

Oregon and California's Chinese Cemeteries During the Mid-19th to Early 20th Century

“The land of opportunity” was a phrase used to describe America because of the notion that this country had many jobs and resources available for those struggling financially to establish themselves and build up wealth. Due to this belief in America providing opportunities for the lower class, people from all different backgrounds flocked to the United States beginning in the mid-19th century and continuing into the early 20th century. One of these opportunities was the Gold Rush in 1848 along the West Coast, which brought many Chinese immigrants to California. With so many immigrants coming to the West Coast to work in the mines, there were not enough job opportunities in California to supply the demand. Once the mining opportunities began to decrease, “young men...were recruited to work throughout the West.”¹ In Oregon, many contracting organizations were located in Portland which led to the city having the second-largest Chinese community at the end of the 19th century.² As the Chinese communities around America grew, so did the discrimination towards them and anti-Chinese laws began to be put in place as a result. In Portland though, enough companies benefited from the poorly paid Chinese laborers that no Chinese ban on employment was passed.³ Furthermore, “Portland possessed two spatially and economically independent Chinese immigrant districts.”⁴ This caused many Chinese to see Portland as a preferable residence due to its slight tolerance when compared to other states and cities in the West.

Immigrants to America were not treated warmly, and the Chinese were no exception. For instance, Californians loathed the influx of Chinese immigrants as they were blamed for

¹Nicholas J. Smits, "Roots Entwined: Archaeology of an Urban Chinese American Cemetery," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 3 (2008): 113, Accessed November 26, 2021. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-1-4939-9710-3.pdf>.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Wong, Marie Rose, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 6 <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/umw/detail.action?docID=3444324>.

declining wages and economic issues in California.⁵ This contempt towards Chinese immigrants did not stop in California, though, and was seen in many areas where the Chinese people settled. The hatred of Chinese immigrants resulted in discrimination and racism that followed these individuals into death in the form of segregated cemeteries and potter's fields. Scholars have researched cemeteries in both states; therefore, this analysis will determine if there are state differences in how Chinese immigrants were handled after death in Oregon and California based on traditional Chinese funerary traditions.

Although some traditions differed depending on the region of China an individual was from, the common traditional practices among most Chinese individuals are *Feng shui* and providing “the *po* with all the necessary comforts of human life,” the *po* being a part of the soul that “enables physical action.”⁶ *Feng shui*, also known as geomancy, is “the positioning of graves... in a harmonious position with the elements of nature” in order to have deceased ancestors rest comfortably.⁷ A funerary tradition that was developed as the Chinese settled in America was secondary burials and exhumations, as they did not plan to remain in America permanently since leaving their body in a foreign land without their family could cause a soul to “never stop wandering in the darkness of the other world.”⁸ Between two to ten years after the body was buried, it would be exhumed, have the flesh removed from its bones, and have the bones packed away and sent to China where they would be reburied with the deceased's ancestors.⁹

⁵Office of Historian. *Chinese Immigration and the Chinese Exclusion Acts*, (Washington D.C: Department of State), <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1866-1898/chinese-immigration>.

⁶Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, (*Chinese American Death Rituals: Respecting the Ancestors*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 22.

⁷Chung and Wegars, 24.

⁸Chung and Wegars, 197.

⁹Nicholas J. Smits, "Roots Entwined: Archaeology of an Urban Chinese American Cemetery," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 3 (2008): 115, Accessed November 26, 2021. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F03377103.pdf>.

