In *Chinese American Death Rituals*, Sue Chung and Priscilla Wegars connect eight essays about late-19th- through early-21st-century Chinese American death rituals in the Western United States. The essays examine the caretaking of graves, funerals, and holidays. These death rituals are very much for the living. Chinese Americans in many states share common customs surrounding death. These include “feeding” the dead by leaving specific types of food and drink and leading elaborate processions to alert the community that someone has died. Such rituals are conducted in groups and allowed individuals to bond with their community. Chung and Wegars introduce the collection with a bibliography of works on the origins of Chinese death rituals. Then they shift to a brief history of feng shui, or geomancy, an ancient practice with Confucian and Daoist roots.

The first essay is Wendy L. Rouse’s “What We Didn’t Understand: A History of Chinese Death Ritual in China and California.” Rouse writes that groups in 19th-century China such as large families or closely knit villages developed unique rites with prayers that combined Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist beliefs. Individuals typically immigrated to the United States alone and then formed community associations to bury and care for their dead. These community associations used similar rites for all persons of Chinese descent.

In “On Dying American: Cantonese Rites for Death and Ghost-Spirits in an American City,” Paul G. Chace explores the role of community associations. Chace focuses on the associations of Marysville, a northern California gold rush town, which became a regional Chinese center. In Marysville, district associations and tongs, or triad lodge brotherhoods, sponsored death rites. These organizations shared the common goal of trying to gain influence over Marysville’s growing Chinese population. One of the most visible death rites was Bomb Day. This holiday, still celebrated by the Chinese American community of Marysville, involves feasting, sword work, and exploding numerous firecrackers around the Daoist temple. Chace says holidays such as Bomb Day solidified Marysville’s Chinese community.

The next essay, by Wendy Rouse, is “Archaeological Excavation at Virginiatown’s Chinese Cemeteries.” Rouse describes the contents of two Chinese cemeteries outside Virginiatown, a late-19th-century mining camp in northern California. The city’s white residents were so resentful of Chinese immigrants that they expelled Chinese bodies, dead and alive, from the town. Virginiatown’s Chinese designed their separate, isolated cemeteries in accordance with the principles of feng shui. They usually buried people in omega-shaped graves (Ω) with their heads facing small hills. Yet, the Chinese sometimes veered away from traditional burial practice. They buried some people in Western clothing such as jeans. This is indicated by the presence of metal rivets in coffins. Virginiatown Chinese also placed Western grave goods such as U.S. coins and European American-style tobacco pipe stems with the dead. This indicates that the Chinese here chose to imitate whites even when whites were openly hostile to them.

Sue Fawn Chung, Fred P. Frampton, and Timothy W. Murphy’s “Venerate These Bones: Chinese American Funerary and Burial Practices as Seen in Carlin, Elko County, Nevada,” complements “Archaeological Excavation” by examining a similar Chinese cemetery in Carlin, a late-19th-century railroad hub in northeast Nevada. Like Virginiatown, Carlin had a separate Chinese cemetery, which was located in town only two blocks east of the public cemetery. All of the bodies in the Carlin Chinese cemetery are male. Many were buried in high-quality redwood coffins. The Carlin men were also sometimes buried in Western clothing and with Western grave goods.
Terry Abraham and Priscilla Wegars’s “Respecting the Dead: Chinese Cemeteries and Burial Practices in the Interior Pacific Northwest” looks at the history of Chinese American cemeteries in Idaho, Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. Abraham and Wegars note a common feature in these cemeteries: the “burner,” a brick or masonry structure in which people burned spiritual tributes. The authors are upset because many of the cemeteries are not well preserved.

Chung and Reiko Neizman’s essay, “Remembering Ancestors in Hawai’i,” looks at Chinese American cemeteries on Oahu and Maui. Many of the Chinese Americans buried here worked on pineapple or sugar plantations. Each grave has a unique marker associated with the individual’s death. The earliest markers are written in Chinese; the middle markers are written in a mixture of Chinese and English; the most recent markers are written only in English. Today, Chinese American associations maintain the cemeteries. Many of the cemeteries are located in the middle of plantation fields.

Linda Sun Crowder’s chapter, “The Chinese Mortuary Tradition in San Francisco Chinatown,” is about the colorful, exuberant funeral processions in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Crowder explains that San Francisco Chinese Americans employ flamboyant practices such as the use of a Chinatown Western-style marching band. In the late-19th century and early-20th century, families hired the Chinese Boys Band and the Cathay Club Band. The sole surviving band today is the Green Street Brass Band. This band plays mostly Western military and hymnal music and none of its members are of Chinese descent.

Roberta Greenwood’s “Old Rituals in New Lands: Bringing the Ancestors to America,” investigates Chinese Americans’ history of transferring human remains. Greenwood says that in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, Chinese Americans sent their ancestors’ remains back to China. They buried them in family cemeteries. Now Chinese Americans are increasingly exhuming their dead in China and bringing them to America. They want the chance to visit their ancestors more often.

Death Rituals is a very useful book for archaeologists and historians. This collection teaches researchers how to collaborate on similar topics. Death Rituals will perhaps inspire its readers to create new resources such as a manual on how to excavate Chinese American cemeteries.

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