

**"WHAT WE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND . . ."
CHINESE-AMERICAN DEATH RITUAL IN 19TH-CENTURY CALIFORNIA**

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ABSTRACT

Recent archaeological test excavations at the site of Virginiatown in western Placer County have revealed new information about Chinese culture in 19th century California. In recent years, archaeologists and historians have succeeded in "rediscovering" the history of the California Chinese. Such studies have revealed a wealth of information about the lifeways of these sojourners. Still, there remains more to be learned from the unique mortuary customs of these individuals. California State University, Sacramento's (CSUS) excavations at the Virginiatown Chinese cemeteries have revealed unique information about Chinese-American culture through a study of funeral, burial, and exhumation ritual as practiced in 19th-century California.

"We attended a big celebration at Chinatown last Sunday . . . What we didn't understand about the ceremonies would make a very large book" (Towle 1993). This quote discovered in the 1877 Dutch Flat Forum sums up the attitude of many Euroamericans in 19th century California. The elaborate rituals of the Chinese both fascinated and confused curious onlookers. Mortuary rituals proved no exception. Period newspapers contain abundant accounts of Chinese funeral, burial, and exhumation ceremonies. Unfortunately, these accounts are also riddled with the often hostile prejudice of the observers.

Recent archaeological investigations at the site of Virginiatown in western Placer County have helped to confirm and discount the historical record regarding Chinese death ritual as practiced in California. Virginiatown, a boom town of the gold rush, had a rather large Chinese community from the 1850s to the 1890s. The town included houses, shops, restaurants, a theater, a Taoist temple and three Chinese cemeteries. The archaeological field crew of California State University Sacramento, under the direction of Melissa Farncomb and Dr. Jerald J. Johnson, spent several years investigating various features

of the Chinatown. Two of the three cemeteries remained relatively undisturbed upon our arrival. Unfortunately, one of the cemeteries had been obliterated by the landscaping activities of the landowner. The two remaining cemeteries will hereafter be referred to as the Matsuda and Engellener cemeteries, borrowing the names of the present landowners. The two cemeteries consisted of a number of shallow depressions, mounds of dirt, and an occasional scattering of ceramic, metal, and glass over the surface. The presence of the empty grave pits indicated that the bodies had been previously exhumed and shipped to China.

Prior to the start of excavation, the following broad questions were composed to guide our research:

1. Is there evidence for a deliberate orientation of the cemetery or individual graves according to the principles of *Feng-Shui*?
2. Why were there three Chinese cemeteries at Virginiatown? Does this segregation represent various socio-

economic levels, temporal distinctions, or association with different family organizations?

3. Who were the individuals buried at the cemeteries? What part of China did they come from?

4. Is there material evidence of distinct beliefs in an afterlife?

5. How "Chinese" were the funerals? Were the Chinese in California adhering strictly to Chinese tradition regarding burial customs? How much influence did Euroamerican burial practices have on the Chinese at Virginiatown?

6. Can examples of regional variation as demonstrated in China be seen in the assemblage at Virginiatown?

7. What was the process involved in the exhumation of the bodies? How "neat and meticulous" were the exhumers? Who were they? When did the exhumations occur?

8. How much of the site has been disturbed by contemporary observers, subsequent landowners, construction activities and earlier archaeological investigations?

With these questions in mind an intensive survey, mapping and excavation project was undertaken. The two cemeteries were mapped and a sample of depressions were selected for excavation. We excavated a total of 18 exhumation pits in the Engellener cemetery and 19 exhumation pits in the Matsuda cemetery.

The CSUS excavations revealed substantial information about Chinese funeral, burial, and exhumation rituals as practiced in California. The full results of these excavations are expected to be published this year. For our purposes here today, however, I wish to focus my discussion on how Chinese death ritual helped to maintain a connection to the practices and beliefs of their homeland. This connection may be best

observed in the types of burial goods recovered from the individual graves and the spatial organization of the cemeteries themselves.

Primary source accounts describing burials are not as common as descriptions of funeral ceremonies. This is due in part to the higher visibility of the funeral processions compared to the more private burial process. Euroamericans rarely observed the preparation of the body for burial nor were they often present at the cemetery during the interment. However, several first hand accounts of burials in 19th-century China have provided us with a comparative set of data. This information compared with the archaeological evidence allows us to observe how closely the overseas Chinese adhered to traditional death customs in the New World.