When a Chinese individual living in Portland passed away, they were given a section in the Lone Fir Cemetery in 1891.¹⁰ More than 1,131 Chinese were buried at Lone Fir's Block 14 before 1928.¹¹ Block 14 was initially intended to hold the bodies of the Chinese "temporarily until their families could bring their bones home to China."¹² Most of the Chinese individuals laid to rest at Lone Fir were disinterred and reburied in China.¹³ In Baker City, Oregon, many exhumations were conducted as the "exhumation pits are clearly visible" and in the 1930s Herman C. Webb was tasked with making around thirty metal boxes to be filled with exhumed bones and shipped to China.¹⁴ Exhumation in Oregon seemed relatively accepted and not restricted, especially when looking at the law of illegal disinterment from 1892 stating that a person will be punished if they "willfully and wrongfully... disinter... any human body."¹⁵ It is not stated what constitutes a "willful and wrongful disinterment," but the law does not give any indication that exhumation was illegal. Rather, the law seems to be making the case that a person cannot purposefully dig up a random body. This is in line with the current Oregon law on disinterment stating that no permit is required, but written consent from the cemetery and "the person with the right to control disposition" is needed.¹⁶ Disinterment laws not having many requirements, if any, during the mid-19th to early 20th century, would have made it much easier for Chinese immigrants to exhume a body to ship the bones to China.

On the other hand, California was and continues to be more restrictive of this practice. In 1878, California passed the Act An Act to Protect Public Health from Infection Caused by

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹"History," Lone Fir Cemetery Foundation, accessed November 26, 2021, <http://lonefir.org/block-14-history/>.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Nicholas J. Smits, "Roots Entwined: Archaeology of an Urban Chinese American Cemetery," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 3 (2008): 115, Accessed November 26, 2021. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F03377103.pdf>.

¹⁴Terry Abraham and Priscilla Wegars, "Urns, bones and burners: overseas Chinese cemeteries," *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 21, (2003): 60. Accessed November 12, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29544506>.

¹⁵William Lair Hill, *The Codes and General Laws of Oregon* (San Francisco: Bancroft-Whitney Company, 1892), 951 <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=65o4AAAIAAJ&pg=GBS.PP7&hl=en>.

¹⁶Oregon Mortuary and Cemetery Board. *Disinterment of Cremated Remains Summary*. Portland: Oregon Mortuary and Cemetery Board, 2012, <https://www.oregon.gov/omcb/Documents/Reference/Disinterment-Cremated-Remains.pdf>.

Exhumation and Removal of the Remains of Deceased Persons. This disinterment law required exhumers to get a permit for ten dollars (\$271.17 in today's USD) to disinter a body.¹⁷ The reasoning for this fee, according to *In re Wong Yung Quy on Habeas Corpus*, is “to pay the expenses of supervising their disinterment” and for the transportation of the remains “without endangering the health of the people.”¹⁸ The respondent, Crittenden Thorton, argues that this law is not discriminatory since it applies to all residents regardless of nationality and race. However, it was known at the time that the largest group practicing exhumations was the Chinese. The conclusion could be made that this was a purposeful way to discriminate against Chinese burial practices. Furthermore, this law discriminated against the poor with its hefty permit fee. The Chinese came to America seeking a better life, meaning that many Chinese immigrants would not have had the means to afford the permit. As for the laws today, it is still strict about having a permit, but there is no permit fee attached. This does not mean exhumations did not occur at all in California, they happened in places such as Virginiatown's Chinese Cemetery that had exhumation pits discovered during archeological work.¹⁹ However, exhumations were more strictly regulated and discouraged compared to Oregon.

The art of *Feng shui* did carry over to some Chinese cemeteries in California and Oregon, but for many cemeteries, the meaningful placement of them was ignored. “Feng” means wind and “shui” means water; therefore, the ideal location for a cemetery was to be close to both elements, but not in an excessive amount.²⁰ In addition to being near water, cemetery sites were recommended to be “halfway up a hill...[and] facing north, which has symbolic meaning in the

¹⁷Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, (*Chinese American Death Rituals: Respecting the Ancestors*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 38.

¹⁸W.T. Baggett., *Pacific Coast Law Journal Containing All the Decisions of the Supreme Court of California* (San Francisco: W.T. Baggett & Co, 1890), 365<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=HRY4AAAAIAAJ&pg=GBS.PR1&hl=en>.

