Chinese at the Historic Los Angeles Cemetery

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Abstract

A portion of an east Los Angeles public cemetery, referred to here as the “Historic Los Angeles Cemetery,” was excavated by Cogstone Resource Management Inc. in 2005. All materials were analyzed and subsequently reburied nearby. Seventy-three of the graves encountered were classified as Chinese; this was based on the presence of Asian (mostly Chinese) artifacts and/or the determination of Asian ancestry through osteological analysis. Prior to 1900, Chinese in Los Angeles were buried in designated portions of the public cemeteries. This cemetery (the second public cemetery in Los Angeles) began operations in 1879.

Nineteenth century newspapers in Los Angeles provide information about Chinese death rituals and funeral practices, including use of American undertakers, burning of the deceased’s possessions, and the practice of leaving religious grave offerings to assist the recently departed with their needs as spirits and in finding their paths out of this world. The accounts include preliminary memorial services, funeral processions, graveyard rituals, and disinterments.

Archaeological results confirm the presence of spirit offerings associated with graves. In addition, the data confirms that disinterment removed only skeletal remains; clothing, personal items, and spirit offerings were left behind. The archaeological investigations reveal the presence of Chinese men, women, and children interred during the mid-to-late 1880s. This time period is not represented in the written burial registers, and thus the archaeological evidence of Chinese burials, especially of women and children, is the only physical evidence. About 7 percent of disinterments in the sample were women. Scoring both personal and spirit offering abundance for each grave determined that there was no relationship between socioeconomic status and disinterment.

Introduction

Historical Background

Chinese sojourners and Chinese Americans in Los Angeles were buried in specially designated areas of public cemeteries beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The first Los Angeles public cemetery was Ft. Moore Hill Cemetery located in what is now downtown Los Angeles on land which is now the Performing Arts High School. The cemetery opened for non-Catholics in 1853. While a resolution was passed by the city council in 1879 to close it to burials excepting those already owning plots, several sources confirm burials continued until at least 1883 (Carpenter 1973:29, 39). A Chinese section is documented by nineteenth-century newspaper articles and Carpenter (1973:27).

The second public cemetery opened in 1879 and accepted burials until 1922. This 10-acre cemetery in East Los Angeles was parallel to Lorena Street, between First Street and what is now Cesar Chavez Avenue, and was immediately contiguous with the private Evergreen Cemetery (1877–present) where many prominent Angelenos were buried (Figure 1). This article refers to it as the Historic Los Angeles Cemetery, but it appears not to have had a formal name until 1917. Prior to that, it was variously referred to as Evergreen, the county cemetery next to Evergreen, the Chinese burying ground next to Evergreen, and the Chinese graveyard just to the east of Evergreen in newspaper accounts of funerals (see below). A portion of the cemetery was used by the Chinese community to bury their dead beginning about 1882 and ending in 1922. The vast majority of these Chinese were not indigent, but laws of the time prevented the ethnic group from owning real estate, even burial plots. As non-indigents, the Chinese were charged uniform fees of $10 for interment and $5 for disinterment.
The Historic Los Angeles Cemetery began its history as a donation from Evergreen Cemetery to the City of Los Angeles. The city accepted five acres at First Street and Lorena Street as a public cemetery in 1877. A problem with the legal description of the land caused a two-year delay in transfer of title, but the city ended up with twice the space. In 1879 the city accepted the deed for 10 acres along Lorena Street from First Street to Brooklyn Avenue (Cesar Chavez Avenue) (Caswell 1878:459, 468–9). Within a few years of the donation, the county took over operation of the cemetery even though it was still owned by the city. In 1917 the county purchased the land from the city, and it became the Los Angeles County Cemetery. By 1920 little land remained for burials, and the county began construction of a crematorium. Upon completion in 1922, burials ceased. The crematorium remains in operation today.

The Chinese Cemetery of Los Angeles opened in 1922, concurrent with the cessation of burials at the Historic Los Angeles Cemetery. The Chinese Cemetery was operated by the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of Los Angeles (Lui 1948:104). About 1918, both Rosedale Cemetery and Evergreen Cemetery began permitting Chinese Americans and Chinese immigrants to purchase burial plots (Gillson 2003).

**Methods**

A small portion of the Historic Los Angeles Cemetery was excavated as part of a public transportation project (Gust et al. 2007). The cemetery was relocated during monitoring of construction excavations by Cogstone Resource Management Inc. (Cogstone). This excavated portion was immediately adjacent to First Street (Figure 1). The cemetery had no standing headstones because they had been removed by the county within a few years of purchase (ca. 1924) to make the property more “park-like”, and water sprinklers were installed for the same reason. By 2005 no one remembered that there was a cemetery in this location.

The author conducted the research for the project, managed the field and laboratory work, and was the

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Chinese Death Rituals

Overview

Funerary practices of China (Watson 1988) and of Chinese in the western United States (Rouse 2005) are well documented. A brief overview drawn from these sources is presented below to provide context, followed by specific information on Los Angeles.

In China, in common with many cultures worldwide, persons who handled corpses were traditionally considered dangerous to touch or to interact with in any way. In California this problem was neatly solved by using Euroamerican undertakers who returned the body to the Chinese community encased in a coffin, protecting them from any dangerous contact. Paid mourners were utilized to open the coffin lid for viewing and to carry the coffin. These mourners were also used to collect personal possessions, especially anything touched by the dead body, and placed them in bundles for burning; this protects the living from any transfer contact.

Chinese religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) share a deep belief that spirits of the deceased are real and potentially beneficial or potentially dangerous to the living. Rituals and ceremonies minimize danger by maximizing beneficence from the spirits or ghosts. These are particularly important if death is untimely, such as by accident, drowning, or murder, since those spirits are presumed to be angry.

New spirits require food and drink and prayers to protect them from the devil. In addition, respect for the new spirit must be demonstrated through eulogies, memorial tablets, and displays of the spirit’s value to the living (best possible feast, best possible coffin, most numerous mourners, best possible grave location, etc.). Between the display location and the graveyard, the new spirit requires protection from being chased by malevolent spirits. These are deterred by loud music, firecrackers, and loud wailing plus slowed by a route with numerous turns and scattering of prayer papers with numerous holes (these latter two because malevolent spirits can only travel in a straight line and must pass through all openings along this path).
Once at the graveyard, the spirit food from the preliminary ceremonies is laid out in case the new spirit needs to eat again. This food is also presented so that any unhappy ghosts (who were not paid proper respect or fed properly) who may visit will be satisfied and not create problems for the living. Representations of money, clothing, and property are burned for use by the new spirit in the next world. The foot of the casket was typically struck to create an opening to accelerate decomposition of the body before the grave was filled.

