful silence. The noise was to confuse evil spirits from pursuing the deceased and to call the attention of the ancestors to accept the deceased into their ranks. Grave markers were inexpensive boards, temporary in nature, but they served the purpose. Chinese inscriptions, written with an oil-based black ink, bore up for many years in spite of the weather. Each burial was duly recorded by family association leaders for future reference.

Through the years, as the Chinese communities grew and stabilized in larger California towns, family units began to replace single men lodgings. As merchants became wealthier and their numbers swelled, many sent for their families from China. With families added to the community, Chinese holidays and special occasions became more frequent and took on a more festive atmosphere. Throughout history, women have always been the preservers of cultural traditions. The Chinese women took care of the myriad

religious details for the many festivals. As indicated in *A History of the Chinese in California*, "the preservation of many temples, customs, and festivals which survived today, are in large part due to the feminine side of the Chinese population." Celebrating Chinese New Years, weddings, birthdays, and other important days took on the same excitement, expense, and preparation as in the villages in China. As with festive occasions, funeral rites became increasingly similar to those of the homeland.

In the 1920's, the preparation for a typical funeral of a wealthy merchant in a Chinese community began with the posting of a death notice above the front door of the deceased's home. The death notice, written in Chinese calligraphy on white paper, served the same purpose as hanging a black wreath on the front door, a custom practiced by many Americans. Obituary announcements printed in local Chinese and American newspapers, like many western notices, extolled the merchant's achievements, honors, and family ties. The notices generally exaggerated the deceased's age by a few years as the Chinese believed only the bad die young and dying at a venerable age showed that he must have lead a good and virtuous life.

There were many mourning regulations governing the family's attire and behavior. Foremost was wearing black or dark blue for forty-nine days. Also during this period, sons and daughters were not allowed to cut their hair and were prohibited from venturing outdoors except for dire emergencies or for grave visitations. Pregnant women did not attend funerals, fearing that the spirit of the dead might, out of jealousy, enter the womb and harm the unborn child who would be entering the world of the living. It seems more reasonable to suggest that the emotional strain of visible grief could be damaging to the mother-to-be's health. In Southeast Asia, a pregnant daughter, upon returning to

her former home for a parent's funeral, was required to crawl on her hands and knees from the outer gate of the compound all the way to the casket to pay her respects. Her crawling represented her unworthiness (as four-legged animals were considered unworthy). The length of her crawl emphasized her piety.

The ritual of dressing the corpse began with the eldest son donning many layers of garments, each layer was then peeled off and put on the corpse before the deceased was ready for viewing. The deceased's eyes were closed and a silver coin placed between the lips; symbolically, the coin might be surrendered to spirits demanding money as the deceased traveled to the spirit world. This explanation may satisfy those inclined to be superstitious; however, I suggest that in centuries past the silver coin, which was an indicator of life, was used to detect any breath emitting from the deceased. If the deceased was an elderly female, she was further adorned with a matching pearl in each eye socket, thus making her face quite grotesque. Pearls represented purity; female family members also wore single strand pearls at the funeral, in contrast to the usual female custom of wearing jade and gold as their favorite jewelry.

The merchant lay in state for several days at either his home or at his family association headquarters; females lay in state at home. At the head of the coffin, a table served as a makeshift altar on which several pairs of vases held flowers, punk, candles, and incense. In the middle of the altar stood a large draped picture of the deceased. At the foot of the coffin, a low table held large platters of roasted pig, chicken, duck, bowls of fruit with accompanying cups of tea and wine. Near this feast stood an empty wine receptacle. The food was the deceased's last meal before his long journey to the spirit world.



To pay respects, a visitor knelt by the coffin, held up a small teacup of wine (in the form of a toast), then poured the liquid into the empty receptacle (the wine was reused for other visitors). Then the visitor kowtowed slowly three times. Elmer Wok Wai, in *Chinaman's Chance*, recalled as a small boy he sipped gin out of the funeral cups at his mother's wake.

Also in the viewing room were professional mourners who were paid to lament loudly, profusely, and if possible, to shed genuine tears. Their clamor rather than their sorrow were attempts to convince the spirits this virtuous man would be dearly missed and the spirits would be fortunate to receive him in the ranks. Psychologically, the constant laments and commotions forced the family to turn their emotions inward and their stoic appearance camouflaged their grief.