¹⁹Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, (*Chinese American Death Rituals: Respecting the Ancestors*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 97.

²⁰Andrew Ryall Briggs, “Feng Shui and Chinese Rituals of Death across the Oregon Landscape.” *Geography Masters Research Papers* 18, (2002): 5, Accessed November 26, 2021. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=geog_masterpapers.

Chinese after-life.”²¹ If an ancestor was buried with proper *Feng shui*, the belief was that the ancestor would provide good fortune and chi energy, life energy. There are not many records about the use of *Feng Shui* in both Oregon and California cemeteries before 1900. One record from the Colma, California Chinese Cemetery does mention that “they chose the spot... by having a specialist study the shan-shui (sic *feng shui*)...to determine a place which would please the deceased.”²² Another example of *Feng shui* being used in a California cemetery is in Virginiatown’s Chinese cemeteries. In a study conducted by Wendy L. Rouse, the first Chinese burial area had exhumation pits “contour around the eastern side of a small hill” and the “Auburn Ravine [flow] along the southeastern side of the hill.”²³ The other Chinese burial area in Virginiatown had exhumation pits “contour around the southern and western sides of the hill and the Auburn Ravine [was] located... south of the cemetery.”²⁴ Both of these cemetery plots had the *Feng shui* principles of being on a hill and near water. Nonetheless, two examples of Chinese cemeteries in California using the principles of *Feng shui* do not signify that all of them did. Chinese individuals would sometimes consult a geomancer in order to know where to properly bury and position their ancestor, but when the location of a cemetery was dictated by Euro-Americans the Chinese did not have much if any control over the landscape.²⁵

A study conducted by Andrew Ryall Briggs determined that out of ten Chinese cemeteries in Oregon, eight of them satisfied the principles of *Feng shui*.²⁶ Although Oregon has more examples of Chinese cemeteries following *Feng shui* principles, that does not necessarily indicate that it was better at incorporating these principles into the burial grounds as California

²¹Andrew Ryall Briggs, “Feng Shui and Chinese Rituals of Death across the Oregon Landscape.” *Geography Masters Research Papers* 18, (2002): 6, Accessed November 26, 2021. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=geog_masterpapers.

²²Andrew Ryall Briggs, “Feng Shui and Chinese Rituals of Death across the Oregon Landscape.” *Geography Masters Research Papers* 18, (2002): 13, Accessed November 26, 2021. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=geog_masterpapers.

²³Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, (*Chinese American Death Rituals: Respecting the Ancestors*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 84.

²⁴Chung and Wegars, 86.

²⁵Chung and Wegars, 37.

²⁶Andrew Ryall Briggs, “Feng Shui and Chinese Rituals of Death across the Oregon Landscape.” *Geography Masters Research Papers* 18, (2002): 32, Accessed November 26, 2021. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=geog_masterpapers.

was. A couple of the Oregon cemeteries, Granite and Jacksonville, did not utilize *Feng shui*, and there could be more California cemeteries that do follow this art that have not been fully researched yet. It is at least clear that both states did not stop this tradition from occurring completely, it was just limited in certain locations.

Another common Chinese funerary practice stems from the idea that there are two parts of a soul, the *hun* and the *po*. The *po* is what allows physical action and the *hun* encapsulates the spiritual and mental energy of an individual.²⁷ After an individual passes away, the *hun* departs from the body and travels to a higher realm for the immortal and the *po* remains within the body.²⁸ Due to part of the soul remaining with one's body, material possessions and offerings will be left at burial sites to provide comfort to the *po*. In order to preserve the body of the deceased, it was believed that putting jade, silver, gold, or pearls in the deceased's mouth would help give it these preservative qualities.²⁹ As for the *hun*, possessions of the deceased may be burned in order for them to reach this part of the soul in the afterlife.³⁰ The belief was that if the two parts of the soul were comfortable and well taken care of then their ancestors would have good fortune.