After burial, tradition required feeding the spirit again at set intervals for several weeks. The effort required also demonstrated continuing respect and value placed on the spirit. Two annual ceremonies serve to continue feeding and comforting of all spirits thereafter. These are the Pure Brightness Festival (Qingming) in the spring and the Hungry Ghosts Festival (Yulanpen) in late summer.

In China traditional beliefs required exhumation of the bones of males once the flesh had decomposed. The bones were then placed in an urn or other container and assumed their place in the family shrine where proper reverence could be demonstrated and the family would benefit from being in the good graces of all ancestral spirits. Continuing this practice for Chinese who died outside China was a major function of Chinese Benevolent Associations. After a period of several years, accounts vary from two to 10, most Chinese men were disinterred for their bones to be returned to their families in China. The exhumers cleaned any remaining flesh from the bones, transferred identification information to the new container, and shipped the resulting boxes. Any remnants of coffins, clothing, grave offerings, personal possessions, etc., were left in place.

**Los Angeles**

The primary sources of information on Chinese death ritual in nineteenth century and twentieth century Los Angeles are newspaper articles. Many were written when overt racism was common and contain wording that would not be considered appropriate today. Newspaper quotes appearing below are referenced to each deceased person.

The accounts predating 1883 are for interments at the first public cemetery at Fort Moore Hill. Such is known because they predate 1879, or because the streets named are the route to Fort Moore Hill. They are relevant as descriptions of the Chinese community’s death-related rituals. Those that postdate 1885 are for interments at the Los Angeles Cemetery. These accounts detail the use of American undertakers to prepare and bury the deceased Chinese, the display of the corpse and of the food for the spirits, the transport of the corpse to the Los Angeles Cemetery in a traditional funeral procession, the graveside ceremonies, and the disinterment procedures.

Most funerals that made the papers were for funerals of relatively wealthy Chinese. Chinese of more modest means had proportionately less elaborate funerals, although all the elements would have been present. Below are segments of articles describing the funeral of an unknown Chinese man from out-of-town who nevertheless was given a proper Chinese funeral, a note that most Chinese laborers had minimal funerals, and a notice regarding the funeral of a popular local Chinese chef:

**Unidentified Man Who Died on the Train**

… a small Chinese funeral came filing down Main and Commercial streets to the burying ground [Fort Moore Hill cemetery]. A nice hearse carried the corpse. A wagon with three mourners and the clothes and blankets of the dead man followed. On the hearse sat a Chinaman distributing little bits of paper to chase away the Devil [Los Angeles Times (LAT), 10 March 1882].
Foo Chong

Though the Los Angeles Chinatown contains several hundred Celestials, who are as subject to mortality as the rest of us, it is rarely that our citizens have the opportunity of witnessing a “bang-up” Chinese funeral. Most of the decedents are laborers or persons of little moment, and they are committed to the grave with the minimum of demonstration. Last Saturday, however, the pig-tailed fraternity had a funeral ceremony as interesting as it was rare here [LAT, 9 October 1885].

Len San

Typical Chinese rites were conducted in the funeral yesterday of Len San, a well known Los Angeles hotel cook, which was conducted by a delegation of members of the Chinese Masonic order from Los Angeles [LAT, 23 April 1916].

Los Angeles Chinese managed to educate at least a portion of the larger community to the significance of their death rituals:

Low Yow.

The Chinese believe that death is the beginning of a long journey … On the journey the deceased has need of food and raiment and of the temporal blessings which are known to Chinatown. In addition there are spirits, both good and bad, that must be favored or propitiated, for these reasons an unusually large supply of the necessities of life are provided the departed friend [LAT, 17 March 1900].

In Los Angeles a preliminary funeral service was conducted at the home or business of the deceased prior to the procession to the graveyard. The body was displayed next to a table(s) with food and drink for the spirit. White shrouds and white suits are described for the deceased along with white banners on the coffin. Elaborate displays of food and drink are described to honor the deceased and propitiate the spirits. Music, prayers and demonstrations of respect by friends and family were common features:

Ah Yet Kee

The coffin containing the corpse was brought out on the side of the street, the cover removed, and a last look at the remains taken by friends. A table stood in the street, on which was displayed roast pigs, vegetables, three huge pyramids of fancy soaps, and dozens of tiny China cups, filled with tea, but from which no one partook. Near by a priest chanted from a huge book printed in Chinese characters, while the chief mourner, an old women dressed in a dirty blue gown, with a cloth over her head, sat on the ground near the coffin and moaned and groaned in the most approved agony of grief [Los Angeles Daily Star (LADS), 8 August 1877].

Lee Pai

Hearing that a distinguished citizen of a Chinatown was dead and lying in state in that delectable portion of Los Angeles, in company with three friends I went Thursday evening to view the body … we soon came to a little alley dimly lighted by tallow candles that took us into a large room where there were 30 or 50 Chinamen working busily on banners, transparencies and other paraphernalia that they would need in the morrow’s funeral … Mr. Undertaker led
the way into the next room where the great follower of the square and compass lay in a neat coffin covered with a white shroud. By the head of the coffin was a basin of meal. At the foot was a spread of pork chops, chicken, rice, fruits of several kinds and many other edibles [San Francisco Post (SFP), 8 September 1878].

Foo Chong

On the south side of the clean-swept space under the peppertrees, directly in front of the door, two large banners, with rollers at each end, were hung up, apparently to break the force of the wind. They were of white cloth with blue border. Upon the white, in very large Chinese characters, was painted the name of the deceased, with the dates of his birth and death. Later in the day a planed board, three feet long and eight inches wide, the lower end unpainted, and the upper two feet a deep green with red inscriptions, was leaned up against the banners. It was the headboard to be placed over the grave. A smaller board, destined to go at the foot of the grave, accompanied it. Upon one of the lintels of the door was knotted a narrow strip of white cloth. The corpse was lying in the front room south of the entrance, in a rather expensive coffin. The body was dressed in a white suit, with blue trimmings, and was covered with a curious white robe. The head was closely swathed, and had several sheets of Chinese paper over it.