Proper directional orientation of the grave was especially important in China to ensure prosperity for the descendants. Practicing the art of *Fung Shui* (literally wine and water), a geomancer selected a gravesite which incorporated the harmonious energies of both wind and water. He also took into consideration mountain patterns, waterways, and other geographical features. Fung Shui is also used to select business and residence sites. In America, grave selection was not a major criterion as interment lasted only until the remains were disinterred and shipped to China for the final rest. Whenever possible, Chinese preferred a westerly orientation; symbolically, their heads and feet faced China. Caucasians also have preferences in grave orientation; at times they select plots because of shade trees, a scenic view, or the peace and tranquility of the area.

On the morning of the funeral, the viewing room became one of din. A local Buddhist priest, called in to officiate, chanted sutras, wailers gave their best in their performance, helpers burned candles and joss sticks and packed up the deceased's belongings and a feast for the journey to the cemetery. The sounds were loud enough for heaven to open her doors to investigate the cause of the earthly commotions.

After the service, the funeral cortege assembled for the trek to the cemetery. The length of the funeral procession, the number and size of community organizations and members participating in the funeral, the number of funeral bands and mourners employed, and the size of the family retinue suggested the prominence of the deceased.

The large draped picture of the deceased lead the procession, followed by a marching band. Earlier Chinese bands used cymbals, gongs, and flutes. In later years, the funeral bands were uniformly dressed, more sedate, and marched to mournful versions of western and Christian martial music.



Pall bearers walked beside the hearse, followed by the sons leading the line of male mourners. Each family member was accompanied by a pair of companions in case grief caused one to collapse. Female members, heavily veiled and dressed in black, walked behind the men. At the turn of the century, females wore coarse burlap hoods instead of

veils while men wore long burlap sashes around their waists. Burlap, being the coarsest of materials, was symbolically similar to the western idea of ashes and sack cloth. Wagons, at the rear of the procession transported the food, the deceased's personal belongings, paper models of furniture, houses, and a few empty wagons to transport people when the walking portion of the route was completed.

If the funeral cortege began at home, the funeral route would pass by his place of business; if the deceased laid in state at the family association hall, the procession would pass by his house and his business. The route was to permit the deceased to bid each of these places a final farewell. As the slow procession circuitiously moved towards the cemetery, long strips of red paper or small circular paper with square holes in the center were scattered along the route. One explanation was that the papers were used to bribe ghosts and spirits from harming the deceased and the demons had a more difficult time following the funeral procession because they had to jump through the squares in the paper coin.

Upon reaching the cemetery, the food was unloaded and placed on a concrete feast table surrounded by a copious amount of burning punk, candles, and joss sticks. The deceased's belongings, paper models, and an abundant amount of paper money were shoved into a nearby incinerator and burned. The act of burning these items transmitted their usefulness for the deceased's need and comfort in the spirit world.

After the coffin was lowered into the grave, each person threw a handful of dirt into the grave, a custom also practiced in some western societies. Family members cast their mourning veils, armbands, waist sashes, neckties, and coins from their pockets or purse into the grave. The discarding

of the mourning apparel indicates the end of the grieving period for all except the immediate family. In modern times, mortuaries furnish the mourning accessories as an added cost. A similar western practice is the pall bearers donning mortuary-furnished white gloves; however, the gloves are removed and placed on top of the coffin prior to the lowering of the coffin into the grave. The gloves are retrieved by the mortuary official and reused, but the Chinese mourning accessories remain in situ.

The coins cast in the grave were last minute money for the deceased's use. The practice also can be interpreted as a method for the family to tip the grave diggers and, possibly, by providing immediate gratification, discourages grave robbers from breaking into the coffin.

As people leave the cemetery, a family member gave each person a small token package containing a piece of candy and a coin, either a nickel or dime. The sweetness of the candy evoked pleasant memories of the deceased. The coin could also be spent on something equally pleasureable, and prolonged or recaptured good thoughts of the deceased.