People in both Oregon and California seemed to allow Chinese immigrants to continue their offerings. In Oregon, there are archeological accounts of food offerings occurring. For instance, at Lone Fir Cemetery, what was mainly found were "personal items associated with...offerings left at grave sites."³¹ This included artifacts such as porcelain bowls, jars, and plates which would have been used to provide food offerings for the deceased to eat, and liquor

²⁷Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, (*Chinese American Death Rituals: Respecting the Ancestors*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 22.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Marilyn Yalom, *The American Resting Place: Four Hundred Years of History Through Cemeteries and Burial Ground* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 224,

[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=s80TrJ8Nh3IC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=chinese+cemeteries+AND+\(%22united+states%22+OR+california\)&ots=dIwOr25Ch1&sig=6pVgn9ZvMntH_IICmfOo1CmOs3k#v=onepage&q=chinese%20cemeteries%20AND%20\(%22united%20states%22%20OR%20california\)&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=s80TrJ8Nh3IC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=chinese+cemeteries+AND+(%22united+states%22+OR+california)&ots=dIwOr25Ch1&sig=6pVgn9ZvMntH_IICmfOo1CmOs3k#v=onepage&q=chinese%20cemeteries%20AND%20(%22united%20states%22%20OR%20california)&f=false).

³¹Nicholas J. Smits, "Roots Entwined: Archaeology of an Urban Chinese American Cemetery," *Historical Archaeology* 42, no. 3 (2008): 116, Accessed November 26, 2021. https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-1-4020-3377-1_103.pdf.

bottles and teacups found would have been for drink offerings.³² There was a funerary burner at this cemetery, however, it was demolished and now a new one for the memorial garden stands in its place.³³ In both the Baker City Chinese Cemetery and Olney Cemetery in Pendleton, Oregon, the burners were both vandalized.³⁴ The burner in Baker City has been reconstructed, but the one in Olney Cemetery was not fully reconstructed and had a concrete cap placed on top of it.³⁵ The vandalism could be an indicator of hostility towards the Chinese and their funerary practices; yet, vandalism can also be a matter of people wanting to cause trouble. There are accounts of offerings happening during Chinese funerals from news articles. In *The Daily Journal* from March 27, 1901, an article titled “Chinese Funeral at the Capital” mentioned that “a 10 cent piece was placed in the mouth of the corpse,” food was placed at the grave, and a fire was created to burn the deceased’s personal items.³⁶ The article is an outsider’s perspective on how the ceremony went and it showed that no one gave any pushback for the Chinese to practice their traditions. There were hostile words towards the Chinese in the article by calling them “heathens,” but it appears that no aggressive action was taken against them. An article in *The New Northwest* from September 29, 1876, does not mention any hostile actions towards stopping the Chinese funeral, however, there are rude comments made about how they made “unearthly clatter” that disturbed the Christians of the community.³⁷ There also seemed to be an infatuation with how “exotic” the funeral was, comparing it to an Egyptian burial scene, which means that most people were probably there to watch and not interfere.

³²Ibid.

³³History,” Lone Fir Cemetery Foundation, accessed November 26, 2021, <http://lonefir.org/block-14-history/>.

³⁴Terry Abraham and Priscilla Wegars, “Urns, bones and burners: overseas Chinese cemeteries,” *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 21, (2003): 65. Accessed November 12, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29544506>.

³⁵Terry Abraham, “Chinese Funerary Burners: A Census.” Last modified 2012, <https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/special-collections/t-abraham/burners.htm>.

³⁶“Chinese Funeral at the Capital,” *The Daily Journal* (Salem, OR), March 27, 1901. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn99063956/1901-03-27/ed-1/seq-3/>

³⁷“A Chinese Funeral,” *The New Northwest* (Portland, OR), September 29, 1876. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84022673/1876-09-29/ed-1/seq-2/>.

