

Ancient Customs Live on in Chinatown

By Alice Adams



The Asian man was 72 when he died, but his year-long bout with cancer had made him look much older. He was thin as a rail, his body ravaged by the dread disease. Dying came as a welcome relief to him and to his family.

His son, who had been part of the hospice vigil for more than two weeks, was impressed with how the staff at Green Street Mortuary handled his father's funeral. An officer of a high-tech company in nearby Redlands, Calif., he was thankful the staff was empathetic, respectful, on time and could grant every one of the family's wishes for the service.

Funeral services in the Chinese community rarely fit any notion of the "standard funeral" because of the fusion between old and new customs. There are, however, some particularly meaningful rituals that many in this North Beach neighborhood take part in.

Upholding these important traditions is part of the mission of Green Street Mortuary. Situated on Green Street in the North Shore neighborhood of San Francisco, the funeral home is just a stone's throw from the well-known area named Fisherman's Wharf. Once an Italian community, the neighborhood has transformed over the years. There are bars for locals and tourists and restaurants of all descriptions.

The mortuary, itself, was more of a storefront than I expected. But, stepping inside, I found an attractive interior, comfortable seating and a warm and welcoming staff who were happy to show me the firm's four chapels, each used for visitations and funerals.

In one chapel, prepared for a funeral that day, a casket was flanked with very large floral sprays on easels and was decorated with Chinese characters.

Before being placed in the coffin, the body is completely dressed, including the footwear, and cosmetics (if female). According to tradition, the corpse is never dressed in red clothing as this would turn the corpse into a ghost. White, black, brown or blue are the usual

colors. Before being placed in the coffin, the corpse's face is covered with a yellow cloth and the body with a light blue one.

After being dressed for the last time, the decedent's clothing is burned.

A traditional Chinese coffin is rectangular with three "humps", although it is more common in modern times to use a western-style coffin. In front of this particular casket were Asian altars with food (whole cooked chickens) along with rice liquor, tea and three sets of chopsticks.

A special altar with a lit white candle is placed at the foot of the coffin. This is for burning incense. Funeral guests are required to light incense for the deceased and bow as a sign of respect to the family. There is also a donation box since money is always offered as a sign of respect to the family of the deceased. This money helps the family defray the costs of the funeral.

There were also paper items for burning at small grills attached to discreet exhaust systems, incense and fan-shaped papers. These were passports so the decedent could travel in the afterlife.

Among the paper was something that looked like Monopoly money – called "joss." Joss paper and prayer money, which provides the deceased with sufficient income for the afterlife, are burned continuously throughout the wake.

There also larger pieces of paper that represent houses, cars, rice cookers and other appliances as well as radios and clothing. These would be burned at the cemetery after the funeral, assuring the deceased would have everything needed for a comfortable afterlife.

To finance the decedent's trip into the next world, a silver coin was placed between his lips.

I was also shown sets of woven silk blankets, which the family traditionally places in the casket as part of the ceremony. First a white blanket, representing death, then a red one for life, followed by other colors.

Beneath the casket's mattress, clothing and other items are included, often adding as much as 200 pounds to the weight of the casket.

In another ritual, the deceased's comb is broken into two. One part is placed in the coffin and the other is kept by the family.

Age-old Traditions

According to traditional Chinese belief, funeral arrangements that are not properly carried out will cause bad fortune to follow the family for a long period of time. Guide-

lines must be followed and the rules observed are permeated with ancient customs and superstitions.

If a traditional wake is held, family members do not wear jewelry or red clothing because the Chinese believe red is the color of happiness. In more observant families, the children and grandchildren of the deceased did not cut their hair for 49 days after the

death, but this custom is now usually only observed by older generations.

It is the custom in some families for relatives and daughters-in-law to wail and cry during mourning as a sign of respect and loyalty to the deceased. The larger the fortune left by the decedent, the louder their cries.

At the wake, the family members of the deceased gather around the coffin positioned

And the Band Plays On

In the early 1940s, the San Francisco musicians' union wanted to keep local musicians busy. One way to achieve this goal was to pressure local mortuaries to hire union musicians for funeral processions, thus guaranteeing the players steady work.