Of the 37 grave pits excavated in the two cemeteries, 19 contained fragments of some type of food vessel. Whole vessels included two double happiness rice bowls, two porcelain wine cups, one stoneware shoulder jar, a champagne bottle and one Euroamerican earthenware plate. Several iron food cans were also recovered from the burial pits. The presence of these artifacts seem to support contemporary accounts in China describing the placement of various food offerings within the coffins (Ahern 1973:167; Dobie 1936:66). These offerings provided the deceased with necessary sustenance in the afterlife and were also used to quell any lingering spirits. Cooked food was also left at the grave to be consumed by the spirits.

Clothing remains also indicate an adherence to certain traditional customs. The discovery of a variety of both Chinese and Euroamerican buttons seems to indicate that the Chinese were burying their dead in both traditional and non-traditional clothing. At least seven graves exhibited use of traditional clothing through the presence of Chinese brass buttons. Jean rivets and ceramic, metal, and bone buttons indicate a more Euroamerican style of dress. The presence of buttons may also indicate adherence to certain burial rituals. Pit #20 contained several Euroamerican and Chinese buttons tied together on a leather string. Anthropologist Linda Crowder has noted a similar custom among modern

Chinese-Americans in San Francisco. Metal buttons are believed to bind the soul to earth. The removal of these buttons frees the soul to enter the other world (Crowder 1998). The Chinese at Virginiatown may have adopted a similar custom.

Coins were recovered from six exhumation pits. In some instances these coins were found *in situ* in various locations in the coffin. Pit #36 in the Matsuda cemetery contained four Chinese coins, each carefully positioned in the four corners of the grave. One source (Comber 1957:31) suggests that these tokens served to repel evil spirits. Similarly, coins tied together as a pendent were often worn or carried in China as a symbol of prosperity or to repel evil (Williams 1960). Pit #17 contained 6 Chinese coins tied with a leather string and may demonstrate an adherence to this belief. Historical research also revealed that coins were placed in the mouth, ears, hands, or eyes of the deceased as a symbol of fertility or wealth for future generations. Nails and grains may also serve a similar function (Thompson 1988:105; Ahern 1979,1973; Clark 1973:1484; Lawton 1987).

Although it is possible that the coins, buttons, and ceramics served talismanic or symbolic functions, their actual significance to the individual Chinese who occupied Virginiatown may remain forever buried.

The second aspect of the CSUS investigations at Virginiatown is related to the spatial organization of the two cemeteries. Upon first glance, there seems to be very little organization to the layout of the two cemeteries. At the Matsuda cemetery, the burials gradually wrapped around the southern and western edge of a small knoll. The actual orientations of individual graves varied greatly and could not be found to have any relationship to cardinal directions. The Engellener cemetery exhibited a similar pattern with the burials extending around the southern and eastern edge of a small knoll. However, historical research into traditional Chinese burial ritual revealed that the practice of *Feng-Shui* may account for the unique organization of the cemeteries.

Feng-Shui literally translated as "wind" and

"water," refers to the positioning of graves and residences in a harmonious relationship with the elements of nature. The ultimate goal of *Feng-Shui* or geomancy as it is called in the west, is to please the deceased ancestor by providing him with a comfortable resting place where there is a balance of *ch'i*, or energy. In China, families often hired professional geomancers to determine the appropriate burial location. Geomancers carefully examined the position of certain geographical features, especially mountains and watercourses, before determining the proper place of burial. Another school of *Feng-Shui* consults a specially designed compass to determine the most auspicious site (Mueller 1987:4).

Generally, hills and mountains were believed to provide a barrier to dangerous winds that may carry evil spirits while allowing beneficial winds to pass (Comber 1957:24; DeGroot 1989:21-22). Water balanced the *yang* influence of the mountains and carried along *yin* energy with it. However, even these two elements, if improperly oriented, could cause bad luck for the family. People generally believed that evil spirits traveled in straight lines; therefore, a watercourse could not run straight on to a grave or dwelling lest evil accumulate on that spot (DeGroot, 22). The water must pass alongside the grave allowing negative energy to meander by while dispersing good *ch'i* along the way (Rossbach 1983: 38).