That evening, friends were invited to join the family in a meal at a local restaurant. Food at this dinner was similar to the daily fare and contrasted sharply with the gastronomic delights found in Chinese banquets. The simpleness of the meal equated with the sincerity of the family in thanking their friends for their kindness during this time. The atmosphere took on a superficial, light-hearted air as friends reminded the family that life must go on and encouraged each family member to eat and keep up his strength.

Formal mourning for the family does not end with dinner after the funeral. Every seventh day for forty-nine days the family visited the grave, taking food, tea, and

incense in case the deceased had not or could not purchase any food in the spirit world. The visits and offerings were displays of filial piety and concern for the deceased's comfort. On a positive note, the grave visitations during this period served as an adjustment period. It prepared the living to accept the finality of death of one of its members.

In the spring, the Pure Brightness Festival, *Ching Ming*, celebrates Chinese Memorial Day around the world in major Chinese communities. Families gathered at the cemetery to clean the family graves. The grass is clipped, weeds pulled, monuments cleaned and swept. When the cleaning is completed, an extravagant meal is laid before the graves, wine poured into the ground, burning incense and candles placed in incense holders, and paper money burned by the graves. Again, the burned items are transmitted to the spirit world for the comfort of the dead. After each family member kowtows, by generation, at the graves, the food is removed and taken home for consumption.

Family associations also participate in the *Ching Ming Festival*. Frequently, a whole roasted pig, along with other food offering, is placed on the ceremonial table in the cemetery. After a round of speeches extolling the history of various prominent ancestors and a recalling of lineage history, the food is divided among the groups of families in attendance. Westerners also remember their departed ones on Memorial Day and holidays. However, the expense and extent of Chinese memorials are again similar in motives to the extravagance of their funerals. Most of the Chinese practices began because of superstition and the need to demonstrate one's status, but, with time, the continuance of the activities became that of empty custom.

The final burial for early Chinese in America consisted of disinterment and shipment of one's bones back to his

native village in China. Financed by the family association assessments on new sojourners and, in later years, from annual dues, the exhumation and shipment process was managed and coordinated by association leaders and cemetery officials. For the most part, the exhumation and re-packing was done en masse; the costs were quite high. It included a public health fee of \$10 per grave, a shipment cost of \$5 per box, and a re-burial expense of \$7 per grave. San Francisco was the central collection point. In the first two months of 1858, 521 exhumations were shipped to China on the French ship, *Asia*, and the clipper ship, *Flying Cloud*. In 1863, a shipment of 258 exhumations cost \$20,500; the large amount included travelling expenses of four supervisors accompanying the shipment and the payment to Tung Wah Hospital in Hong Kong for transshipment to the rightful family plots of each deceased.

There were no religious rites attached to the disinterment process. The family associations hired Chinese men with expertise from San Francisco to perform the task. Depending on the soil condition, generally from seven to ten years after burial, each grave was opened, bones scraped clean and repacked in a fetal position in a tin can lined with oil cloth or canvas. The thigh bones, being the longest, stood on end and the skull was the last to be placed in the can. A vial or brick, placed in the can, identified the person's family lineage and his village origins. Because of this practice, there are no Chinese cemeteries in the Gold Rush area of California and, possibly, not even a Chinese grave of the era left.

The practice of re-interment ended in 1936 with the Japanese invasion of China. The subsequent turmoil of World War II, the internal Communist-Nationalist conflict, and the closing of China to the Western world by Mao Tse Tung dashed all hopes for Chinese reburial in native soil.

With the severing of this one tradition, a new chapter of Chinese-American thinking began. It hastened the acculturation of immigrant Chinese into the American way of life and developed a satisfying sense of permanence in this land for Chinese born in America.

In retrospect, Chinese mortuaries in Chinatown perpetuate most of the burial customs because families are too embarrassed or are in too much grief to question forgotten folkways. However, with time and acculturation, many Chinese burial customs are forgotten and less elaborate services are becoming more popular. The changes are noticeable, but some customs have remained at least for now: the respectful kowtowing thrice before the coffin, the distribution of candy and money packets, and, last, the dinner with the immediate family after the funeral. In the future as Chinese become more westernized, these customs may disappear totally.

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