About this same time, Chinatown mortuaries were beginning to go out of business. This left Chinatown residents with only one choice – to take their funerals to the nearby Green Street Mortuary in the predominantly Italian neighborhood of North Beach.

This change of routine led to the birth of the Green Street Mortuary Band, a legendary musical group that many decades later continues to lead funeral processions through the streets of Chinatown, honoring decedents with hymns, dirges, marches and other music.

But the tradition of Chinatown funeral bands goes back even further to 1911, when the Cathay Chinese Boys Band formed a marching group in Chinatown. Their duty? Chase away evil spirits on the trip from the mortuary to the cemetery with loud music, cymbals crashing and drums beating.

An amateur band, the Cathay Chinese Boys Band got its start when some young Chinese immigrants heard an Italian marching band parading through their neighborhood. They wanted to learn to play, too, so they formed their own band. By the 1960s, the band expanded to include professional musicians from all backgrounds. It had become a steady-paying gig that everybody wanted in on.

The band performed for every important event in Chinatown, including the Chinese New Year, the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge, Confucius birthdays, the 1939 World's Fair and, of course, many long and elaborate funeral processions.

For current funerals, the Green Street Mortuary Band assembles in the basement of the funeral home and begins by playing "Amazing Grace." The pallbearers soon appear, led by the funeral directors, carrying the casket and placing it into the funeral car.

As the much-played hymn ends, mourners file out and the motorcycle escorts line up in the procession.

At this point, it's important to mention that weekend traffic

jams – because of these processions – are common and nearby business owners do not hesitate to voice their opinions about the impact it has on their clientele and the difficulty parking.

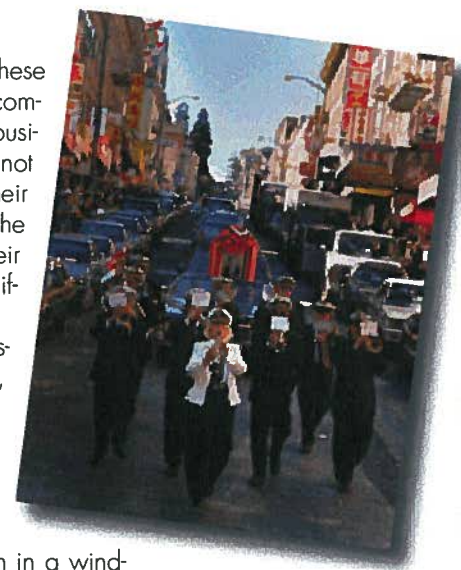
But now the procession is moving and, like a well-tuned machine. Once everyone is in place, the band begins playing again and leads the procession in a winding tour through Chinatown because of the Chinese belief that evil spirits are only able to travel in a straight line. When the procession makes a turn, these spirits are confused and cannot menace the decedent's transition into the afterlife.

It is a standard part of all of Chinatown services for the procession to stop at the decedent's home for a brief ceremony. The brass band doesn't travel out of Chinatown, so if the home is further away that ritual takes place later.

In front of the home, the large floral framed photo is placed next to the opened door of the hearse. Another hymn is played. At the end of the hymn, a gong sounds three times. At this signal, mourners scatter off-white spirit money before the procession starts moving again.

As do funeral processions all over the world, the Chinatown procession's basic purpose is to communicate the importance of the life lived, the passage to the next world, and the loss that family and friends are experiencing.

As another hymn is played, a gong sounds and more paper money is scattered. Then, the band breaks formation, bows to the family and the funeral car and the procession then continues to the cemetery.





according to their rank in the family. Children and daughters-in-law customarily wear black. This symbolizes that their loss is greater and they are grieving more than others. Grandchildren dress in blue and great-grandchildren wear light blue. Sons-in-law wear brighter colors because they are not blood-relatives. In the most traditional of families, the children and daughters-in-law also wear sackcloth hoods over their heads.

The eldest son, who is considered the chief mourner, sits at the left shoulder of his parent, and the deceased's spouse sits on the right. In strictly observant Chinese families, relatives arriving later must crawl on their knees towards the coffin.

Back in China, when there was no son, some families hired or appointed a male in the community to wail for the deceased.

The duration of the wake is determined by the financial resources of the family, although it should be at least one day long to allow for the offering of prayers.