The family considered the shape of the grave as important as the location itself. Sometimes artificial ridges were built along the back and sides of the graves to allow rain water and negative energy to flow away from the grave (DeGroot 1989:19). An omega shaped grave, buried with the head up against the slope of a hill, afforded this type of protection around the tomb (DeGroot 1989:19; Freedman 1979:196; Thompson 1988:104). In areas in which second burial was practiced, grave diggers buried the body in a shallow pit to allow the flesh to decompose before the pits were opened again and the bones removed. Geomancy proved just as important in second burial (Thompson 1988:104; Freedman 1979:196; Naquin 1988:58). Several years after death the descendants returned to scrape the flesh from the bones and then rebury the bones in urns. Reburial of the urn in a geomantically

suitable setting completed the process.

Fred W. Mueller, Jr. in his study (1987) clearly demonstrated the application of *Feng-Shui* to dwellings in 19th-century California Chinatowns. Mueller concluded that the layout of several Chinatowns appeared to be appropriately oriented in compliance with the principles of *Feng-Shui*. In a similar manner, the location and orientation of some Chinese cemeteries in California may have been determined by these same principles. The excavations at Virginiatown seem to confirm this.

The organization of the burials of the Engellener and Matsuda cemeteries appears to conform to the basic principles of *Feng-Shui*. In both cemeteries *in situ*, bones, clothing, burial markers, and personal goods confirmed that the heads of the deceased were deliberately oriented toward the uphill slope. In this manner, the knoll formed an omega-shaped grave which served as a protective barrier against harsh winds carrying potential evil spirits. Similarly, the feet of the deceased were oriented toward the Auburn Ravine, which flowed in an east/west direction just south of the cemeteries. Geomancers believed that flowing water passing alongside the grave allowed the *yin*, or negative, energy to pass while absorbing the *yang*, or positive, energy (DeGroot 1989:21-22; Comber 1957:24; Rossbach 1983:38).

The evidence strongly suggests that the Chinese at Virginiatown deliberately organized the two cemeteries according to these principles. However, since geomancy is a highly subjective concept that varies from individual to individual and region to region, some may doubt my interpretation in this matter. Let me, therefore, add one more shred of evidence to support my hypothesis.

During the last few weeks of our two-year excavation at the cemeteries we began investigating one of the many anomalies at the Engellener cemetery. This "exhumation" pit varied from the others that we had excavated in that it was located near the top of the knoll, on the western side and appeared to be oriented east/west with the head aligned perpendicular to the uphill slope. This concerned me since it

seemed contrary to our "*Feng-Shui*" theory. Excavators soon discovered, to their surprise, that the pit was over five feet deep. All of the Chinese exhumation pits were very shallow, most less than two feet to the top of the coffin. Finally, the discovery of an *in situ* burial in the grave confirmed our suspicions. After contacting the proper authorities, osteologists and physical anthropologists from CSU Sacramento analyzed the remains, confirming that the individual was a middle-aged woman bearing none of the characteristics of an Asian individual. Another burial encountered within the next week also had Caucasian features. With the assistance of a small ditch witch, we excavated a series of two-foot deep trenches perpendicular to the two known burials in search of more graves. The profiles revealed a total of eighteen, apparently *in situ*, Euroamerican burials all oriented east/west, in typical Christian fashion, and located on the western edge of the cemetery. Unlike the Chinese, the Euroamericans seemed more concerned with cardinal direction than orientation of the burials in harmony with specific geographical features.

The segregation of the Chinese and Euroamerican burials at the Engellener cemetery also reflects the inherent conflicts existing between the two groups in life. The Chinese at Virginiatown, and all across California, were not well-received by their Anglo neighbors. The peculiar lifeways of the Chinese bewildered and frightened onlookers. Ignorance and fear eventually led to distrust, discrimination, and in some cases violence. In 1860, the Euroamericans at Virginiatown voted to forcibly segregate the Chinese population from the rest of the community (Farncomb 1994:49). Declaring them a fire hazard, the town agreed that the Chinese should live outside the main part of Virginiatown. The segregation of the races at the Engellener cemetery seems to represent an extension of the hostilities that existed between the Chinese and Euroamericans at Virginiatown.