A little after 11 o’clock a number of Celestials brought out three tables, set them under the trees, and began to spread a feast for the dead … Having set out the tables beneath the shade, the workers began to produce the eatables. Two Chinamen came trudging from a bakehouse with a pole from shoulder to shoulder. In a bamboo sling depending from the pole was a wide carving board, and upon it was a whole roast pig. He was placed upon the table farthest from the banners, and a mate was soon put down beside him. Each pig was probably a 75 pounder. They had been split from nose to tail, and sprawled upon their bellies. Their forefeet were curled around and tucked into the flesh each behind his own shoulder. A gash was cut into each side, and into it was twisted a hind trotter. Both pigs were done to a beautiful meerschaum brown. They had the rear table to themselves.

Upon the tables in front, however, there was a novel variety of viands spread. First to be noticed were four plates of biscuits. They—the biscuits, not the plates—seem to have been boiled rather than baked; at least there was not a suspicion of a crust on any of them. Half were of a corpse-like pallor—neither white nor yet exactly grey—and the rest a brilliant cardinal. All were of a size as closely as if run in one mould, and all had “raised” well. Stuck on the sides of the pyramids into which the biscuits were built, were little wheels of the same material, cooked in the same way, whose spokes were alternate corpse-color and cardinal. The next notable entrée was the poultry—a hen and a rooster, stripped of feathers and boiled. Their combs, wattles, etc., were left on, and their heads were held up in a life-like manner. Both had their hind legs folded astern.

Beside the rooster and upon the same plate, was a roll of boiled fat pork; and upon it a setting of hard-boiled eggs with the shells off. Then there were pretty little bowls heaped with snowy rice, larger bowls filled with
curious dainties which looked like strips of orange peel and squash fried in fat; and yet other bowls, whose contents appeared to be dried fruits. There were chop sticks laid in front of the dishes, in hen of [sic—in lieu of] knives and forks. At the table corners were little white tea pots with blue polka-dots; and these drew their inspiration, not from the herb which cheers without inebriating, but from a very American demijohn of brandy.

Last of all the table furnishings were two tin boxes, each fifteen inches long, six wide and four deep. There were well filled with sand and clean brown paper was neatly pasted over the open tops. Their mystery was explained when some of the attendants brought forth several packages done up in splints of bamboo. Unwrapped, these proved to be crimson wax candles from a foot in length and an inch and a half in diameter, down to less than half that size. All were of the same bright color, and all were adorned with the most brilliant hand-painting in purple, silver and gold. Each candle had a rocket-like stem of cane, and the stem, stuck down through the sand, served to hold each upright. The big candles were stuck in the middle of each box, with the little ones tapering (no pun) downward on each side. When these had been thus disposed, a great lumber of sticks with scented punk on the ends were also stuck into the boxes, and all were set burning together.

Among the hacks which dotted the great crowd about the spot, were two of special interest—the bandwagons. Each contained a full band of four pieces—but whether to call the string bands, brass bands, or cornet bands, would puzzle a Philadelphia lawyer, in his soberest moments. Each orchestra had an aesthetic bronze drum—or, rather, gong—suspended upon by a small stick. Each had also a mammoth pair of cymbals, a fife, and a wooden drum. The fife had a tiny ivory mouthpiece, and a blunderbuss of a brass flare at the other end. The drum was like unto a nailkeg in size, but appeared to be carved from one piece, with the core excavated from beneath. The top was round; and the tone, under the taps of two sticks, recalled the familiar xylophone of theatre orchestras … As the bands struck up their doleful ditty, the hired mourners went in to request the deceased’s attendance at the ceremonies. These official mourners, or pall-bearers, were all young men, with long, white night-gowns over their other clothing, and white cook’s caps on their heads. They brought out the coffin with much ado, and set it on trestles with the head to the banners and the foot to the feast. A six-inch strip of crimson cloth ran from end to end of the coffin top; and a similar but shorter strip was tied across the head of the coffin. Two gilt paper affairs with peacock feathers were stuck in the knots. On the back of the rear table was a white curtain, with a green landscape painted upon it. Behind it two rows of heavy straw matting were spread upon the ground. Four of the hired mourners first advanced upon the matting, side by side. They clasped their hands, bowed thrice, and went down upon their knees. Then the other two poured brandy from the teapots into four thimble-sized china cups. Each kneeled, took a cup drained it upon the matting before him, and thrice bowed his body until his face was within a foot of the ground. Then they rose, and the other two mourners, with two dark clothed friends, took their places. This performance was kept up for over an hour, all the friends of the deceased thus paying their respects [LAT, 9 October 1885].
Low Yow

Four posts were planted in the ground near the sidewalks, arranged in the rectangular form, over the tops of the poles, that extended about eight feet into the air, canvas was stretched. Beneath the canvas and about eighteen inches from the ground boards were placed to hold many peculiar emblems that are indispensable to a Chinese funeral. The low bench held a whole roast pig, several roast chickens, rice and an assortment of Chinese beverages. Pans filled with sand were placed around the edges and candles, tapers and punks all lighted, set upright in them. The corpse was brought ... and placed beside the funeral banquet. Some incantations were indulged in and a Chinese band proceeded to beat the tom-toms and the drums in a most heart-rending manner [LAT, 17 March 1900].

Low Yow is identified as female.

Ah Mow

With an American 5-cent piece between his lips to pay his entrance fee to the doorkeeper of the Chinese heaven Ah Mow lay in state under a canvas fly in front of the Hop Sing Tong’s headquarters, 520½ North Los Angeles Street, yesterday afternoon. Prostrated upon a mat before the coffin were Ah Mow’s widow, his little son and his baby daughter, garbed in white—the mourning color of China.

Pressed to the ropes encircling Ah Mow’s coffin and the tables upon which were displayed the viands prepared for the last journey of the dead Chinese was a big crowd of sightseers. Those who stood in front saw the ceremonies of the Chinese Freemasons. Those behind had to content themselves with hearing the wails of the widow and the children, accompanied by an obligato performance by a Chinese musician on a little brass clarinet from which he drew a monotonous tune.

