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 promises to care for them after life, to send 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, 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.

Join us!

The Association for the Preservation of Historic Congressional Cemetery is a private, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to the restoration, interpretation, and management of Congressional Cemetery. It is predominantly a volunteer-based organization relying on over 400 neighbors, history buffs, conservators, dogwalkers, and armed forces personnel each year to restore and maintain this national treasure. Established in 1976, the Association is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Funding for the preservation and maintenance of Historic Congressional Cemetery is provided (in part) by the Congressional Cemetery Endowment, which was created with matching funds provided by the Congress of the United States and administered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
The greatest secrecy was observed by the Chinese concerning the disinterment. When the digging was begun a party of Chinese was on hand. They watched everything until the last body was exhumed. When all but one left, He, a stout, heavy-checked man of middle age remained to keep a guard while the most grisly part of the ceremony was performed. That was the boiling of the corpses, which occupied the entire afternoon. This was necessary because only the bones are to be sent to China. The bones will be put into metal boxes for shipment. When they reach China they will be cremated and their ashes placed in urns.

The gravediggers attend to this gruesome work. But ever at their elbows was the watchful Chinaman, 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 who, 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.

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

Memorial marker erected at a Chinese cemetery in Oregon, 1908, echoes sentiments in DC.

"To Honor Them as if They Were Here"