Our research at the Virginiatown cemeteries revealed several important things. First, the importance of funeral, burial, and exhumation rituals to the overseas Chinese in helping to maintain a connection to home. In some cases this

connection was merely symbolic - as in the placement of traditional Chinese coins or food vessels in the grave with the deceased. In other cases the connection with home became real as with the removal and shipment of the bones back to China. Through the practice of *Feng-Shui*, the California Chinese also maintained a connection with the rituals and beliefs of their homeland while reminding the young of their familial obligations. Second, our findings revealed that the California Chinese were flexible and adaptive even in death. The adoption of Euroamerican clothes, coffins, and personal goods suggests that the Chinese were capable and willing to adapt somewhat to the practices of their neighbors. This is especially important if we are to recognize that no people, no matter how traditional in their customs, ever remain static.

NOTES

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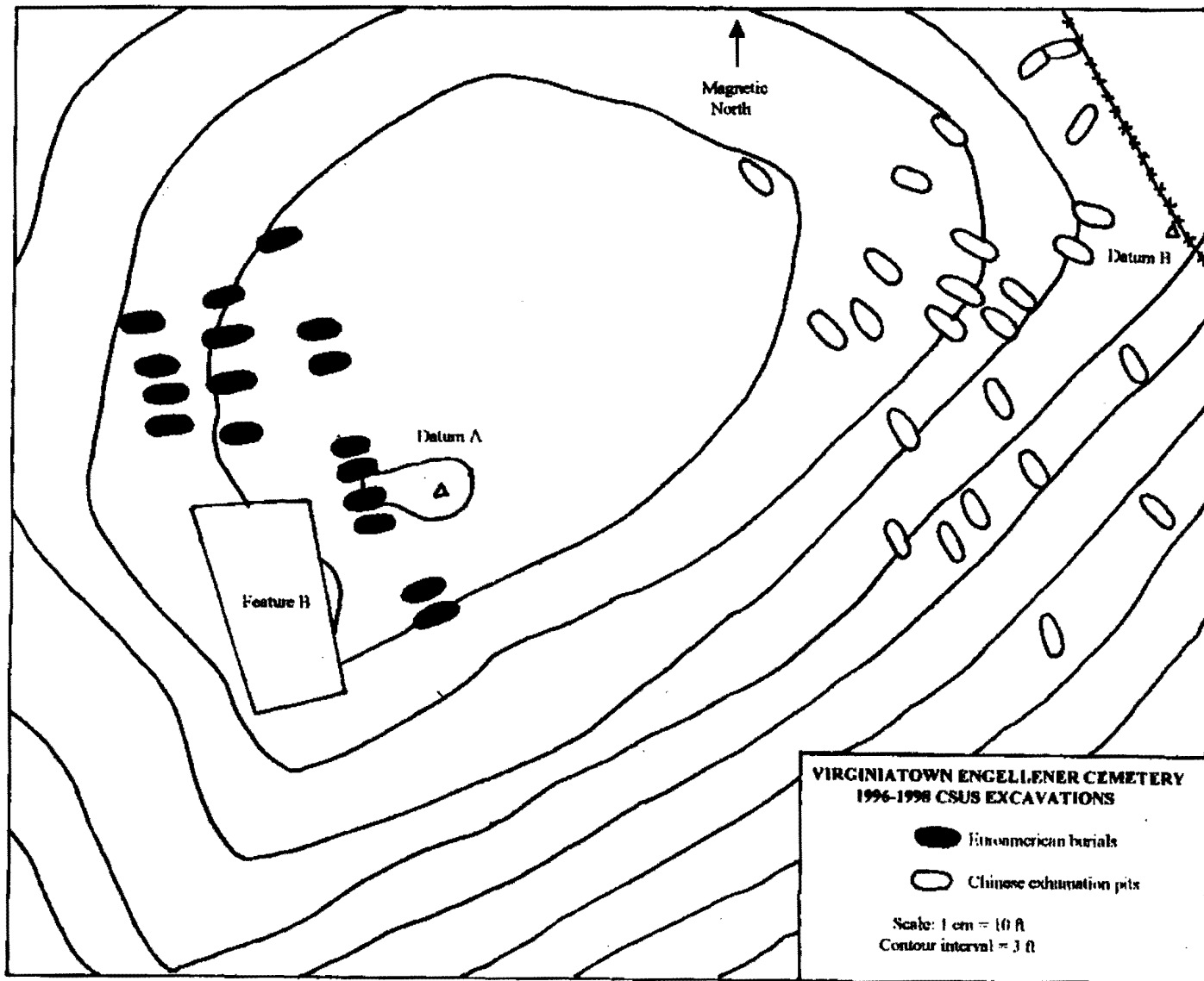


