The Role of Clan and District Associations

The Chinese Exclusion Laws, first enacted in 1882, prevented Chinese from immigrating to the United States and prohibited them from becoming American citizens. The formation of families was severely curtailed and civic participation was restricted. The role of the clan and district associations became important. Throughout their lives in the United States, Chinese received comfort and material support from these associations and promised to care for them in the afterlife - sending their bones home for their final burial or to perform rites if they remained in the United States.

In Washington, DC, the Lee and Moy Clan Associations were prominent, as were the On Leong and Hip Sing Associations. Particularly prominent was an umbrella organization called the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA). Today, it is an association of almost 30 Chinese American organizations. The CCBA continues to honor its promise to individuals to care for their graves and perform the essential rites.

Each year, during Qing Ming (the Sweeping Tombs Festival near Easter), the CCBA attends to rites at three cemeteries surrounding Washington, DC where Chinese remain buried, keeping promises made in America in many cases over a 100 years ago.

A WORD OF CAUTION: The centuries have made many grave markers and sites unstable. Please be careful near grave markers and watch where you step: depressions and sink holes lie hidden in grass, and footstones and corner markers can trip the unwary.

Revised 04.29.2020

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The Evening Star

2. MOY, JOE (d. 14 January 1910, age 31),
The Evening Star

1. WING LEE FUN (d. 3 June 1898, age 35),

Refer to the Range (R) and Site (S) grid numbers and the map on the back to help locate each grave site. Individual names can be located at www.congressionalcemetery.org

Chinese Interments

1. WING LEE FUN (d. 3 June 1898, age 35),

2. MOY, JOE (d. 14 January 1910, age 31),

The Funeral of Moy, Joe to Be Held Tomorrow With Oriental Rites

With Appropriate Honors

R132/S257

All that was mortal of Lee Fun Wing was put in a grave in Congressional Cemetery yesterday, there to remain until the body can be reburied and taken to China. Wing was only about 35 years old, and his death was due to consumption. He had recently lived at 330 Pennsylvania Avenue, where he died. At the grave, the Chinese burial services were participated in by relatives of the deceased and there was the usual fire made of the dead man’s effects, and Chinese pine, white wine and eatables were placed on the grave to tempt the evil spirits. Lee Fun Wing was popular in the Chinese colony and he had a much larger funeral than most Chinamen have had in this city. While Undertaker J. Wm. Lee was the one who furnished the casket and arranged for the carriages, the celestials made all their own arrangements and notified the undertaker of the time of the funeral only a short time before they were ready to start.

2. MOY, JOE (d. 14 January 1910, age 31),

“The Evening Star, January 16, 1910

“With Oriental Rites

Funeral of Moy, Joe to Be Held Tomorrow Chinese Symbols to Decorate the Coffin and Feast Will Be Ready on the Grave”

R99/S11

With every touch of the Orient which can possibly be added to a Washington funeral train, the body of Moy Joe will be taken to Congressional Cemetery tomorrow afternoon. All the relatives and friends of Moy—and there are a great number of them—will follow the hearse. Moy Joe’s body will rest in a coffin decorated with Chinese symbols wrought of paper flowers and odd-looking inscriptions on odd paper of far eastern make. One of Moy Joe’s countrymen will ride upon the hearse and will make a startling figure as he scatters imitation money to the four winds of heaven. He will be “buying off” the evil spirits, who might otherwise interfere with the passage of Moy Joe’s spirit to its rightful resting place.

At the grave, a grand feast will be found waiting for the spirit before it takes its journey across the mystic chasm. There will be roast duck, roast chicken, sweetmeats, rice and tea, and there will also be a fire built somewhere near the grave. The last is one of the Chinese customs used at all funerals. Moy Joe was at one time a laundymen, but he made enough money to sell out and retire to the Chinese quarter. He developed tuberculosis and, learning of other Chinese was on hand. They watched everything that was done, and no stranger was allowed to come near. Several tried to do so—persons who were at the cemetery for one reason or another and, from idle curiosity, sought to find out what was going on within the shed but they would be met by one of the gravediggers, who told them they could not approach.

Any arrangements have been made by the Chinese to have the bones of their friends taken home on a ship which sails from New York Thursday. The disinterment was put off until the last possible day and was kept quiet. But for the necessity of obtaining permits for the disinterment of the bodies it would probably have been accomplished without anything being known about it.

Of the bodies that were disinterred yesterday none was buried later than 1903. Several were buried in 1896. Usually the remains are allowed to remain in the earth for five years, but sometimes the relations of the dead are unable, for one reason or another, to attend to their removal when the five-year limit is up, and so let them lie until the proper arrangements can be made. The twenty-two sets of bones will probably be sent Tuesday from Washington to New York, whence they will start on the long sea journey home.

Chinese Remembrance Festivals for the Dead

Chinese Remembrance Festivals for the Dead were also held at Congressional Cemetery where families gather to clear away weeds, clean gravestones, make food offerings and burn paper offerings.

The Evening Star, August 22, 1906, p. 15

“Food For The Dead Ceremony by Chinamen at Congressional Cemetery”

A large portion of the population of Chinatown, on Pennsylvania Avenue, proceeded to Congressional Cemetery last Monday afternoon to celebrate the feast of feeding the dead. The ceremony is considered a very important one by the Celestials. The ceremony at the cemetery began at 2 p.m., the start having been made about an hour earlier. Many of the Chinamen prepared tempting delicacies intended to appease the hunger of their deceased comrades journeying to the far-away land.

When the start was made it looked as though the party was off for a picnic rather than to engage in a solemn ceremony. The members were dressed in their best costumes, and in a carriage were baskets, boxes and bottles, the supplies including chicken, rice in large quantities, oranges, bananas, a peculiar brand of Chinese wine and other things. On their arrival at the cemetery, the food was carefully placed on the various graves of Chinamen. Small cups were filled with wine, and plates well laden with chicken and rice and fruit set on each grave. The food was lighted over each grave and burned. Moy Gim conducted formal rites over each grave. A bonfire of paper of peculiar texture was lighted.

This memorial marker erected at a Chinese cemetery in Oregon, echoes sentiments in DC.

We Honor You As Though You Were Present