It is believed that the souls of the dead face many obstacles and even torment and torture for the sins they have committed in

life before they enter the afterlife. Therefore, monks offer prayers and chanting to help smooth the decedent soul's pathway to heaven. These prayers are often accompanied by music played on the gong, flute and trumpet.

By custom, the Chinese tend to be superstitious and many still believe funerals are filled with bad omens. That's why many practices designed to keep bad spirits at bay are still observed.

When a death occurs in a family, all statues of deities in the house are covered with red paper, so they will not be exposed to the body or coffin. Further, all mirrors are removed because it is believed that one who sees the reflection of a coffin in a mirror will shortly have a death in his or her family. A white cloth is hung over the doorway to the house and a gong is placed to the left of the entrance if the deceased is a male and to the right if the deceased is female.

Some believe these bad spirits are actually souls in limbo, just waiting to lure the soul of a recently-deceased individual to take their place. That's why every light in the house is turned on when the family leaves for a funeral service. Reportedly, this helps the deceased find his or her way out of the house.

Some families also believe that once you leave the house for the funeral, it is bad luck to look back and that no one should return to the house for any reason until the funeral is over because this could lead the deceased back to be trapped in the house forever.

Serving Modern Clients

Although cremation is not a Chinese tradition, more Chinese Americans are requesting cremation. Most services at Green Street, whether the final disposition is cremation or burial, are full traditional services with the

body prepared for viewing and present in the chapel prior to the burial or cremation.

Men attending the funeral are given black armbands to wear during the service. Women receive green bows or flowers to wear in their hair. After the graveside service, these armbands and bows are thrown into the grave before it is closed. The women are then given red bows to wear for the next three days.

During the funeral service, each mourner goes to the front of the chapel, turns toward the casket and bows three times to honor the deceased. Then, they turn and bow three times to the family seated at the front of the chapel.

Green Street's client base is largely Chinese – like the old man and his son I mentioned earlier – although other families of other ethnicities come here to make funeral arrangements, as well. The property has been part of Service Corporation International for at least a quarter century.

Close to 50 years ago, Green Street Mortuary was called the Valenti Muni Parada Mortuary. As times changed, populations shifted and the Broadway Street boundary between Chinatown and the rest of North Beach began to disappear. Valenti Muni Parada left his predominantly Italian clientele, and the new owner began contacting various associations and clergy while aggressively cultivating the Chinese clientele.

The upper floor of this stately mortuary likely served as living quarters for its early Italian owners, but at the time I visited was sparsely furnished – a virtually empty room, save for a single chair draped with an errant necktie.

In the basement, next to where urns are stored, the weekly processions begin assembling with members of the Green Street Mortuary Band and their instruments – trombones, trumpets, tubas, cymbal bearers and bass drums. Brass instruments bellow and drums beat loudly to keep evil spirits away.

These are professional musicians, many of whom play for the San Francisco symphony, opera or ballet. Others are music teachers, jazz players or part-time musicians.

Membership in the mortuary's band is a highly-prized gig for local musicians. There are usually at least two or three funerals each weekend, the work is steady and they perform only during the day, leaving the evenings free for other jobs.

Although Green Street Mortuary holds funerals seven days a week and can perform as many as seven services a day, most funer-

als for the Chinese community take place on the weekend. Some families consult the zodiac to determine the optimal day for the service, meaning some services are delayed until the "right" day and many tend to be scheduled for the same day.

Green Street carries out every Chinese tradition, from burning incense, paper houses and other symbolic paper objects, to the funeral cars and, of course, the marching band. None of the players in the uniformed band, as I noticed, were Chinese.

Once the prayer ceremonies have ended and the wailing of the mourners reaches its peak, the coffin is closed and sometimes nailed shut. This represents the separation of the dead from the living. During the closing, the mourners turn away because they believe it is unlucky to watch a coffin sealing. Often a single individual is designated to stand watch, making sure that once the casket is closed, it is never re-opened so evil spirits cannot get inside.

The coffin is then carried from the chapel with the head of the deceased facing forward. It is further believed that blessings from the deceased are bestowed upon the pallbearers, so there are usually many volunteers.