The Chinese Freemasons, who had charge of the service at the Plaza, wore long pearl-gray wraps and around their heads were strips of white and red cloth. They crowded around a table upon which three whole roasted pigs, a dozen baked chickens, cups of rice, dishes full of doughballs and trays heaped with Chinese sweetmeats were placed. Burning punk and spluttering thick red candles diffused sickening odors. The pallbearers, garbed in long white blouses, assisted the Masons in their ceremony.

Libations of sam (som)-chu or Chinese wine were poured in little cups and after short prayers, thrown upon the ground in front of Ah Mow’s photograph, which was placed in such a manner that it dominated all the eatables prepared for his trip to Spiritland. From a sack containing a lot of paper inscribed with Chinese characters the Master Mason drew a bundle. Another applied a match to this and when it had been reduced to ashes Ah Mow’s body was lifted up and carried to the hearse. Part of this bundle represented Ah Mow’s future home in his Chinese heaven and the rest was the money to keep himself in style.

There were flowers and wreaths, contributed by American friends, on the coffin. One floral display was in the form of an anchor sent by the Los Angeles Chinese Reform Association. Scrolls of silk and paper upon which the virtues of Ah Mow and his ancestors were engrossed and which had been stacked near the
bier were lifted aloft so the body was bound to the hearse and the Chinese cemetery [Los Angeles Examiner (LAE), 20 January 1905].

After completion of the preliminary ceremonies, funeral parties proceeded to the cemetery. Measures to deter the malevolent spirits were employed along the way, and once at the graveyard, death-contaminated property was burned (for protection of the living) separately from paper representations of property (for use by the spirit in the next world), and the spirits were fed:

**Ah Yet Kee**

About 2 o’clock the procession was formed and took up its line to march through Los Angeles, Commercial, Main and Temple streets to the cemetery [Fort Moore Hill Cemetery]. A carriage, preceding the hearse contained a Chinese band, with gong, cymbals, flutes, fiddles, etc., the music from which was ear-piercing and unearthly. Immediately in the rear of the hearse were two large express wagons filled to their utmost with every variety of provisions, the first of the wagons also containing the chief mourner, whose heart-rendering shrieks increased in power and volume as the procession advanced. Then followed, apparently, every hack, carriage and livery vehicle in the city, all closely packed, and, bringing up the rear, were innumerable fish and vegetables wagons and Chinamen on foot. The procession was over in ten minutes in passing a given point, and attracted general attention from which thronged the sidewalks [LADS, 8 August 1877].

**Lee Pai**

At two o’clock Fred Dob’s band—not Chinamen—marched through our principal streets leading an immense procession. Immediately following the band was the hearse drawn by four horses. Following the hearse, came first, hired mourners on foot, then the Masonic lodge—mostly Chinese—composed of about one hundred members, all on foot, and then followed a long line of carriages. The hearse had the square and compass in each window [SFP, 8 September 1878].

**Foo Chong**

At last the dead man had feasted enough. The viands were put in F. Baker’s express wagon, in which was already stored all the bedding, clothes and other property of which Chong died seized [sic]. After long delays, during which an artist photographed the curious scene, the procession started, one band ahead of the hearse, and the other at the tail end of the convoy of fifty-six vehicles.

Arriving at Evergreen Cemetery, the hearse stopped while everyone gathered about. Then the coffin was taken out and set on trestles by the grave, and there was more bowing and worshipping. A lot of brown papers of different shapes were burned. Some represented money, some stood for clothing, etc., and thus the deceased went to Ting Hong well heeled. Then the coffin as lowered into the grave, and the victuals and property of the deceased were burned in the furnace which the Chinese keep there for that purpose. This was not, as an intelligent Chinaman informs the reporter, to send the things to the next world for their former owner—who had already been provided for by the symbolic sacrifice papers—but because no Chinamen keeps the dead man’s things … The su-song of Foo Chong was the most elaborate here in eight years. After the ceremonies at the
cemetery, the friends came home and feasted on the roast pigs [LAT, 9 October 1885].

**Low Koon Goo**

There were three Chinese bands in the procession, with marshals on horseback, and over fifty vehicles in line. The hearse was drawn by four horses, two blacks and two grays [LAT, 4 July 1890].

**Low Yow**

A silver coin was placed in the bottom of the coffin and another in the mouth of the deceased. After some further mystic rites the funeral cortège was formed. The provender and candles, and the corpse were loaded into one express wagon, and the clothes of the deceased, together with part of the bedclothes and couch which the woman had used in life, occupied another. Then came the hearse and the carriages containing friends … At the grave the food and native wines were placed about the grave… and pictorial representations of the Chinese devils burned. The clothes and slats of the bed were also incinerated in the belief that by this means the pleasures of the journey would be enhanced. The burial took places at the county cemetery, just beyond the Evergreen Cemetery [LAT, 17 March 1900].

Low Yow is identified as female.

**Ah Mow**

A guard of honor composed of very well-drilled young Chinese dressed in uniform similar to that of American cavalrmen followed the body. There was a long line of carriages filled with members of the Hop Sing Tong of which Ah Mow was president. There was an American band and a Chinese band. The procession closed with express wagons, containing all the elands prepared for Ah Mow’s journey. In former days, these were left at the cemetery. Now they are returned to Chinatown, because tramps got into the habit of congregating at the cemetery after a funeral and eating up the provisions intended for the late lamented [LAE, 20 January 1905].

**Lau Yok Jew**

… afterward Lau Yok Jew took an unconscious part in a unique procession which left to the Chinese burying ground next to Evergreen Cemetery. The procession consisted of one band wagon and one hearse. Lau Yok Jew was not in the band wagon. A great deal of care was taken to throw the devil off the scent [LAT, 14 January 1911].

**Len San**

En route to the cemetery one member of the delegation rode on the funeral car, scattering a trail of torn bits of paper. The Chinese belief is that Satan must pass through small holes in the paper bits, this delaying this Satanic Majesty’s progress until the soul of the dead has safely passed through purgatory. Cook meats and other viands were spread on the grave for the entertainment of the spirit guests who might visit the scene later [LAT, 23 April 1916].