The same applies to California, in which there is archeological evidence of porcelain bowl fragments, a liquor cup, plates, and small stoneware discovered in Virginiatown's Chinese Cemetery, supporting how food offerings were done.³⁸ Personal items were discovered by excavators in a few of the exhumation pits, which were probably placed in the grave to comfort the *po*.³⁹ While there was no evidence of a funerary burner at Virginiatown, many other burners have been found in other Chinese cemeteries and burial areas in California. For instance, in Nevada City, there is a "square burner for money" and other "hundred-year-old burners" have been discovered in the Chinese Cemetery in Auburn and Historic Marysville Cemetery.⁴⁰ Evergreen Cemetery in Los Angeles has one as well that was constructed in 1888, avoided demolition, and was restored in 1997.⁴¹ There are also accounts of offerings happening during Chinese funerals from news articles, the same way there were in Oregon. In an article titled "A Chinese Funeral" from the *Los Angeles Herald* from July 4, 1890, it is mentioned that "at the grave...edibles were left for the comfort of the spirit on its long journey."⁴² A full article about Chinese funeral cemeteries from *The San Francisco Call* discusses there being a small crematory furnace and "the clothes, bedding, cooking utensils...and articles of personal nature" are placed in it and burned.⁴³ Between the archeological finds, the burners, and how these traditions were written in the paper, it seems that nothing was preventing the Chinese from carrying on these traditions in California as well.

³⁸Sue Fawn Chung and Priscilla Wegars, (*Chinese American Death Rituals: Respecting the Ancestors*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 89.

³⁹Chung and Wegars, 95.

⁴⁰Marilyn Yalom, *The American Resting Place: Four Hundred Years of History Through Cemeteries and Burial Ground* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 224.

[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=s80TrJ8Nh3IC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=chinese+cemeteries+AND+\(%22united+states%22+OR+california\)&ots=dIwOr25Ch1&sig=6pVgn9ZvMntH_IICmfOo1CmQs3k#v=onepage&q=chinese%20cemeteries%20AND%20\(%22united%20states%22%20OR%20california\)&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=s80TrJ8Nh3IC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=chinese+cemeteries+AND+(%22united+states%22+OR+california)&ots=dIwOr25Ch1&sig=6pVgn9ZvMntH_IICmfOo1CmQs3k#v=onepage&q=chinese%20cemeteries%20AND%20(%22united%20states%22%20OR%20california)&f=false).

⁴¹"19th Century Chinese Memorial Shrine Preservation Project," Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, August 30, 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120830220729/http://www.chssc.org/history/shrinefull.html>.

⁴²"A Chinese Funeral," *Los Angeles Herald* (Los Angeles, CA), July 4, 1890, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84025968/1890-07-04/ed-1/seq-2/>.

⁴³"What Chinese Funeral Ceremonies Mean..." *The San Francisco Call* (San Francisco, CA), December 23, 1900, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1900-12-23/ed-1/seq-9/>.

Chinese immigrants still faced violence and discrimination from Americans during the mid-19th to the early 20th century. There was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, two Chinamen were killed in Oregon, the Chinese Massacre of 1871 in Los Angeles, and these are only a few instances of the racism Chinese immigrants faced at this time. This paper was not to prove that they didn't experience immense discrimination since they were able to practice some of their funerary traditions freely, but rather to see how heavily American intolerance towards Chinese immigrants followed them into death. Comparing how the residents of California and Oregon treated Chinese funerary customs was to show if the same prejudice carried along state lines. Based on how Oregon and California inhabitants dealt with exhumation, *Feng shui*, and paying reverence to the deceased, it seems that both states gave Chinese immigrants the same amount of freedom to practice their traditions. The only difference is that California was more restrictive when it came to exhumations. Chinese funerary traditions in America have changed over time as Chinese individuals assimilated and began identifying as Americans. However, the history of their early funerary practices in America is remembered today through preservation such as the Lone Fir Block 14 memorial garden, the restoration of the Evergreen Cemetery burner, and the restoration of the Chinese Cemetery in Los Angeles.

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