As a group of monks in traditional saffron robes appears, chanting and ringing bells, the coffin is loaded into the back a waiting hearse. The odor of incense is strong as mourners make their final bows, honoring the deceased.

As they leave the funeral home, each mourner is presented with two envelopes – one white and one red. The white envelopes, called "bak gim" or "white gold," symbolize money or a gift from the deceased. The coin inside is to be spent on something that brings happiness to compensate for the sadness of this occasion.

The red envelope contains candy, which should be eaten after the funeral to sweeten the memory of the event. Red is also a lucky color, meant to bring back any good fortune that may have been snatched away by the evil spirits drawn to the funeral chapel.

A black convertible is filled with family members. Several have the task of handling a large photograph of the deceased, which is framed with flowers.

Once the photograph is held aloft, the band begins playing to encourage the decedent's spirit to remain near the body until the burial. By hiring the band, which more than 300 families do each year, the family is demonstrating their status while announcing the

death of their loved one to the community.

Motorcycle escorts lead the slow procession as it dodges traffic. The band marches behind them, followed by the family in the convertible, the funeral car and a line of mourners. As cars pull over, out of the way, some bow their heads. Others remove baseball caps.

For this particular procession, the vehicles must make their way up one of the city's in-

needs of the deceased in the next world and, at the same time, this distracts any unfriendly ghosts who may be following.

The Cemetery & Beyond

Because of their beliefs in feng shui, Chinese families often request burial on the highest ground in the cemetery and, if possible, close to a water feature.

As the casket is removed from the funeral

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famous hills in order to pass the home of the decedent, a common ritual. This last visit will help the dead man's spirit move from this world to the next.

Now the band is at a full stop. As a vigorous drum roll begins, mourners join the family in throwing paper money into the air in a tradition called "buying the road." There are two purposes for this part of the ritual. Symbolically, the family is providing for the material

car and lowered into the grave, it is customary for the mourners to, once again, turn away because they believe watching the lowering of the casket will bring them very bad luck. The deceased is buried with the head pointed northward.

Once the casket is in place, members of the family throw a handful of earth into the grave. Often the eldest son will retrieve some of the earth from the grave to put into an



incense burner. This is placed on an altar in the home, where the memory of the deceased will be worshipped.

In Chinese cemeteries, mainly in China or in Asian communities in the U.S. and other countries, the keeper of the cemetery offers prayers to help the decedent's soul on its way

nce the grave has been filled.

Upon re-entering the home after the services, family members jump over a small fire to cleanse themselves of any bad spirits. In some cases, they burn the clothing they wore at the funeral to ward off other evil spirits. Then family members are given three grains of rice to swallow with a bit of water. The grains of rice and the water represent the elements needed to sustain life – earth, wind, fire and water.

Some families have a banquet after the funeral, symbolizing the filling of the emptiness left by the loss of their loved one.

Three days later, the family will return to the cemetery to visit the deceased. Buddhist families bring food and burn incense at the grave. Others may burn paper money, paper clothes and other paper objects as offerings for the decedent to use in the afterlife.

Many Chinese believe that the soul of the decedent will return to his or her earthly home seven days after death. Families often place red plaques on the outside of the home to help the soul find its way back. And on the day the soul is to return, family members remain in their rooms.

How do they know the soul of the de-

ceased has returned? Sometimes flour or talcum powder is dusted on the floor of the home's entrance for evidence of the visit.

Interestingly, the official period of mourning lasts for an additional 100 days. Those in mourning – particularly in China – wear a piece of colored cloth on their sleeves. Highly traditional families will wear pieces of mourning cloth for as long as three years. If the decedent is a wife or a child, however, a period of mourning is not required and is usually not observed.

Early Chinese immigrants were buried in America only for a few years. Then, their remains were disinterred and sent back to China for burial with their ancestors. Today, as China's expanding modernization has begun to threaten long-used burial grounds, most Chinese-Americans buried in the U.S. remain here. In fact, some Chinese who have family in the U.S. have their remains shipped from China to here for burial.

Without question, the Chinese take death very seriously. Respect for the deceased is expressed freely and also according to custom. Old Chinese traditions continue with each new generation, truly reflecting the long-held beliefs of an ancient culture. ✪