Disinterment of bones and processing for shipment back to the deceased person’s family in China were unfamiliar to non-Chinese, and many who happened to view the procedure were squeamish:
Scraping Dead Men’s Bones for Shipment to China

A Chinaman, in fact, half a dozen Chinamen, sitting scraping bones. Human bones. Bones that have aided in cultivating our orchards, in washing our linens, in cooking our dinner. There they were, in little piles, carefully arranged so as not to become mixed, in the Chinese burying ground, yesterday … John kept on scraping the femur; then the skull was taken up, and his old table knife soon cleaned that after a fashion; then came the ribs and fingers, and legs all prepared. The vertebrae were carefully tied together and then the master of ceremonies deftly arranged the bones into a neat bundle, which looked exactly like a mammoth package of liquorice roots such as druggists have. A few twists of twine around it made it ready for the next operations.

The “remains” were then tossed over to another John, together with a memorandum, which looked like a tea-chest label. This man neatly did the bundle up in wrapping-paper, then put a sheet of rice paper over it and consulted the tea-chest label a few minutes. “Hung Li, bing gaa, mana kee-e-e- fiko,” he chanted in an undertone, while the reporter was frantically trying to write down the words. It was evidently the deceased record he was reading, for with his brush and India ink he soon has a fake simile of the tea label on the neat looking bundle.

It was now transferred to another man, who was busily engaged in packing numerous similar packages in a large packing case, gaily decorated with red labels. The bundles told their own stories to some extent. Some were miniature, others medium sized, and one or two looked as if their contents might have formed the framework of a six-footer. Four of the chests were already packed and this one was about half full. The packer picked up the one the reporters had watched through its career, fitted it neatly into its space, and sang out what evidently meant “Next!!” for soon another remnant of mortality was handed to him and was popped into its place. These chests are shipped to San Francisco, thence to China, where once in their native soil, the souls of the departed are supposed to be free to enter paradise. There are no religious ceremonies held … [LAT, 7 April 1887].

Indecencies in Cemetery

… yesterday at the Chinese graveyard, just to the East of Evergreen Cemetery, and adjoining the public highway on East First Street. At the present time there are five graves lying open there, with the rotten, reeking coffins which lately held the body of some departed Celestial, fully exposed to view, while on the piles of soil alongside the graves are the decayed grave clothes, and scattered around are queues of the recent occupants and broken fragments of coffin …

These graves have been opened to secure the bones of the dead Chinamen, in order that they may be sent back to China for their final rest … In many cases old coffins, half rotted away, have been torn to pieces and the sections are scattered about the graves. Old slippers, pantaloons, overcoats, caps, etc., rest in confusion, not exactly picturesque, just where they have been pitched when pulled out of the graves by bone hunters. In several cases the long black queues, neatly
brazed and perfectly preserved, with bits of scalp attached, lay on the ground at the edges of the open graves.

… Down at the eastern end of Apablaza Street there is a three-room shack enclosed with a high board fence. This building economically combines two enterprises. It is known as the Chinese hospital and “Dead House.” In two … rooms the poor, decrepit old Chinese who are so diseased and unable to work that their end is considered near, are allowed to eke out their miserable existence and await their inevitable end. In the third room of this building is the “Dead House.” When the bones are taken from the graves at the cemetery they are sacked up and carted to the “Dead House.” Here they are poured out on tables and the old men scrape them clean of remnants of adhering flesh. The bones are then placed in tin boxes, labeled, and stored away until enough have accumulated to make a shipment to the Flowery Kingdom … [LAT, 11 December 1902].

Graves Not Desecrated

A sensational yarn about the desecration of Chinese graves at the county cemetery was recently published by a local sheet. That the highly colored account was without foundations is stated by Mr. Hildebrand, foreman of the cemetery. Bodies cannot be removed until after a lapse of ten years and the graves are refilled immediately either by Mr. Hildebrand or the Chinamen themselves who dig up their dead to ship them to the old country. That the Chinese section is untidy, bestrewn with old clothing and like trash is true enough, but queues and putrid flesh are minus quantities [Los Angeles Daily Journal, 12 December 1902].

Chinese Society Seeks Permission to Exhume 300

Permission to exhume approximately 300 bodies of Chinese buried in the County Cemetery so that the traditional custom for providing their final resting place in China may be fulfilled, has been requested by the Ning Young Society, according to a letter filed yesterday with the Board of Supervisors from Rex Thomson, county superintendent of charities. Thomson wrote that the society is not able to pay the usual $5 disinterment fee and he asked the Supervisors to consider an offer that members of the organization furnish all necessary tools and labor [LAT, 16 January 1937].

Archaeological Results

Seventy-three features were classified as Chinese based on the presence of Chinese artifacts and/or the determination of ancestry of the skeletal remains (Rhine 1990). Three interments were not within the construction footprint and were left in place. Recoveries included 42 burials (skeletal remains and artifacts) and 28 assemblages of Chinese artifacts associated with disinterments (see endnote). Numerous artifacts were recovered. The most abundant class was mortuary items such as coffin hardware. The second most abundant class was clothing represented largely by buttons. All other classes were minor by comparison but included personal effects, health and grooming items, and recreation-related objects. Some graves had items constituting religious offerings of respect for the deceased. Prominent were food-related items such as rice bowls.

Overview

Consistent with natural properties, much of the bone and organic materials, such as coffin wood, were
decomposed to varying degrees. Some graves had been disturbed by disinterment and by other activities prior to the archaeological excavations. The number of artifacts and materials present at the time of excavation is not considered to be representative of what was present at the time of burial.

**Burial Containers**

All but five graves had remnants of coffins or caskets. Over 80 percent were coffins (shaped with shoulder area wider than feet), and the remaining 20 percent were caskets (rectangular). Virtually all the burial containers were oriented with the head at the southwest (perpendicular to First Street and facing northeast). All appeared to be constructed of redwood, and some had viewing windows. In addition, some were painted red.

**Markers**

Markers were relatively rare in the excavations. Headstones were thin pieces of marble, averaging about a half to three-quarters of an inch, with characters carved into the surface (Figure 2). Burial bricks were standard red building bricks with identifying information painted or carved on the surface (Figure 3). These bricks were placed on top of the coffin and were meant to be read when the individual was disinterred. They usually featured the name of the individual and the name of the home village in China.