Figure 1: Redrawn from original map in Farncomb (1994)

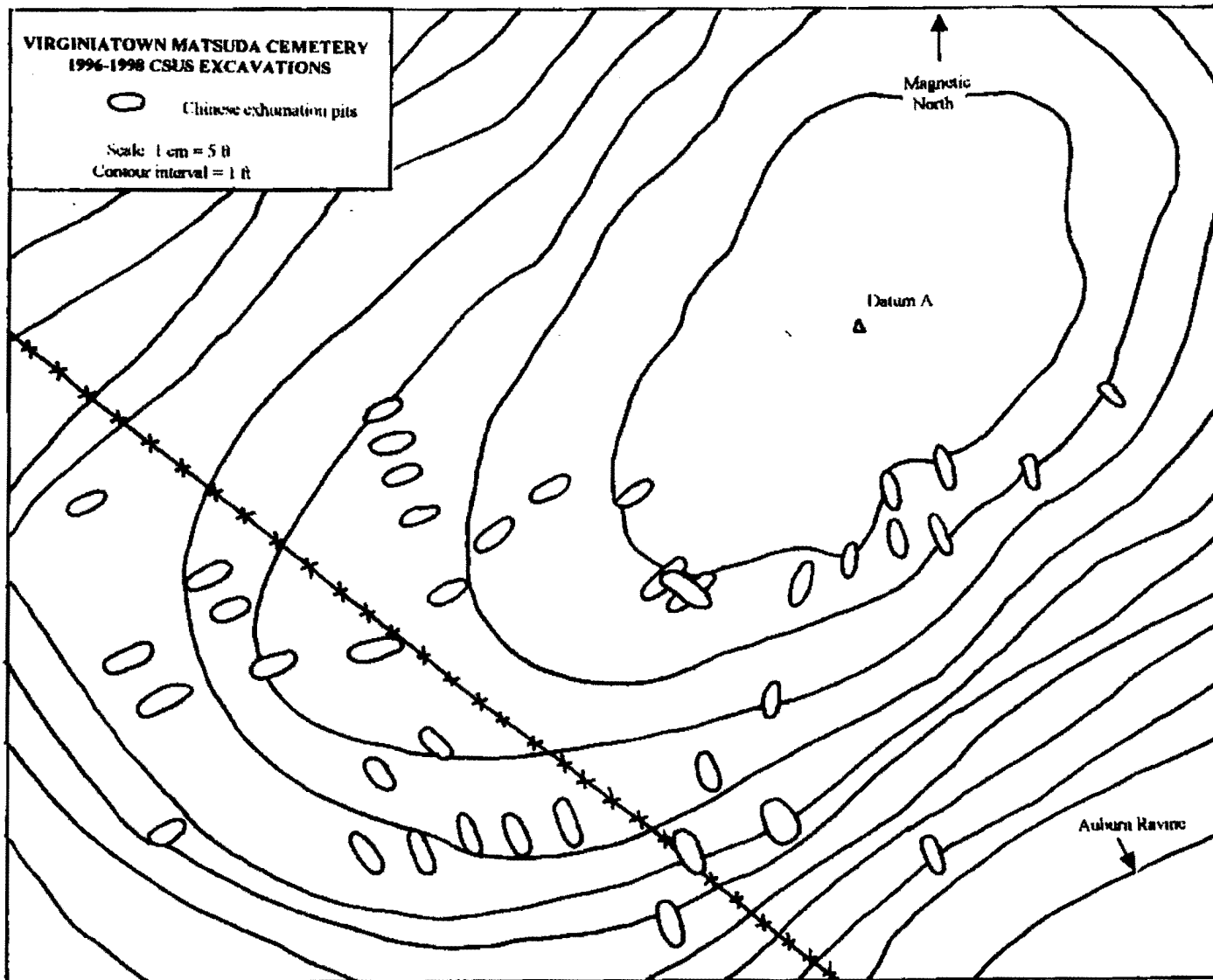


Figure 2: Redrawn from original map by Dr. Jerald Johnson and Melissa Farncomb.