**Mortuary Artifacts**

While some mortuary artifacts reflect consumer choice, many may have been the most economical for the undertaker. Examples of the latter are mismatched handles and mismatched motifs which are also seen on coffins from the indigent portion of the cemetery. The most abundant artifacts were mortuary hardware. Functional hardware included handles (for carrying the coffin) and thumbscrews and escutcheons (for fastening the lid to the coffin). These functional objects all had decorative patterns. Purely decorative items included coffin studs and plaques.

Handles were mostly the swing bail type (movable handle) with less than one-quarter being the short bar type (fixed). A wide variety of patterns were present on both functional and decorative items. The most abundant motifs on swing bail handles were of floral design and tree trunk and ivy design. The most abundant motif on short bars was drapery. Children’s handles were typically a lamb and sunburst motif (Figure 4). One unusual motif on swing bail handles was the abbreviation of the International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF). These appear on Chinese coffins with the abbreviation upside down (Figure 5).

A small percentage of burial containers had one or more pieces of a mortuary hardware set consisting of an octangular lug decorated with oak leaves and acorns attached by a red cord to a blossom-shaped element (Figure 6; see also the cover of this *PCAS Quarterly*). The lug was fixed to the coffin. This set was found only on Chinese coffins but was manufactured in the United States with a date of 1875. Glover (2009:6) hypothesized that it was an ornament representing a lotus blossom manufactured for the Chinese community. However, recently the patent application was located (US164812), and these were revealed to be a mass marketed “Improvement in Coffin-Handles” patented by Martin Crane of Crane, Breed and Company of Cincinnati. Illustrated as part of the patent is the octangular lug with oak leaves and acorns attached to two alternate pendants, a bell shape and the blossom shape.

Thumbscrews and escutcheons permitted removal of lids for viewing the body. These were the next most abundant types of hardware. The most abundant motif for thumbscrews was the acanthus, and the most abundant motif for escutcheons was the fleur-de-lis. The most abundant motifs for coffin studs were floral patterned.
Personal Artifacts

The second most abundant class of artifact was buttons. Traditional Chinese ball buttons were far outnumbered by ceramic four-hole buttons, indicating a mixture of traditional and American clothing of the deceased. All other classes were minor by comparison but included personal effects (shoe and belt leather, for example), health and grooming items (pharmaceuticals and combs, for example), and recreation-related items (opium). Shell casings were found associated with some skeletal remains. In one case unfired bullets were present. All these were inside coffins in locations such as between the feet. Coins recovered included Chinese wen, Vietnamese dong, and American coins.
Figure 5. IOOF short bar handle.

Figure 6. Lug and blossom handle.

**Spirit Offerings**

Three-quarters of the identifiable spirit offerings recovered were rice bowls. The remainder, in descending order, were other types of dishes, teapots, wine bowls, bottle glass, spoons, a mutton bone, a beef round steak bone, and a pot. Over 80 percent of the offerings were rice bowls with bamboo pattern, one had a double happiness pattern (Figure 7), one showed a four seasons pattern, and the remainder could not be determined. Five teapots were of the flower and vine pattern, one was of the four seasons pattern, and one had a previously unrecorded pattern featuring horses (Figure 8). Other dishes were cobalt flow blue, cobalt floral transferware, and Japanese green with floral elements.

**Graves**

**Children**

Two features were infant burials, two were children (4–8 year old category), and one was an adolescent.
One infant (F. 74) had no personal articles, and the other (F. 73) had only ceramic four-hole buttons. One child (F. 75) had both ceramic four-hole buttons and a shank button. The other child (F. 94) had brass shank buttons with an anchor motif, a fabric-covered metal button, and 16 ceramic four-hole buttons. The adolescent (F. 79) had eight Chinese ball buttons. No food-related objects for spirit offerings were recovered.

**Women**

Fourteen graves were identified as those of adult women based on skeletal remains (13) or a name on a burial brick (1). One grave (F. 170) had no mortuary, personal, or offering items. Another grave (F. 117) had mortuary and personal items but no offerings. There were three swing bail handles, three thumbscrews, and one coffin stud. Personal items were a jade pendant, jade earrings, and a Liberty seated dime (date illegible). (Liberty seated dimes were minted from 1837 to 1891)

Five graves had no mortuary artifacts but did contain personal items. Two (F. 11, 27) consisted only of ceramic four-hole buttons and shank buttons. Another (F. 173) had a Chinese ball button, a leather wallet, woven fabric fragments, and three Liberty seated dimes (1875, 1876, 1883). Another (F. 24) had a buckle, ceramic buttons painted light blue, shank buttons, and leather shoe fragments. One burial (F. 19) had personal items including a buckle, fabric-covered metal buttons, ceramic buttons, including some with blue paint, and an offering of a round steak bone.

Two graves had no mortuary artifacts but had both personal and offering items. The first grave (F. 172) had personal items consisting of seven safety pins and a wen coin from the Kang Xi reign, 1662–1722. The offering item was a celadon dish fragment. The second grave (F. 135) had three fabric-covered buttons.
and a wen from the Shun Zhi reign, 1644–1661. The offering item was green bottle glass.

One woman’s (F. 152) coffin had an oak leaves and acorns lug, three sets of thumbscrews and escutcheons, and one decorative stud. Personal items were an opium pipe stem connector, ceramic buttons, and a metal button. A single Chinese wen coin was from the Jia Quing reign, 1796–1820. Offering items were a Euroamerican dish and olive-green wine bottle glass.

Two other women’s coffins had mismatched or mis-manufactured hardware. The first coffin (F. 83) had five swing bail handles in two different motifs and one short bar handle. There were also four sets of thumbscrews and escutcheons and two studs. Personal items were two Chinese ball buttons, a ceramic button, four wen, and a Liberty seated dime (1883). The wen were all from the Qian Long reign, 1736–1795. Associated offerings included a condiment dish in the Four Seasons pattern and a hole-in-cap tin can lid. The second coffin (F. 173) had three swing bail handles with the IOOF motif. In addition, this coffin had two thumbscrews and escutcheons, studs, and red paint on the wood.

A disinterment (F. 137), probably representing more than one individual, included a burial brick with a woman’s name, Chow Nui Kam of Lee village. Mortuary hardware included 10 swing bail handles in four motifs and one thumbscREW and escutcheon set. No personal items or offerings were recovered.

One woman (F. 149) had simple mortuary hardware consisting of one swing bail handle, three sets of thumbscrews and escutcheons, and one stud. This grave was the most artifact-rich of all those recovered and contained 154 buttons. The buttons included 14 Chinese ball buttons, 117 ceramic four-hole buttons, four metal buttons, and 19 fabric-covered metal buttons. Two of the buttons were still stitched to a woven cotton fabric fragment. Other personal artifacts included an 1884 Liberty seated dime, nine gaming pieces, an opium pipe stem connector wrapped in leather, an earthenware opium pipe bowl, a vulcanized rubber pipe stem with remnants of a burl wood bowl attached, a lunate Chinese comb, a metal and bone pocket knife, a decorative milk glass jar, and a photograph between two glass sheets of a young Chinese couple in traditional attire. Offerings included a whole celadon wine bowl, rice bowls with bamboo and four seasons patterns, a Euroamerican porcelain dish, bottle glass from wine and other beverages, a ferrous metal teapot, a ferrous metal cooking pot, and unidentified metal fragments.

One disinterment (Feature 159) had a small casket placed inside an adult-sized coffin. This may represent a woman and her infant. The small casket had no hardware. The coffin had swing bail handles with Freemason symbols, two sets of thumbscrews and escutcheons, and four studs. A burial brick with the name Wong Sei (the next character illegible) was recovered. Personal items from the coffin included an 1883 Liberty seated dime, three Chinese ball buttons, a ceramic button, a shank button with a Chinese character, a buckle, and a coin purse frame. The only item inside the small casket was a woven fabric blanket. Offerings included a Chinese stoneware jar lid and two hardware items.

Men

Eighteen graves were identified as adult men based on skeletal remains (11) or names on burial bricks/headstones (7). Six graves had only personal items. These were mostly clothing related such as a ceramic four-hole buttons, ferrous four-hole buttons, fabric-covered buttons, a buckle, a suspender clasp, and woven fabric. One had an 1876 Liberty seated dime. An additional burial (F. 164) had two ceramic four-hole buttons and a Chinese padlock as personal items as well as a Euroamerican stoneware jar as an offering item.

Minimal hardware was recovered from two graves. One (F. 130) had a single thumbscrew and red paint.

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on its the coffin wood. It contained no personal items but did have a Chinese teapot with a horses pattern, a Euroamerican earthenware dish, and a Hutchinson soda bottle with spring stopper in place. The second (F. 124) had only three thumbscrews. Personal items were Chinese ball buttons, ceramic four-hole buttons, woven fabric fragments, and leather. The only offering item was a picnic flask.

Two men’s graves had more mortuary hardware than the others. The first (F. 139) had three swing bail handles, four thumbscrews, two escutcheons, and studs. Personal items were Chinese ball buttons, a ferrous four-hole button, and a Chinese hair pin. The second (F. 165) had three swing bail handles, two thumbscrew and escutcheon sets, and viewing pane glass. Personal items were Chinese ball buttons, ceramic four-hole buttons, a safety pin, a coin purse frame, a celluloid pipe bit, a woven blanket fragment, and a .30 caliber cartridge case.

Two disinterments included recovery of marble headstones. The first (F. 111) was for Jew Fuk Cheong of Ning Yap district. Mortuary items were a thumbscrew and four studs. Personal items included Chinese ball buttons, ceramic four-hole buttons, a braided Chinese toggle, two buckles, fragments of woven cloth, a coin purse frame, 10 beads, and a bracelet with a charm (“precious long life” inscribed in Chinese). Offerings included a colorless glass pharmaceutical bottle, olive-green wine bottle glass, colorless liquor bottle glass, a spoon, and a dish fragment.

The second disinterment (F. 126) contained a brick with the name Yee Wong of Wing Shing village, Tung Hou district, and was dated December 11, 1885. Other mortuary artifacts were six swing bail handles, two thumbscrews, and two coffin brackets. Personal items included woven cloth, three Liberty seated dimes (1851, 1873, and 1876), and a shield nickel (date illegible). (Shield nickels were minted from 1866 to 1883.) Offerings included olive-green wine bottle glass, aqua bottle glass, and a sheep bone.

A third disinterred grave (F.116) with a burial brick had the name Chew Kei Uet and stated that he was a multiple generation resident of Hoi An village, Ning Yap district. Mortuary items included three swing bail handles and three thumbscrews. The only personal item was a Chinese wen coin from the Shun Zhi Reign, 1644–1661.

The fourth disinterred grave (F. 98) with a burial brick had the name Wong Sei Tun. Other mortuary artifacts were two swing bail handles and two coffin studs. No personal or offering items were recovered.

The fifth disinterred grave (F. 123) with a burial brick had the name Wong Yee of Tung Hou village, Ning Yap district. The only other mortuary items were two swing bail handles. Personal items included Chinese ball buttons, ceramic four-hole buttons, a ferrous
four-hole button, shoe eyelets, shoe leather, a leather hat, woven fabric fragments, and 20 wen strung on red string. The wen were from multiple reigns: Jia Qing, 1662–1722; Qian Long, 1736–1795; Jia Qing, 1796–1820; and Dao Guang, 1820–1851. The only offering item was olive-green wine bottle glass.

**Presumed Males**

The remaining 33 graves could not be attributed to either gender based on osteology or artifacts but are presumed male given that few women were present in the early Los Angeles Chinese population.

Six graves contained lug and blossom handles. Four graves had other mortuary items including swing bail handles, short bar handles, thumbscrews, and red paint on wood. Two graves had no personal items, and they were minimal for the others: a single ceramic four-hole button, a fragment of woven fabric, and opium lamp oil reservoir covers. Three graves had offerings: a single Chinese flower and vine pattern dish, a Chinese teapot lug, a porcelain dish fragment, olive-green wine bottle glass, a ferrous handle, and olive-green bottle glass.

Four graves contained Asian coins. The first grave (F. 85) had four swing bail handles, four thumbscrews, three coffin studs, and red paint on the wood. Personal items included three Chinese ball buttons and 11 Chinese wen from the reign of Kang Xi, 1662–1722. Offerings included a bamboo pattern rice bowl and aqua bottle glass. The second grave with coins (F. 99) had two swing bail handles and two coffin studs. Personal items were a suspender clasp and two Chinese wen from the reign of Kang Xi, 1662–1722. Offerings included only green bottle glass.

The third grave with coins (F. 120) had one thumb-screw and escutcheon set, a ceramic four-hole button, and three Chinese wen from the reign of Qian Long, 1736–1795. The fourth grave with coins (F. 132) had a swing bail handle, two thumbscrew and escutcheon sets, and red paint on the wood. Personal items were a ceramic four-hole button, a Liberty seated dime (date illegible), and 22 Vietnamese dong coins (Figure 9). The dong coins were from the reigns of Gia Long (1802–1820), Minh Mang (1820–1841), and Tuc Duc (1848–1883). Offerings included seven Chinese rice bowls with bamboo pattern and a white earthenware dish.
Five graves had small amounts of artifacts from each category. Mortuary items included swing bail handles, thumbscrew and escutcheon sets, coffin studs, and red paint on wood. Personal items were Chinese ball buttons, ceramic four-hole buttons, shank buttons, an opium bowl, an opium pipe stem connector, a coin purse, and an illegible coin with a reeded edge and a hole near one edge. Offerings included Chinese bamboo pattern rice bowls; olive-green, amethyst, amber, and colorless bottle glass; and a mutton bone. An example of this type of grave is F. 150 (Figure 10).

Two graves had mortuary and offering items but no personal artifacts. The first had viewing pane glass and a bamboo pattern rice bowl, and the other three had swing bail handles along with a celadon rice bowl, light-green bottle glass, and a metal hardware object.

Six graves had no offerings. Of these, three had mortuary and personal items, and three had only personal items. The mortuary artifacts were swing bail handles, thumbscrew and escutcheon sets, coffin studs, and red paint on the wood. Personal items were Chinese ball buttons, ceramic four-hole buttons, shoe leather, boot eyelets with leather shoelaces, a rubber comb, a metal ring, .38 caliber casings, and unfired .44 caliber bullets.

Four graves had only offering artifacts: the only Double Happiness pattern rice bowl recovered; a Chinese stoneware utility jar; a Chinese stoneware utility jar and Chinese porcelain ware; and a Chinese porcelain fragment and cobalt flow blue dish. One grave contained only skeletal remains (F. 138).

Discussion

Correlations to Historical Accounts

Newspaper accounts record the placement of food and wine on graves until about the turn of the century, when food was removed after the burial due to theft by indigents. The 70 Chinese graves excavated had 139 identifiable spirit offerings.

In addition, newspaper accounts of disinterments state that only the skeletal elements were removed. This is confirmed by the coffin remnants and artifacts left behind for the 28 disinterred graves. Forty percent of the Chinese graves excavated had been disinterred.
**Chronology**

The time period of burials represented by this assemblage appears to be mid-to-late 1880s. This is based on two markers with dates of 1885 and 1887–1888 and on seven additional graves having American coins that date no later than 1888. Asian coins found in graves were mostly decades to centuries older, but one grave had a dong coin that dated to 1883. This time period is not represented in the written burial registers, and thus the archaeological evidence of Chinese burials, especially of women and children, is the only physical evidence.

**Gender and Age**

Five children under 16 years of age, 14 adult women, and 51 adult males are represented in the excavated sample. City of Los Angeles census data indicate males dominated the Chinese population (Chen 1952:540). Women were a small percentage of the population until after the turn of the century. The number of children increased much more slowly, but 70 Chinese children were recorded by the census by 1890 (Kwok 1979:7). The cemetery populations of men and women closely reflect the overall population percentages, but children are over represented (Table 1).

**Disinterments**

The excavated sample includes 28 disinterments. One of these is a known female based on the burial brick name, and another is presumed female based on a partial burial brick and inclusion of an infant-sized casket inside the coffin. Seven are known males based on burial bricks or headstones, and 19 are presumed male. Based on this small sample, seven percent of the disinterred were female and the remainder males.

**Grave Goods**

To evaluate non-mortuary grave goods, a score of one was assigned to each offering item present, and a score of one was assigned to each type of personal item (clothing, opium, coin, gaming piece, comb, etc.). This means that someone with one button has the same score as someone with four buttons, shoe leather, etc., because those are all parts of clothing. Using this system, total scores ranged from zero to 11.

The known Chinese woman disinterred had a score of one, and the presumed female had a score of two. The woman with the most burial goods was not disinterred. Scores for those females not disinterred ranged from zero to 5. The seven known males disinterred had scores from zero to 9 and presumed males had score from zero to 11. Males and presumed males that were not disinterred had scores that ranged from zero to 8. Thus, there appears not to have been a socioeconomic component to disinterment.

To sum up, Asian coins did not have monetary function in California, but were used in making many types of talismans, such as coin swords, gaming pieces for games such as fan-tan, decorations on clothing and baskets, and medicinal objects in the practice of coin rubbing (Akin 1992:59–62). In two cases, Asian coins still had remnants of the red cord used to string them together in a protective charm.
There are no apparent relationships of coins to other types of artifacts. American coins were found in eight graves, wen in seven graves, and dong coins in one grave. Coin purse frames were found in a grave with an American coin and in a grave with a wen. Two coin purse frames were in graves lacking coins.

Memorials and Reburial

All skeletal remains and their associated artifacts were reburied with appropriate ceremony, including community participation, in Evergreen Cemetery. The specific location was requested by the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California.

On March 8, 2010, a memorial ceremony was held at the reburial site. Chinese American representatives included members of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, The Chinese Benevolent Association, and other Chinese-American groups. The ceremony was open to the public and was very well attended. Numerous government representatives addressed the group and acknowledged the misfortune of the forgotten history and the several years of community meetings on issues of treatment of remains and reburial. A memorial wall was unveiled which included art and brass plaques in Chinese and English commemorating the Chinese pioneers whose graves had been forgotten and then rediscovered. An interfaith service was conducted to bless the reburial site. In addition to the wall, an obelisk at the corner of First and Lorena Streets memorializes the people buried in the cemetery and directs people to the memorial wall/reburial area.

In the summer of 2010, all remains and artifacts were reburied. Each grave bears a brass plaque. The Chinese section of the reburial area was designed in cooperation with the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California and features Chinese poems and other memorial wording. Interfaith services were conducted at the conclusion of the reburying. The Chinese Historical Society of Southern California sponsors remembrances at this location for the Ching Ming and Hungry Ghost Festivals each year.

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Endnote

A table of the data for each feature discussed here is posted at www.pcas.org/V52N2.htm.

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